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Sand Hills Stories

by

Jacqueline Marie Bitz 

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Department of English

Edmonton, Alberta
Fall 2001

University of Alberta

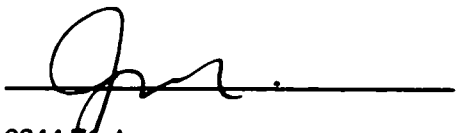
Library Release Form

Name of Author: Jacqueline Marie Bitz

Title of Thesis: *Sand Hills Stories*

Degree: Master of Arts

Year this Degree Granted: 2001



9844 76 Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta
T6E 1K5

University of Alberta

Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled *Sand Hills Stories* submitted by Jacqueline Bitz in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Prof. Greg Hollingshead

Prof. Susan Hamilton

Prof. Lynn Penrod

September 24, 2001

for my mother

Abstract

The following six stories are concerned with love in its various forms and with the ways in which people learn or do not learn to know themselves and each other – the ways in which they grapple with the beautiful, terrible effects of love. Occupying a space in which suffering is neither just nor unjust, but merely a part of living, these characters are ordinary, often inarticulate. Their stories unfold in that vast, largely rural area surrounding the Great Sand Hills of southwestern Saskatchewan, a landscape constant, quiescent, almost immutable.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Greg Hollingshead for his guidance and thorough editing, to my friends Tim Birch and Steve Price for their support and encouragement, to Rita and Dennis Thorburn for opening their home to me, and most of all to my mother, Lorraine Bitz, for everything.

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The Favoured One

I

He was our great-uncle (younger than my grandfather by a number of years, we were surprised to learn at the funeral), though Max and I always called him, simply, Uncle Aloetius. Because we spent long, dull summers with my grandparents and because Uncle Aloetius was retired from his job at the pottery in Medicine Hat and now lived in the same small town near the hoodoo-like hills of the South Saskatchewan River valley, we saw quite a lot of him, though we never knew him well, never settled into the kind of teasing friendliness we did with my grandmother's brothers from distant Gravelbourg. And, though Max and I never talked about it, I think we shared the same uneasy distrust of Uncle Aloetius, a result of more than just his disturbing habit of leaving the top two buttons of his trousers undone to accommodate the gout which had swelled his belly round and hard as a pumpkin – something which Max and I may have found funny in someone else, someone other than Uncle Aloetius, with his tobacco voice and the fine purple veins cracking across his nose like lightning and the way he would drop a meaty fist onto the table unexpectedly when talking, making the coffee cups jump and rattling us all in our chairs.

Despite his habit of blowing his nose loudly into a hanky at the supper table, despite his German accent (inexplicably heavier than our grandfather's), despite the tufts of hair on his knuckles and in his ears, Uncle Aloetius occupied a position outside our mockery of grown-ups, our low-grade jokes about smells and scabs and bodily functions. For this alone, this impossibility of caricature, we may have respected him, may even have liked him a little bit; wanted, in fact, to like him. And he, in turn, may have wanted us to. But there was something about Uncle Aloetius that defied both affection and ridicule. He would try to tease us, try to joke with us the way our grandfather did, easily, the way our other uncles did. But his humour always fell flat, as if he did not quite believe in it himself.

"Bet you a quarter you can't tear this leaf in half," he said one morning, but without humour; a demand. *Betchu a kvotteru can't dare dis leefenhuff.*

He held the poplar leaf out toward Max, who was sitting on one of the cinderblocks Grandma used to pot her geraniums. Max looked at me, then took the leaf

in his palm, carefully, as if it were a green heart, still beating. He fingered it briefly, squinted up at Uncle Aloetius and handed it to me.

"Right in half," Uncle Aloetius stressed. "Right down the middle there."

I used my thumbnails to edge minutely, painstakingly down the spine, staying impeccably true to the line of it. Max breathed heavily, nostrils whistling, over my shoulder.

"Oh, oh," Uncle Aloetius said every few seconds, when it seemed I might falter.

I had to tilt the leaf away from the reflection of the sun to see the spine clearly. My elbows were propped on my knees to steady me, my hands kept from trembling through sheer force of will. When I was finished, I handed over the two perfect halves.

"That's good," Uncle Aloetius said, studying them carefully. "Pretty good." He held one half up. "That's a good half," he said. Then, tearing that half in two, added, "Here's a quarter."

When he didn't joke, when he talked to us seriously, as an adult would, there was something else, not quite a heartlessness, we thought, but something like it.

"Bet you can't guess what I got here," he said to us one afternoon, coming into my grandparents' yard with a small cardboard box under his arm.

It was Thanksgiving weekend and, though it was cold, Max and I were sitting in the gravel driveway, idly throwing stones onto the roof of the garage.

No, we confessed uneasily, we couldn't.

"Come on, now," he barked, "just guess."

Max looked at me as if he might cry. Uncle Aloetius had played this game with us before. Chances were, whatever was in the box, it was probably something alive, or something that had recently been alive or, worse still, a part of something that had recently been alive: gopher tails (*ten cents a piece ven I vus your age, enuff to buy a new pair uff shews*); the gray, pointed head of a sturgeon he'd caught in the river; a rattle from the snake he'd run over on the highway.

"I don't know," I said slowly, imagining the terrible possibilities. "Aaa...some...partridge feathers?" I asked, hopefully.

"Partridge feathers," he scoffed, and shook his head. He settled the box on the gravel and pried the lid off with the tip of his walking stick. "Have a look."

Max remained stolidly near the porch, but I took a step or two forward, thinking, *Please God, let it not be a snake, anything but a snake.*

I peeked into the box. It wasn't a snake, it wasn't alive, and it hadn't been alive recently, not by any stretch of the imagination. I wrinkled my nose, leaned away slightly, hoping Uncle Aloetius wouldn't notice. Made confident by the fact that I had not shrieked or bolted, Max sidled over.

"Ew," he said simply.

Uncle Aloetius frowned at us, annoyed and disappointed. "A *skull*," he said, as if we didn't get it. "Look at those teeth there."

Reluctantly we looked. They were blackened and broken and clamped in a vicious grin. I considered, briefly, the awful possibility of a tongue.

"Bobcat," he said proudly. *Popcat*. "Here." He held it out to us. Max and I stepped back. "It's petrified," he stressed, and tapped his knuckles against his forehead. "Like wood."

Petrified. I wasn't positive I knew what the word meant, but it seemed somehow appropriate.

"Like a vossle," he added.

Max and I blinked.

"A *vossle*," he barked. "Don't they teach you that?"

Max sniffled a little, grabbed the hem of my shirt. Vossle, vossle – I searched my brain – what was a vossle? It sounded German, somehow. Finally it occurred to me. Yes, I did know what a fossil was, but it was impossible, for some reason, to admit this, as if admitting the knowledge would make Uncle Aloetius even more scornful of our repulsion. In dealing with him, we'd learned, there was a measure of safety in ignorance. He was more willing to give up in his efforts if he thought us, not fearful, but merely stupid.

"What the Christ *do* they teach you?"

Max always cracked under the pressure.

"Pictures," he bawled, "with macaroni."

Uncle Aloetius stared at the two of us, still holding the skull forward, stared at my hands fixed firmly in my pockets, at the snot pooling above Max's quivering lip. Then he packed up the skull and hobbled off toward home, stabbing the air with his walking stick every few steps, as if making a point.

* * *

Uncle Aloetius lived across town, in a small, dim house flanked by several overgrown lilac bushes and filled with his collections, things he'd found while walking the Sand Hills or down at the river or in the fields blown smooth in spring. Pieces of things: skulls, bones and skins. They ranged across shelves and counters and window ledges, were nailed to walls, rested unexpectedly in kitchen drawers and closets and dressers. Not that Max or I ever ventured far during our visits to Uncle Aloetius' house, choosing to remain quietly perched on either side of my grandfather, like bookends. But we were occasionally sent to fetch some small thing – more mix from the back bedroom, the calendar from the kitchen cupboard, a deck of cards, or a knife, or a glass – an errand that would most often end in an unhappy discovery of some sort.

It was always me, not Max, who made these discoveries. Being older, I didn't mind so much that I was the one appointed to the errands. It would have been easier though, making those forays into dark bedrooms and closets, if Max had offered to come with me. At first I bullied him into it, staring fiercely until he slid from his seat and followed me from the room with a martyred air.

"Just reach in there and find the bottle opener," I said one time, pointing to the kitchen drawer which we'd been able to wedge open only a few inches before it stuck.

Max gaped at me. "Why don't you?"

"Your hand's smaller." I lifted my hand, spreading the fingers as wide as I could manage. "See?"

Max stared.

"Hold up your hand, Max."

Max stuck both hands firmly down the front of his pants.

I knew enough not to force the issue. Had there been any crying, things would go worse for us with Uncle Aloetius, and with my grandfather, too, who only suffered our squeamishness in small and sporadic doses. It was best just to do it myself.

I slipped my hand into the drawer, shuddering as I felt around, recognizing items by touch – scissors, a pen, rubber bands, nothing worse than that. When I found what I thought was the bottle opener, I slid my hand out quickly, relieved. But it wasn't a bottle opener. I had grabbed instead the handle of a small hairbrush, a soft blue enamel one rimmed with a border of white vines. A woman's brush. And I thought immediately of Uncle Aloetius' wife, Cherry, whom I knew only through photographs. At any other time, I would have been thrilled to find it, fascinated as I was by her, by her long absence and, because of it, her perpetual youth. But on that day I was too dismayed

at the thought of having to slide my hand back into that drawer to pay much attention to a hairbrush. That day, it was merely another strange item in an already strange house.

When I finally found the opener, I puffed out a great sigh of relief.

Max pulled his hands from his pants and said, "See, they're not smaller."

"Next time," I said firmly, as we returned to the living room, "it's your turn."

From then on, Max simply stared stubbornly back at me whenever I was called on to fetch something, and I ended up going miserably alone.

But there was one place even I would not go, upon pain of death.

"You know what's down there?" Uncle Aloetius would say each visit, without fail, nodding toward the door – latched shut with hooks at both the top and bottom – leading from his kitchen to the root cellar.

Max and I shook our heads, though of course we knew. How could we forget?

"Do you?" he'd demand.

"Children," Max would say, chin trembling. "Lots of them."

"What kind of children?"

"Bad ones."

"And were you good this week?"

God, yes, we hoped so.

Naturally, there were questions we had about these children – *How many? Where did they come from? How old were they?* and the one that seemed to grip Max: *Where did they go to the bathroom?* – questions we broached tentatively in bed at night with the blankets pulled up over us like a tent and Max's feet pressed against my belly, or, more often, safely, by daylight. But they were questions we would never have dared to ask Uncle Aloetius.

We did, after much deliberation, ask my grandmother one morning while she mended clothes in front of the TV.

"It's those Germans," she said, as if that explained everything. "Just look," she added, "at their fairy tales." She bit a thread between her broad front teeth, teeth we always thought looked like Chiclets. "Russian Germans," she said, meaning Grandpa and Uncle Aloetius, "they're the worst."

"Are we Germans," Max asked, after a moment, "Russian Germans?"

"Part," she said. "A quarter."

Max started to cry then. Grandma put down the work sock she was darning, pulled the damp wad of Kleenex she always kept balled in the elastic of her sleeve (The *same* Kleenex? we often wondered), and wiped at Max's face.

"Oh, now," she said, "that's just foolish."

For a long time, though, we weren't sure whether she'd meant the possibility of children kept chained for years in Uncle Aloetius' cellar or simply Max's tears.

But Max was like that. There was always a certain element of desperation to his fear – as though he were a little closer to the edge than I was – that made me sorry for him on those visits to Uncle Aloetius' house, sorrier than I was for myself. I could, for instance, almost feel through the plaid chesterfield the trembling of poor Max's limbs when Uncle Aloetius addressed either of us. Uncle Aloetius must have sensed it too, smelled the fear coming off Max like off a trapped rabbit. And he must have despised it.

"Max," he said unexpectedly one night as he and my grandfather leaned over a card table playing rookie, "get my glasses from the bedroom."

It was quite late on an evening in December, and the house was dark except for the old teardrop floor lamp that stood in the corner behind Uncle Aloetius' chair and the faint, almost-pretty green glow of the neighbours' Christmas lights coming through the front room windows layered over heavily with ice. "The Little Drummer Boy," our favorite carol, played softly on the turntable, but fuzzy-sounding because Uncle Aloetius needed to replace the needle. Every so often it would skip, and either Grandpa or Uncle Aloetius would thump his boot heavily against the floor to fix it. The air was stuffy and old, and my skin itched hotly beneath my long underwear. Neither Max nor I had removed our parkas, and we held our toques and mittens between our knees, hopefully, as though we would be leaving any second.

"Max," Uncle Aloetius repeated, "go get my glasses."

Max did not move. Though I couldn't see his face from where I was sitting on the other side of Grandpa, I knew how he would look, his lips stretched tight and pale with anxiety.

"I'll get them," I offered quickly.

"Max can do it," Grandpa said reasonably, taking a drink from the tumbler of warm rye and coke at his elbow. He shuffled neatly through the deck a couple of times with his thumbs, looked down at Max, who still had not moved.

"Max!" he said.

I clenched my jaw, knowing Max would cry any moment, knowing his tears would bring all kinds of anger and derision down upon both our heads: the candy-assed kids from the city, the crybabies, the chickenshits.

"Get Uncle's glasses," Grandpa barked, elbowing Max in the shoulder, "what are you waiting for?"

I looked across the table at Uncle Aloetius, expecting that old scornful look of disdain. But he was looking, instead, at my grandfather, looking at him with what appeared to me to be such a raw kind of emotion, part resentment, part relief, his face open like a wound. And I thought, for the first time, with absolute amazement, "They're *brothers*." It was so shocking to me to think of them that way, to make that kind of blood discovery; so embarrassing to see Uncle Aloetius naked like that, needful almost, that, without thinking, I grabbed at my grandfather's wrist.

"Let's go," I said, "let's go."

But no one heard me. On the turntable, the record had begun to skip at the chorus. Max stood up, paused there a moment, not looking at anybody, and then walked slowly down the dark hallway towards the bedroom, his snowsuit rasping with each step, the record continuing to skip and the three of us staring after him, as if we were all momentarily suspended and preserved in that cold green winter light.

When Max returned, grim-faced, glasses in hand, Grandpa thumped his boot against the floor and the music and the card playing resumed, steadily, as if nothing in that room had changed.

II

They were the only boys in a family of five, a farm family, and according to my grandmother neither Grandpa nor Uncle Aloetius ever had any interest in farming. So the land was divided, when the time came, between the three girls and their husbands – who *did* want to farm, as the girls were quick to point out – and the boys were left to make their own ways. Grandpa got on almost immediately with the R.M. doing road service, a good, steady job, and Uncle Aloetius wandered around some, to Kindersley and Swift Current and Lethbridge, finally getting work at the pottery in Medicine Hat, where he settled. It wasn't clear exactly where he'd met Aunt Cherry, but she was with him when he arrived in Medicine Hat. They rented a tiny apartment across from the old

stockyards on Foundry Street and were married soon after out at the family homestead in Saskatchewan. They did not linger after the wedding, but returned to the city and their little apartment that no doubt stank all day of manure and slaughter.

I guess they wouldn't have seen much of each other in those early years, Grandpa and Uncle Aloetius. Holidays maybe, the occasional weekend, more often once Grandpa bought a car. Everyone thought Uncle Aloetius had moved to Medicine Hat for good. Even after Cherry left, no one expected him to come home. And he didn't. I imagined him alone in that little two-room apartment, smelling the hot dark smell of animal flesh that got into his clothes and his hair and his skin, that gave a faint taste to the food he ate, imagined him listening all night to the moaning of cattle penned shank to shank in the heat and the rain and the snow, and beneath that another sound, lower, the constant hum of flies. I could not figure out what made him stay, but stay he did.

So when he bought that little house just four blocks from Grandpa, turning up one day with his belongings packed roof-high into the back of his old, white Pontiac, everyone was surprised. "Why would I live there," he'd said in response, meaning Medicine Hat, "when I can live here at half the price and none of the headache." For Uncle Aloetius had never made any bones about his distaste for city life, in spite of the fact that he'd lived there nearly forty years.

"Those people," he'd say in disgust, and swat his hand heavily through the air.

By the time Aunt Cherry left Uncle Aloetius to go back east, Grandpa had met and married Grandma. They had three children, two who died in infancy, and the third, my father. This was in the late '40s, just after the war, when a few years of good rainfall and good wheat prices tempered the burgeoning inflation, and Grandpa and Grandma were busy managing their own lives, their little family. Grandpa built them a house across from the lumberyard – a small two-storey frame house – and planted an enormous garden out back from which Grandma put up pickles and preserves each fall. It sounded, from what my grandmother told me in later years, like a good life, though it might just have been memory taking the edge off things, like it does.

Once, a few years after Grandpa died, she told me she'd known him almost a year before she was aware he had a brother.

"Your Grandpa had come down to see me once," she said, "just after he bought that car, that awful old thing, and he said, 'Ludie, I think I'll take a ride over to Medicine Hat next week, if you want to come.' We were engaged by then, of course, so I said, 'All

right' and he said, 'I guess there'll be room for both of us with Aloise' and I said 'Aloise? Who's Aloise?' and he just looked around a bit and then he said, 'My brother.'"

III

Grandpa had never shared Uncle Aloetius' penchant for collecting, but he occasionally joined him on his meandering walks through the Sand Hills north of town or in the deep, stratified coulees of the river hills. If Max and I happened to be visiting, we were expected to participate. Though we hated those long, hot, agonizingly boring walks whether they were through the Sand Hills or the river hills, we always choose, if consulted, the Sand Hills. For one, there were no rattlers, of which there were plenty around the river, curled like fat, gray muscles behind rocks and beneath ground cedar, and no bull snakes either, which, though harmless (as Grandpa continually pointed out), could startle us both into tears by appearing suddenly between the sagebrush at our feet, long and black and thick as a man's arm. For another, the Sand Hills were full of chokecherries and saskatoons and we could sit on the great yellow dunes, writing our names with sticks and letting the hot, soft sand squish up between our toes, pretending to be marooned on a desert island, pretending the dry rolling scrubland for miles to every horizon was all water. We could pick bunches of wild rose, that smelled faintly of apples, and scurf-pea and orange sand dock to take home to our grandmother, and, if we were lucky, we might see a bush hare or a buck or even a mule deer and her fawn feeding in the small shade of aspen bluffs. Usually, though, we were not allowed to wander off by ourselves or sit alone under that vast blue sky but were expected to keep pace with my grandfather and Uncle Aloetius, who, much to our dismay, did not walk on the dunes at all, preferring to poke through the brush, where we were subjected to the awful zinging of grasshoppers against our bare legs and arms and faces, and where, as Uncle Aloetius pointed out, we were more likely to "find some good thing": antelope prongs or petrified snail shells or even a Clovis point.

"What's a Clovis point, anyway?" Max asked me one day – in that last summer before Uncle Aloetius died – as we minced along behind him, eyes glued to the ground, ever cautious of the chance rattler that may have found its way up from the river hills, or of some other terrible thing: a dead kangaroo rat or a salamander or simply cow shit.

"An arrowhead," I said, "I think."

Grandpa was off to the side a few feet, but Uncle Aloetius looked at us over his shoulder.

"About yay big," he said, holding up his thumb. "Shaped like your tongue."

Max felt his tongue.

"But chipped around the base, like so. For hunting," he raised his arms in an absurd gesture meant, we assumed, to denote great size, "*Vooly Mammet.*"

"Really?" Max said. "Wooly Mammoths?"

"Yah." Uncle Aloetius nodded. "Ten thousand years old. More." He stopped walking and turned to frown out across the field. "They used to be all over here." He swung his walking stick through the air. "Before that," he said, "it was all ice. There was nothing."

Max looked at him in disbelief. "Where did it go, all the ice?"

Uncle Aloetius shrugged. "Melted. Dried up. Ran away. Now there's just the river."

"And buffalo?" Max asked. "Was there buffalo?"

"That was later." Uncle Aloetius scowled, though you could see he was pleased. "Thousands of years. Prehistoric times. There's rubbing stones still. In the glacial tillage. You know what that is?"

"Yeah," Max said, "sure."

I stared at him.

"And tipi rings," Uncle Aloetius said. "It took seven, eight buffalo hides to make a tipi. Cartilage to sew it together. Bones and hooves to make glue. The stomach for a water pouch. They wasted nothing," he added proudly, as if it had all been under his personal supervision.

"What did they use the heart for?" Max asked.

"They ate it," he said, "of course. Same as *kow harst*."

I cast a grimace at Max, ready to band in solidarity against the detested cow heart Grandma sometimes breaded and served at Grandpa or Uncle Aloetius' request. But he had trotted ahead a bit to walk abreast of Uncle Aloetius. Grandpa had stopped a few feet away and was staring at us.

"It was a special treat, buffalo heart," Uncle Aloetius was saying, "for an honoured brave. Or some favoured member of the tribe."

"They ate it?" Max asked.

"Of course."

"Raw," Max asked, "or cooked?"

Grandpa walked up, took the canteen Uncle Aloetius carried slung across his shoulder. "When we were young," he interrupted, taking a big swig of water, "we used to come out here for fun, eh Aloise?" He pointed to the highest of the dunes, which rose maybe fifteen metres or so above us. "We'd bring boards," he said, "and slide down."

"In the winter?" I asked.

"Summer, too," he said. "Or we'd just roll down. We'd roll the girls down. Like barrels. Remember that? They would scream."

Uncle Aloetius nodded, poking his stick in a gopher hole.

"They would tie their skirts like so between their knees and we would roll them down and they would scream. They'd come up with sand in their hair and in their mouths. And laugh. Then we'd have a fire, maybe. Aloise," he said. "Remember? Remember Eleanor Gutfrend? Huh?"

Uncle Aloetius shrugged.

Grandpa looked at us, tipping his head toward Uncle Aloetius. "He remembers. All those girls, Eleanor Gutfrend. They all chased him. He was always the favourite."

Uncle Aloetius said nothing, just kept jabbing that stick around, turning over rocks, lifting branches of sage and ground cedar.

"We had fun times out here, eh Aloise?"

"Did you ever find a Clovis point?" Max asked.

"Go." Grandpa nodded toward the dune. "Roll down. It's fun."

Max and I looked at each other.

"Go on," he said, smiling, though his voice sounded angry for some reason, "try it."

Max and I walked slowly toward the dune and looked up at it, the sun beating down heavily on our heads. I touched the top of my hair. It was hot.

"Go on," Grandpa ordered.

Max started up the hill, leaning forward, using his hands against the incline for balance, his feet sinking to the ankles in sand. I looked down at my short skirt. It would be impossible to tie it between my knees, and I became furious suddenly that I had not worn shorts. I looked back to see if Grandpa would force me to go, but he was shading his eyes, looking up at Max, silhouetted now by the sun. Uncle Aloetius stood next to him, looking up also. And it occurred to me that it wouldn't matter to either of them whether I went up or not.

"Okay," Grandpa said when Max was poised at the top of the dune. "Just lay down and roll. Keep your arms straight at your sides."

For a moment, I thought he would do it, he looked as though he would, but then he just stood there, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

"Oh for Christ sake," Grandpa called up. "It won't kill you. It's sand. The girls used to do it."

Max scratched the back of his arm.

"Did Grandma ever do it?"

"Grandma?" Grandpa growled. "How the hell should I know. Probably."

Max stared down at us.

"Did Aunt Cherry?"

I started at the sound of that rarely heard name, surprised that Max would throw it out that way. Grandpa opened his mouth, snapped it shut. Uncle Aloetius kept looking up at Max, as if he hadn't heard, or hadn't cared. Max stood at the top of the dune, waiting.

"Oh for Christ sake," Grandpa said again. "Walk down, then."

Max hesitated, then scrambled down the hill, sliding most of the way, the sand rushing before him in a smooth, hot sheet. When he reached the bottom, I whispered, "Why'd you say that? Why'd you bring up Aunt Cherry?" But he just shrugged, then walked over to Uncle Aloetius, and asked, "What color was it? The Clovis point?"

Grandpa frowned. "We should get back, not?"

"Yah." Uncle Aloetius shrugged. "If you want to get back."

"No, Grandpa," Max said, "let's look for a Clovis point. We can find one I bet."

Grandpa shook his head. "We should get back," he said, and without waiting for the rest of us, started walking to where the car sat white and shimmering dully in the heat, like a bone.

IV

Of our Aunt Cherry, Max and I knew little. There was a photograph of her in Uncle Aloetius' bedroom that we had glimpsed but for obvious reasons never lingered over, and also two others in my grandmother's album. The first was a rather distant shot of a bride and groom standing solemnly on the steps of the Catholic church in town.

They were both frowning a little, perhaps at the sun, and held their arms straight at their sides; the only indication they were even aware of each other's presence was that their shoulders were pressed firmly together. Underneath, my grandmother had written in neat blue pencil, *Cherry and Aloetius.*

Next to that was another of the two of them, but this time with my grandfather, almost unrecognizable in a clean white shirt and suspenders, a fedora cocked to one side over his unhandsome face. He lounged easily between them, an arm slung across each of their shoulders, his mouth partway open. Uncle Aloetius stood almost as solemn as before – as though he were bearing all my grandfather's weight in that arm – except that something in his face had relaxed a little. It wasn't a smile, not quite, but it was the closest thing to it I'd ever seen on Uncle Aloetius' face. Here, on this younger man, this boy, thin and pale in his suit, that smile made any relation to the man we knew – the man of the gout and the suspenders and the walking stick – all but inconceivable. Or, it would have if it weren't for something in his expression that was also unaccountably Uncle Aloetius, some element of anxiety, as if nothing light came easily to him. He reminded me in that photograph, sometimes, of Max, though I couldn't have said why exactly, and I didn't, quite frankly, like the parallel. Some tension in the line of the jaw, perhaps, nothing more. Serious, even there, on his wedding day. It made me wonder, had he never been happy?

Cherry was something else entirely. In the second photograph she had turned halfway around, her teeth bared in what looked to be a laugh, as though Grandpa had just said something tremendously funny – the hand that held the bouquet blurred now, being raised or lowered, we couldn't tell. There were three other people in the photograph, anonymous people, two men and a woman in a frumpy knee-length dress and a hat with a veil. But they stood rigidly, staring straight ahead. At first, we'd thought the woman was Grandma, but she'd said, "No, I didn't know your Grandpa then. That was before my time."

A dog had wandered into the frame, too, his head and front leg just visible in the foreground, tongue lolling in a crazy grin. Max said it must have been Grandpa's dog, you could tell by how it was looking right at him, but I didn't see how you could tell that, it could have been looking at any one of them, at no one. The top corner of the snapshot had been torn away, just a chunk of sky, the edge of a cottonwood tree, that was all. Beneath this one my grandmother had written simply, *With Mattias.*

VI

The morning we heard Uncle Aloetius was dead, Max and I were out in the garden. It was late August and the sun had already bleached the edges of leaves and baked the earth too solid for a hoe. We were picking what would certainly be the last of the peas, the plants still cool and swollen with the night air, and Uncle Aloetius – as far as we knew – still across town smoking happily, or at least not unhappily, in the old recliner on his front porch, cap tipped far back on his head the way he always wore it and a thermos of Nescafe between his knees. Grandpa came over from the neighbours', hauling their rototiller, ready to till up the pea plants when we were finished. He scooped a handful of pods from the metal bucket, dragging the peas out in one smooth motion with his thumb.

"Eat some," he said to us, "they put hair on your chest."

The phone rang in the kitchen, and Grandpa asked us if we knew how to make a peapod into a whistle, and Grandma came to the back door and stood there barefoot on the edge of the steps, staring at us like she forgot something. Grandpa dropped the empty pods and walked over but only half way, and they just looked at each other, their hands hanging motionless at their sides, with the morning's first cabbage butterflies like tissue paper everywhere and the cool green smell of peapods.

And then Grandma said, "Aloetius."

Grandpa just stood there a minute longer, then he dropped his head a little, said to us, "Go into the house now."

"What is it?" Max said.

"Come." Grandma waved us in through the screen door. We went to stand by the window and she said, "Leave him alone now." But she stood there with us, a hand on each of our shoulders, and we watched as Grandpa fired up the rototiller and began plowing through the garden, not just through peas, but through the unharvested pumpkin and squash and rows of corn. Max and I looked at each other and then at our grandmother, her mouth settled into the same puzzling calm that it always was.

"Grandma," Max said, "what's wrong?"

But she just sighed and lifted her shoulders a little.

"Someone should go out there, I guess," she said, finally. "Before he does something foolish."

VII

"I guess you'll call Cherry," my grandmother said that evening at supper, after phone calls had been placed to relatives and arrangements made for Uncle Aloetius' funeral. She said it that way, evenly, as if it were a fact, but from the way she looked at Grandpa, Max and I could tell it was a question. "She'll want to come back," she added.

We were eating much later than was typical with our grandparents, the sun already at that point in its descent when its power seemed unbearable. It was hot in the kitchen. On any other day, we might have filled our plates and sat in the shade on the back steps, listening to the after-supper sounds of lawn mowers and children and dishes clinking against each other through the open windows of our neighbours' kitchens. But this day we stayed at the table, as if in some sort of penitence, our legs sticking to the vinyl of our chairs.

Grandpa mashed at his boiled potatoes, shook salt liberally over everything, and began to eat without looking up. Grandma wiped her brow with a tea towel and took her seat. She picked up her fork, put it down, picked it up again. Max and I exchanged a glance across the table.

"Still in Thunder Bay, she is." Grandma took a bite, chewed in that slow, careful way of hers, as though everything were riddled with fish bones. "From what I hear."

Thunder Bay. I loved the exotic, stormy sound of it, mouthed it quietly to myself, feeling the weight of it on my tongue. I imagined waves spraying a black shore, great pointed pines, wolves. I imagined lightning, brush fires sparked then smothered by the wild unpredictability of weather. I imagined smoke. Cherry; yes, if your name was Cherry you would live in Thunder Bay. You would stand on the rocks, watching the storm roll in, rain whipping at your hair. You would have strong, beautiful hands. You would not, you could not, be married to a man like Uncle Aloetius.

Grandpa looked up, scowling into the sun that pounded through the kitchen window. "Pull that damn blind," he said to me, and looked back down. I laid my fork carefully by my plate and got up, lifting my chair rather than scraping it against the linoleum as I usually did. Outside, a flock of noisy sparrows had gathered, shrieking and flapping over what remained of the garden. The tilled plants had already lost their

greenness, lay wilted and browning in the heat, ears of corn beginning to rot in their sleeves. There will be rats, I thought with a shiver, we'll get rats now.

No one had mentioned the garden since that morning, not since Grandma had said, "Someone should go out there, I guess." Max and I had watched from the window while Grandma, barefoot still, stepped steadily across the green swaths and pulled the key on the rototiller. When the engine coughed itself out, Grandpa turned on her. "Job foya mutt," he snarled. *Damn you to mud.*

But Grandma just stood there and so he muttered, "Es nutzt dich nicht," knowing she would not understand, using that ugly awful language against her, as he did when he was angry sometimes, against all of us. But it was nothing this time. *Mind your own business.* That's all. And Grandma said something back – or, we thought she said something because we could see her lips move – but neither Max nor I could hear her. Maybe Grandpa couldn't either, because he just kept standing there, staring at her, until she turned around – the key to the rototiller wrapped in her palm – and walked back to the house the same way she'd gone out, lifting one soiled foot and then the other across the swaths, bending only once to collect the metal bucket of peas Max and I had left behind in the sun, easily, as if that was her only reason for going out there in the first place.

The key (though, oddly, not the rototiller) had been returned to the neighbours, and the bucket stood now in the cool of the back porch, the peas waiting to be shelled, blanched, packed in clear plastic bags labelled neatly with the date on a strip of masking tape, and frozen. They would be, I knew. Work was not left undone here, not for anything. Nothing was wasted. And I wondered, when they ate those peas next winter, when Grandma pulled the bag from the freezer, would she see that date and think of this day, this one long day?

"Sit down," she said now, behind me. "Finish eating." I returned, quietly, to the table.

"I have Cherry's number," she said to Grandpa, "unless she's moved." She paused, watching as Grandpa raised his coffee mug. "But I don't think so. She would be there still, I think."

Max wriggled in his chair and I tried to send him a warning look – don't speak, don't even move – but he began fiddling with his fork, tapping it to some unidentifiable tune against the rim of his water glass, ting ting ting ting.

"You can call after supper," Grandma said.

Ting ting ting ting.

"Or I could –"

"What for," Grandpa finally barked, flecks of potato flying from his lips. Max dropped his fork on the floor with a clatter and we all stared at it. Grandpa wiped at his mouth with the back of one hand. "So she knows the cheques won't come?"

"Mattias," my grandmother said.

"Thirty years she takes money from a man not even –"

"*Mattias.*" Grandma cast her eyes toward Max and me. Our grandfather looked at us briefly, pushed his plate away. Not even what? Not even thanking him? Not even visiting?

"She's his wife still," she said. "She should know."

"His wife," Grandpa sneered.

"It's been so long," Grandma said, leaning forward, "to keep blaming. Matt. Listen. After all this time. Who is there to blame?"

"Blame," he growled, head down. "You don't know."

I snuck a look at his face then, was shocked to see that his nose was running, like a child's, the way Max's did, that he didn't bother to wipe it away.

Outside, beyond the drawn blind, a flock of sparrows lifted in a sudden rush, the way they do. There was that quick, rising sound of air being beaten, as if they were flying right at you, and then that impossible, hot silence. Grandpa shook his head, heavily.

"You don't know," he said again, but the force was gone now. It was an apology, of course. Somehow, we all knew it.

"Yes," Grandma said gently, after a moment. She bent to pick up Max's fork, wiped it with the hem of her apron. "Yes, Matt. I do."

And it seemed that it was over then, whatever it was they were angry about. But I thought about it later, about what they had said. That Aunt Cherry took money from Uncle Aloetius, a man not even – what? Not even her husband? But, no, she was his wife still, Grandma had said. There were the photographs from the wedding; I'd seen them. So, what then?

I asked Max what he thought that night, long after we'd been in bed, after we'd heard the door to Grandpa and Grandma's bedroom softly close, after the long summer light yellowing the walls had finally gone.

It took him so long to answer that I thought he was already asleep, so I closed my eyes too, felt the length of that day settle along my bones, heavily, until I finally heard him say, "Who cares."

But it was so late then, I couldn't be sure he'd spoken at all. The room was dark. I could have dreamed it. And I thought, After all this time, who is there to blame?

I wrote her name out sometimes in the back of my school notebook, in big looping writing, with flourishes on the A and the C and the M. Aunt Cherry. Cherry. Cherry Mueller (though this last only rarely, as it called too vividly to mind images of Uncle Aloetius). I thought she was impossibly beautiful. We, Max and I, didn't blame her for leaving Uncle Aloetius. Who wouldn't? I imagined her fleeing across the prairies – her white wedding dress fluttering behind – to far-off, mythical Thunder Bay. Often, she became the heroine of our make-believe games, the princess fleeing the ogre.

Sensing the slightly illicit nature of these games, we would choose remote spots in which to indulge them: the alley behind the house, the abandoned lot beside the post office, the garage. The last time we played it was in the spare room upstairs, in the summer, after Uncle Aloetius had died, but before the funeral. It was hotter up there, even with the windows open, so we stripped down to our underwear, though Max, for some reason, retained his socks.

"Max," I said, losing patience, "you can't be Aunt Cherry."

We went through this nearly every time, but this day there was an additional conflict: an old wide-brimmed hat, mauve with a veil and yellow roses and a wide satin ribbon along the crown. It must, we knew, have belonged to Aunt Cherry. It couldn't possibly have been our grandmother's. Max clutched it against his bare chest.

"Max," I said, pulling at the hat, "let go. You're a boy. This is a girl's hat. See? Do you want to look like a girl?"

Max tugged, his face set in that bullish look he sometimes got.

"Okay," I said, letting go and crossing my arms, "go ahead. Make a fool of yourself."

Max jammed the hat down on his head and pranced around on the tips of his toes, lifting his knees high, his long legs absurdly white. "I'm Aunt Cherry," he said, in a ridiculous falsetto, "look at me."

"Max," I said, snatching the hat away, "don't be stupid." I took these play-actings very seriously, and I realized then, for the first time, that for Max they were only

games, nothing more. I realized that, to him, Aunt Cherry was no one, a photograph in an album. She might as well have been on the moon. And I envied him his easy disengagement.

"Who can I be, then," he said.

"You can be..." I considered, not without an element of animosity, "you can be Uncle Aloetius."

Max stared at me, appalled. "He's *dead*."

"Well, who do you want to be, then?" I snapped. "You can't be Aunt Cherry."

"What's going on up here?"

Both Max and I leapt a few inches off the floor. Our grandmother had appeared in the doorway, silently, as she often did.

I touched the brim of the hat guiltily, was about to say, Nothing, when Max piped up. "She wants to be Aunt Cherry. She wishes she was her." And then he added, though I'd never said this, "She wishes Aunt Cherry was our Grandma." And he laughed, pleased with his joke.

"Shut up, Max," I said.

He scowled at me. "You shut up."

Grandma looked slowly from one of us to the other, and I noticed she was wearing her good dress for some reason – dark blue chiffon with a tiny white stripe and a full, swishing skirt – though we weren't expecting any relatives until the next day.

I wanted to say, "You look nice." She did, but I could not, at that moment, have said anything of the kind. There was something in her face very close to hurt. Or, at least, I thought there was, though maybe I just imagined it was there. It was so unlike her. And for a second, for the first time in our lives, I hated Max, hated him so much that sweat broke out all over my body.

I thought Grandma might be angry then, that she might punish us both somehow; it was possible, so much that was strange had happened in the past few days.

But she just turned to leave, her skirt swirling out behind her. "Don't wreck that hat," was all she said, though at the stairs she added, "And for God's sake, don't let your grandfather hear you."

VIII

Though Grandma had offered to have someone pick her up at the airport in Medicine Hat, Aunt Cherry insisted over the phone on renting a car and driving herself the hundred or so miles. This seemed perfectly right to me, that she would return to Uncle Aloetius the same way she had left (or, at least, the same way I'd imagined she had left), on her own.

Grandpa simply snorted and flipped a page of the newspaper he was reading when Grandma told him. We were sitting in the living room waiting for Aunt Cherry to arrive. On the coffee table stood a glass bowl of late summer flowers – larkspur and calendula and marigold – that I had picked that afternoon in honor of Aunt Cherry's arrival.

We all sat there, Max and I grudgingly at either end of the chesterfield (we had not spoken since the fight of the previous day), Grandpa and Grandma in their individual chairs by the window.

"Why don't you two go pick saskatoons out back," Grandma said finally. "We'll have them with some ice cream. When Aunt Cherry gets here."

"Saskatoons?" I said doubtfully, considering their sweet dirt taste, their gravelly bodies, the color of a bruise. It wasn't much of an offering. "Don't they have saskatoons," I asked, "in Thunder Bay?"

"So," she shrugged, "pick them anyway. It's a nice thought." She went to the kitchen and rinsed out an old ice cream pail she'd been using for vegetable peelings. Max and I stood behind her, waiting for the pail, and it occurred to me that a significant portion of the time we spent at our grandparents' was devoted to picking things: tomatoes and rhubarb and lettuce from the garden (the carrots, radishes and beets were all off limits, as Max would inevitably break the stems, leaving the vegetable to rot in the earth); saskatoons and chokecherries out at the Sand Hills for jelly; mint and chamomile from the patch in back for the detested tea, which, along with raw nutmeg and garlic, was used to treat all the minor ailments which we didn't have the good sense to hide.

It had attained ritual proportions for us, this harvesting, our methods guided by our grandfather's counsel: always work left to right, that way you don't miss anything; never pull, always pinch; and, pick with your right, hold (the bucket, the branch, the plant) with your left. Most important: try to pick early in the day, before the heat has sucked out all the night dew. We generally remained faithful to these rules, even if

Grandpa wasn't around to supervise. Often we ate as we worked (there was no rule against this) and made up little songs which we thought terribly funny, punning tunes we'd heard on the radio, *Pardon me, boooy, is that the cat that chewed your new shoooes?* to "Chattanooga Choochoo" or *Don't ever leee-eave your pi-zza burning* to "Beast of Burden" (though Max always wanted to sing to "Convoy," which was impossible).

But this morning we did not sing. We trailed out to the saskatoon bushes west of the garage, me walking ahead with the ice cream pail, Max scuffing along a few feet behind. We did not sing, nor did we eat as we picked. We kept our backs to each other, the pail on the ground between us. It had seemed to me that, in the past few days, Max was somehow different, less silly and less anxious, older perhaps. But there was something else, a sort of reserved hostility that I'd never noticed about him before. Timed as it was, this change seemed to be connected in some way to Uncle Aloetius' death, though I didn't see how that was possible. Uncle Aloetius hadn't really meant much to either of us. Hadn't really meant anything, as far as I was concerned. He was just an old man. Worse, he was Uncle Aloetius. And he was dead. The idea that Max might somehow be grieving was absurd to me and I began to wonder if this change was all just a show, a way of getting attention. I worried, too, about what he would say to Aunt Cherry. Would he tell her about our play-acting, about *my* play-acting? The very thought was so humiliating I felt the blood rush to my cheeks. Would he make some stupid, hurtful joke as he'd done the previous day to Grandma?

I cut a look at him from the corner of my eye. He was picking slowly, dropping each berry into the bucket before reaching for another.

"You shouldn't of said that to Grandma," I began, after a moment, over my shoulder. "That was a dumb thing to say."

I kept picking, waiting for him to respond. When he didn't, I turned around. He was crouched down, with his back to me.

"Max," I said, "I'm talking to you."

But he just shifted slightly on his haunches. I wanted desperately to know what he was looking at, but turned back to picking anyway. For a while, there was only the plunk and roll of my berries hitting the bottom of the ice cream pail. Finally, I looked back at him. We were both dressed in our next-to-best clothes, had been warned against staining them or snagging them on the branches. And I thought, for a second, of shoving him, right between his narrow shoulder blades, into the bushes. I wished him there, caught in those branches, scraped and struggling. Instead, in spite of myself, I walked

over and locked across his shoulder. In the palm of his hand he held one fat saskatoon berry.

"What," I said, trying to sound disinterested, "are you looking at?"

He glanced up at me briefly, then looked back down.

"Watch," he said, and rolled the berry slightly with the tip of one finger in a way that made me think of the Mexican jumping beans our parents sometimes bought us at Woolworth's.

"So?" I was about to say, when a tiny worm, fine as an eyelash and white white against that purple flesh, twisted up out of the berry and made an absurd, desperate movement, as though it was rearing its head, like a viper: a movement of aggression or blindness, it could have been either. And it was, for some reason, the most awful, the most terrible thing I had ever seen. I hit Max's hand, hard, harder than I'd meant to. The blow threw him off balance and he toppled onto his side in the dust, the berry landing with a leafy plunk in the bushes.

He looked simply startled at first, then his face grew tight and red. "What'd you do that for?" he yelled from there on the ground.

I was sorry I'd done it, did not, in fact, know why I had done it. I didn't know what to say, so I turned back to picking, leaving him sprawled there, my body tensed, half expecting him to charge me from behind, pummeling me into the bushes. He didn't, though, and so I picked on, trying to act as if nothing had happened, even though I felt angry and ashamed and, for some reason, frightened, not of Max or of anything he could do to me, not anything physical, not even anything he could say to Grandma or Grandpa or Aunt Cherry in retaliation. I was afraid of something that was in me, something that was in both of us. And I thought, He'll be dead too, someday, we both will. And my heart seemed to swell up in my throat. I turned around and looked down at him, his mouth working silently, as though he were searching for words, terrible words, German words maybe; I looked down at that angry little face, the tender white rim of his skin over his ears and neck where he'd just gotten a haircut, and I loved him fiercely, so much it made my skin burn, loved him for holding that ugliness in his palm, that ugliness that I had thought was betrayal, that had made me think, There is not anything good anymore. And I knew I would cry then, so I turned away. I pretended to pick some more, and as I did I felt that swell in my heart subside, felt it sink a little because I knew, somehow, that this was the last summer for us, the last summer we would come here, to this place.

Uncle Aloetius was dead and he'd taken something with him, something terrifying and tender and unnamable. And I knew that Max and I would never be the same.

When I finally looked back, he was gone.

IX

It took me a while to pick enough berries to make a bowlful. I knew Max wouldn't return to help; he was a sulker, we both were. So when I thought I had enough, I headed back to the house. There was a car I didn't recognize parked behind Grandpa's Buick under the old cottonwood tree and I thought, with a great flutter of my stomach, Aunt Cherry.

But when I stepped into the kitchen with the bucket clenched tightly in my hand, it was not Aunt Cherry sitting there at the table with Grandma. I was both relieved and disappointed. Grandma and the other woman turned to look at me, standing there the way I was in the doorway, made awkward by the presence of this stranger. Neither Max nor Grandpa was in the room.

"Dump those in the sink," Grandma said, "with some cold water to soak."

I crossed the kitchen, stiffly, noticing that the woman watched me with a funny sort of half-smile as I went. She was old, older than Grandma maybe, though it was hard to tell that at first because her hair was an odd, flat shade of red and her eyelids were smeared heavily with green shadow that glittered, but softly, like new snow. She leaned with both elbows on the kitchen table, arms folded. In one hand she held a cigarette and I noticed that on her finger she had a big gold ring in the shape of a cat's head. There were two little green stones for eyes. It was hideous, but I couldn't look away. The woman caught my stare.

"You like this?" she said, wriggling her finger. "It's a present. From a sweetheart of mine."

The word sweetheart sounded so strange on her lips, a foreign word, and at first I didn't understand it, as though I'd never heard it before.

She took a long drag on her cigarette. "Have you got a sweetheart," she said, letting the smoke puff out with each word. "I bet she's got a couple." But she wasn't even looking at me. I felt the back of my neck grow hot, slowly, the way it did when the sun hit it dead on. Grandma smiled at me a little and I noticed she was wearing that

lipstick again and I thought, It makes her mouth look so odd, like when you cut different features from a magazine and put them all together for a new face. Her lips didn't quite seem to belong.

"Can't you say hello," Grandma said to me.

"That's all right," the woman said, "she don't know me. I'm your Great-Auntie Geraldine." She said the last part loudly. If Max had been there, we would have snickered. And I remembered then about Max and I felt angry with this woman at the table, with her minty-smelling cigarette and her ugly gold ring, as if what had happened between Max and me had something to do with her.

"I'm your Great-Auntie Geraldine," she said again. "From Thunder Bay. That's in Ontario."

I stared at her a moment, then at my grandmother, then back again, with that awful feeling in my stomach of cold, slow dawning.

"She's been waiting for you all day," Grandma said to the woman. "They both have." Then she looked around the kitchen, noticing Max's absence. "Where's Max?" she asked.

But I just stood there, feeling sick. "Geraldine...?" I said finally.

"*Auntie* Geraldine," the woman stressed.

"The kids know you as Cherry," Grandma explained.

"Oh," the woman said, laughing, though not kindly, "that's right." She looked at me. "Cherry," she said, "is how they used to say Gerri."

"They?" I said, though I didn't really want to know.

"Your Grandpa," she said, "Aloetius. All those Germans. Isn't that right, Ludie?"

My Grandma didn't say anything.

"Can't say their g's right," she went on, "or their j's. Or their th's or their sh's. Or anything, really. Cherry." She made that same laugh sound again. "Cheraldine." She shook her head, as if she couldn't believe it. "Tree o'clock,' they would say, 'Cheraldine, it's chust about tree o'clock.'" She shook her head again, looked from me to my Grandma and back again, waiting for us to laugh, too.

"More coffee?" Grandma asked instead.

"Now you're talking," the woman said. "But I need to use your bathroom first. I'm about to float away."

I watched her walk down the hall, watched the heavy brush of her old woman thighs in the stretchy green fabric of her pants, the way her skin hung loosely at the backs of her elbows, like pouches.

"Where's Max?" Grandma asked behind me.

I went to bed that night without Max for the first time in all the summers we'd spent at our grandparents'. He'd come back around suppertime with Grandpa and, though I'd tried to catch his eye across the table while we ate, he kept his head down, did not even look at Aunt Gerri except to say a brief hello, and then got up and left with Grandpa again after they'd finished eating, leaving me and Grandma and Aunt Gerri to do the dishes and then sit uneasily at the kitchen table with an untouched plate of date squares between us, waiting for a reasonable hour at which we could say goodnight.

Grandma came to tuck me in, something she didn't normally do.

"I wonder what those two got themselves into," she said, meaning Max and Grandpa.

I just lay there, staring up through the window, up at the sky which was still half-light.

"I don't know," I said, but I knew where they were, we both did. And I did not feel angry about it or resentful, only a little sad, lonely maybe.

"Well," she said, "somebody's got to do it. There's so much stuff in there, it will take a good while." She stood up and pulled the blind down, so I didn't have anywhere to look now except inside the room. "Still," she said, more to herself, "I thought he might have waited until after the funeral at least. I thought he might have waited that long."

She pulled the blanket up under my arms and tucked it in tight. I could hear Aunt Gerri humming in the bathroom where I knew she was standing in front of the tiny mirror, smoking and putting rollers in her flat red hair. We both listened a moment. It was a Christmas carol, "Good King Wenceslas."

Grandma studied my face, then patted my foot beneath the covers. "It won't be the first time," she said, and I thought, even then, that I knew what she was talking about. "Anyway," she said, "it will be a long day tomorrow. Get some rest."

"You're not German," I said, as she moved toward the door.

"No," she said, laughing a little in surprise. "You know that."

She stood there at the end of the bed, and I noticed that she'd wiped her lipstick off, or that it had just worn off and she hadn't bothered to reapply it, and this was

somehow comforting. I tried to picture Grandpa then, and Max, across town, but I couldn't see them there in that house, not without Uncle Aloetius, not with the hot earth sucking the light so fast from the sky. And I knew Grandma would not stay long with me, she did not like to linger over things. So I said, softly, so it would not carry, "But you call her Cherry, not Gerri. You say Cherry, too."

And she looked so strange then, sad maybe, or just thinking back, as if that name had meant something to her once, too.

"Oh," she sighed, "you just pick things up." She shrugged her shoulders. "After a while. It all becomes the same."

I found Max asleep on the chesterfield the next morning, covered half over with the plaid blanket from the spare room upstairs. He had not changed into pajamas but wore his T-shirt and shorts from the day before. Someone had placed kitchen chairs facing the length of the chesterfield so he would not roll off in his sleep.

My grandmother was already in the kitchen frying eggs and potatoes, and I could see my grandfather beyond her through the kitchen window, puttering around the open garage doors.

"Watch these potatoes," Grandma said. "I need to go down cellar."

I stood at the stove, turning the smoking potatoes with a spatula and Grandpa came to the door.

"What are you doing," he said to me. "I need a hand."

But before I could answer, Max came into the kitchen.

"That's all right," Grandpa said to me. "Max, come help clean up the car."

I stood at the window watching them swipe across the Buick with wet rags from the rain barrel, knowing how cold their hands would be from that water that had not yet been warmed by the sun, and when Grandma came up she said, "Go on out there. Tell them breakfast is nearly ready."

I slipped into my shoes and was about to open the screen door when I saw Aunt Gerri sitting on the concrete steps, and I stopped, without thinking, made an awkward motion to go back inside. But she'd already seen me hesitate, so she pretended she hadn't noticed, looking the other way, out into the yard at Max and Grandpa washing the car. And I felt so bad about that hesitation, so ashamed, that I had to go out.

"Morning," she said, when I sat down next to her. She was smoking, a pack of cigarettes with a lighter tucked inside balanced on her knee. Her hair was still in rollers,

and I noticed how thin it was, her pinkish scalp exposed that way between the rows. She was wearing eyeshadow again, but this time a light shade of mauve that did not glitter and made her skin look vaguely yellow.

She caught me staring at her. "I never smoked a day in my life," she said, "till I married Aloise."

"Oh," I said.

"That's how it is," she said. "That's how things are."

I felt some sort of response was expected, so I said, "We're from Saskatoon. Max and me."

"You got a sweetheart?" she asked, and I felt that old hotness on the back of my neck.

"No," I said.

She nodded, as if I'd said yes.

"How's Thunder Bay?" I asked, trying to make conversation.

"It's Thunder Bay." She shrugged. "It's not going nowhere."

I nodded, unsure whether or not I was supposed to laugh.

Grandpa said something I couldn't hear to Max, who went to the garage, came back with a bottle of liquid and, under Grandpa's direction, began rubbing it on the chrome.

"They started going through Aloise's things," she said, after a while, nodding toward Max and Grandpa. "I guess they don't need my help," she said, "nobody asked for my help. Which is just fine by me."

I didn't know what to say, though I felt she was waiting for some sort of assurance; exactly what, I did not know.

"You like your Grandpa?" she said suddenly.

I squirmed, shrugged. "I guess so," I said, uneasily. "He's my Grandpa."

She took a long drag of her cigarette.

"He don't like me much."

I wanted to assure her that wasn't so, but instead I said, "How come?"

She flicked ashes from her cigarette, pulled something from her bottom lip with her long fingernails. They were painted mauve, like the eyeshadow.

"I just hope he don't want to palm that junk off on me," she said. "I don't have nowhere to put it. I'm moving into a new place and there's nowhere to put it."

And I remembered, then, that hairbrush I'd found months ago in the kitchen drawer at Uncle Aloetius' house.

"Isn't it your stuff," I said. "Doesn't some of that stuff belong to you?"

She snorted but said nothing.

"I mean," I ventured, "you're still married to him. After all."

She peered at me, not in an angry way, just looking, then dropped her cigarette on the step and crushed it with her sandal.

"They don't divorce," she said, lifting her chin towards Grandpa, "they don't believe in it."

"Oh," I said again.

"So I just say I'm widowed. That's what I've been saying all this time. 'I'm a widow.'" She shrugged. "So? Now I am one."

We sat there listening to the swish and rub of those rags across the Buick, Max and Grandpa working without speaking.

"I found a brush one time," I said, after a while. "I thought maybe it was yours. It was blue."

"Maybe," she said. "I guess so. I guess it must've been mine."

"Don't you want it?"

"No," she said.

The sun was up full and hot then, and I heard Grandma call breakfast from the kitchen window. Aunt Gerri looked at me as if she was going to rise, then stopped.

"Love," she began, and nodded. I waited for her to go on, but she just stared across the yard, at Max and Grandpa and the old Buick, at the cottonwood tree that needed to be cut down. I waited, with the sun hot on my knees. "Love," she repeated, finally. "You think that's what it'll all be about. But then you find out. It is. Only not the way you thought." Then she nodded again and went inside.

X

After the funeral, Aunt Gerri drove back to Medicine Hat and flew from there to Thunder Bay. She took nothing with her from Uncle Aloetius' house, nothing that I knew of anyway, though I thought she should at least have that picture of herself from

Uncle Aloetius' bedroom. If I'd had the guts, I'd have gone over to get it for her. That and the hairbrush. But I didn't. That much, at least, had not changed.

I was the last one to see her before she left. I was sitting under the willow outside the church. Everyone else had already walked over to the community hall for the lunch the town ladies always provided there after a funeral. Aunt Gerri came out the side door of the church and I was about to call over to her, when she stopped abruptly and leaned with one hand against the wall, as if she were dizzy. It was only a second, but I stood up in alarm, was about to go to her when she straightened quickly and walked briskly to her car, her purple high-heels clicking on the concrete. I knew she had seen me there, but she did not look back, and I didn't blame her, not really. She just climbed into her car and, in a moment, she was gone.

It came as no surprise when I learned later that Uncle Aloetius had left her what little money he had. But it reminded me of what Grandpa had said about her, that she took money from a man not even, what? I never did find out, though I thought I knew; I thought, at least, it had something to do with love.

Max and Grandpa weren't around much in the days following; they spent most of their time across town, sorting through things, packing up all that junk, or maybe throwing it away.

My grandmother said to me one afternoon as I stood by myself, kicking at the nearly-dried cornstalks in the garden, "Why don't you go on over?" But we both knew I couldn't do that.

I crunched a browning stalk under my heel. "Why doesn't Grandpa like Aunt Gerri?" I asked.

Grandma smiled a little. "It's been so long," she said, "I don't think he remembers."

She bent and began collecting garden refuse in fistfuls, stuffing it into the plastic garbage bag she toted by her side.

"But you remember," I said.

Grandma stood up, laughed. "No." She shook her head. "Some things, it's best to let them go. Old hurts. Your grandpa can't let things go." Then she propped her hands on her hips and looked with dismay around the garden, as if she'd only just noticed it, at the soft, yellowing leaves, the rusting, wrinkled flesh of pumpkins. "Such a waste," she said. It was the thing she seemed to hate above all.

"Do you like her?"

"I don't know her," she said.

I nodded, though her answer wasn't entirely satisfying.

"What will they do with his stuff?" I asked.

Grandma shrugged. "Keep it, I guess, his personal things. There's room in the attic. See if your father wants anything." She peered at me. "Is there anything you want?"

There was, of course there was.

"No," I said.

Grandma went back to gathering cornstalks. "Anyway," she said, "we could all blame someone if we let ourselves. We all have something we could blame for. But what's the point?"

I felt bad then, standing there watching while she worked, and so I bent to help her.

"No," she said, firmly. "I want to do this myself."

I stared at her.

"If you want to help," she said, "you can get me some more garbage bags from the kitchen."

So I went, taking my time. I took the garbage bags from the cupboard below the sink, then, thinking she might appreciate it, went to the fridge to get her a cold drink. There on the bottom shelf stood the bowl of saskatoons Max and I, mostly I, had picked the day Aunt Gerri had arrived. In all the upheaval, I'd forgotten about them entirely, though Grandma had washed them and put them in one of her good porcelain bowls. They lay there like blue pearls, beautiful now, out of context, like something of sand and water, like cold blue stones. It was almost a shock to find them there among all the ordinariness of pickles and mayonnaise and eggs. I stood admiring them for a moment, and I thought, I'll remember this, then, I'll remember this one good thing. Then I took the bowl to the back door and, while my grandmother was turned away, tossed them out into the yard.

Lillie

I

Lucy Satterley was sunbathing again. Her hair pulled up in a bun on the top of her head and secured with a ribbon the exact green of her two-piece swimsuit. She did not move, but every so often the wind would lift the ribbon in a cool, shimmering flap and twist it gaily about her ears, then let it fall. From where he sat in the shade on the low cinderblock wall, Owen, who was almost eight, noticed she'd slipped the straps of her swimsuit down over her shoulders, exposing a white, shining rim of flesh. She looked, he thought, like a water queen, like something you read of in books, some fine thing just washed in from the sea. He mouthed her name, counting the beats off on his fingers – Lu-cy-Sat-ter-ley-Lu-cy-Sat-ter-ley. Five beats exactly, five fingers. It wasn't much of a game. He jumped down, brushed dust from the seat of his pants, waited a moment to see if she'd notice him. When she didn't, he crossed the Satterleys' back yard to where she stretched belly-up on a silver blanket, glistening, like a new fish. Owen sniffed. Up close, her skin had an oilier sheen and a smell like the cookies his mother used to bake – raisins and coconut. And something else, something like mown grass after it's lain for a while in the heat. He stood there shifting his weight from foot to foot, willing her to move. A meadowlark sounded from down the alley. The ribbon danced briefly and fell. Finally, he peeled off his shirt, spread it on the lawn and sat down with his back to the sun, precisely, so that his shadow fell true to the line of his body.

Still, Lucy did not move. He stared at the back of her head, hard. "Sure is hot," he said, finally, plucking a blade of grass. He chewed the end. Plucked another. He thought maybe she twitched, just a little, so he repeated himself, louder, and added conversationally, "Hotter'n a cat's snatch."

Lucy rolled her head slowly toward him, opened one blue eye. For some reason, he had known she would have blue eyes, cool and transparent as rainwater.

"Where'd you hear that?" she drawled.

Her voice startled him a little. It sounded hot, gritty. He scratched the back of his hand. "Nowhere. I can just tell. It's hot isn't it?"

"I mean 'cat's snatch.' Where'd you hear that?"

He shrugged, looked down at the grass. There was something in her tone that made him wish he had not come over after all.

"You shouldn't say that." She shifted her hips on the blanket. "It's not nice." She opened the other eye and peered at him sharply. "I bet you don't even know what that is."

Owen squinted up at a thick band of clouds ballooning towards them across the sky. Who cares if he didn't? He knew a lot of things. He knew it had not rained in forty-seven days. He kept track on a calendar his mother got from the bar. It had pictures of prairie scenes to match the seasons. Lucy humphed at his silence, but gently, like the sound a sleeping seal might make. Like the sound of those clouds moving. Fat with rain. Where did it go? If not here, where?

He knew by the rustle of her hair brushing the silver blanket that she'd turned away again.

"It's hot anyways," he said, after a while. He looked back at her, noticing how the sun lit the fine yellow hairs on the back of her neck, how it left bluish shadows, like caves, behind her shoulders, under her arms. From the wall, he had longed to tickle her there, but now he could see this would not be possible. "I'm getting a new bike," he said, then felt foolish. Why would she care? "For my birthday," he added, but without conviction now. "Maybe."

He sighed and looked around the yard. There were three half-hearted patches of petunias, purple and white, along the back of the house, and a big lilac tree with the blooms already gone to seed. There was a small aluminum shed, the kind people used to store lawnmowers and snow shovels and red plastic jerry cans. There was a garden hose curled through the dusty grass like a garter snake and a clay pot with three pink geraniums and, wedged far back under the steps, a cardboard box of glass bottles. There was a potato chip bag blown up against the cotoneaster hedge, but low so you couldn't really see it unless you were sitting on the ground. There was a clothesline. And under the big, shushing cottonwood at the back, there was a small table and two lawn chairs, the kind you could stretch out on. Beyond that, he knew, there was nothing. A few more houses, fields. The highway. And then the Sand Hills, barely visible. He walked out, often, to the eastern edge of town, just as far as the highway, and stared. People passing in cars and trucks stared back. Sometimes they waved.

"This morning," he began, tentatively, "there were mirages on the highway."

Lucy squinted back at him, scowling. He had her attention at least.

"You know," he said, "like when you're driving down the highway and you see those big puddles of water, like the road is flooded-out up ahead? But they disappear before you get there? That's a mirage."

"Oh," she said, flatly. "Yeah."

"It's an optical illusion. Because the ground is hotter than the air. It's just the reflection of the sky getting *refracted–*" he stressed the word, knowing he was showing off, why not? "—refracted by the hot air on the ground. That's why it looks blue."

"Mmm." She turned away.

"It works the other way around, too," he said, loudly, "if the ground is cold and the air is warm. Like in the winter. That's why sometimes it seems like things are closer than they really are. Like farms. Or towns." He leaned over her a little, to see if her eyes were open. They weren't. "Sometimes it's like the Sand Hills are just on the other side of the highway. Like you could just walk right over. You ever seen that?"

Only her green ribbon shifted against her cheek. She was beginning to look a little pink. Hot.

He wondered if he should explain about refraction, about how you could see it by holding a pencil into a glass of water. Probably she already knew about that.

"Anyway," he sighed, slumping back on the grass, "that's a mirage."

He watched the ribbon flip and settle. Had she fallen asleep?

"I can fill that spray bottle with ice water," he said. "My mom keeps a pitcher cold."

Lucy lay there, motionless, her skin gleaming. There were beads of sweat glinting in the hollow of her collarbone, like sparks, as though she would burst into flame any second. It could happen. Spontaneous combustion.

Finally she said, "She home?"

What difference did that make? "No," he lied.

Without opening her eyes, she unscrewed the cap, dumped the tepid water from the Windex bottle at her side and held it toward him.

He eased himself up, noticing how his shadow fell across her belly in a wide, dark stripe. He wondered how long he would have to stand there in order to leave the white shape of his body on her skin. He banged the empty bottle against his leg a couple of times. Lucy opened her eyes.

"Well?"

"Do you want a drink?" he asked. "I could get you something."

"Yeah," she said, "see if you got any Tang."

Owen slammed through the screen door. His mother knelt on the kitchen floor in a halter-top and the cut-off shorts she wore to work, trimming new strips of Mac-Tac to line the cupboards – yellow with green dots a shade lighter than Lucy's swimsuit. She was wearing the belt he hated, the one with her name stitched on the back, *Lillie*. He had one, too, in a box somewhere in the basement. *Owen*. Like it meant something. It was too small now. He'd picked them both out that year they'd gone together to the Stampede in Medicine Hat. He'd ridden on the carousel and on a pony, a brown one with big white patches that made him think of continents. And then she'd taken him on the Ferris wheel, and the wheel had stopped once when they were almost right at the top and he was amazed that even from way up there he could still smell red candied apples, like cinnamon, and popcorn and hotdogs (and mustard, he was sure he could smell mustard) and he wondered if he just thought he could smell it because he knew it was all there, hamburgers and pizza and fat, pink wads of cotton candy, and before he knew it the wheel had started, and they were at the bottom again, and his mother was holding the bar back so he could climb out and he realized, with dismay, that he'd never even looked at the city. *How about a corndog?* his mother had said then. But he wasn't hungry. So they'd splurged – that's what his mother had said – and bought the leather belts. Owen had picked them out. He wished now he'd chosen something else. He wished his mother would not wear hers anymore, but he could not tell her this.

"Shush," she said now as he stood in the kitchen doorway, though he had not said anything, "I just put the baby down." She leaned back on her haunches and frowned at him. "Owen. Where's your shirt?"

"I been in the shade," he said, trying not to look at the loose flesh of her belly over the shorts.

"Still." She put down the scissors. "Sun goes right through leaves, right through to your skin. You'll get sunstroke. Or skin cancer. Do you want that, skin cancer?" She picked up a ruler and measured another careful strip.

Owen did not want skin cancer. He wished she would not say those things. He crossed the narrow kitchen and reached two plain bar glasses from the shelf, then put them back and chose tall, clear mugs ringed with yellow sunflowers. He looked back at his mother. Would she say something about that?

"Dinner'll be ready soon," she said. Owen looked at the clock. It was after three. "Take some crackers if you're hungry," she added, "but use a paper plate, not the good patterned ones."

Owen took two pitchers from the refrigerator, poured both mugs almost full of Tang and filled the Windex bottle with cold water.

"Who's that for?" his mother asked, standing up and, almost in one motion, leaning into a chair. "Oh, my back. Sweetie, come and just rub right there. Who's the Tang for?"

Owen dug his thumbs under his mother's shoulder blades. He could tell by her voice she was having a bad day. That's what she called them, her bad days.

He shrugged. "Just a friend."

"What friend?"

"Lucy."

"Lucy Satterley?" She frowned over her shoulder. "Lower, sweetie."

He shifted his hands down his mother's back. Had he noticed before that it was freckled? Surely he must have, but he could not, just then, remember. Her skin felt hot and dry under his hands, and there was a pinched red welt where the elastic of her top dug into her flesh. It seemed there were a lot of people his mother didn't want him to talk to. He hoped she would not say he couldn't talk to Lucy.

"That's better," she said, tilting her head forward. "You'd think I was eighty the way my back hurts. That's what a pregnancy'll do to you. That and worse. A bit to the right. The right."

Owen shifted his hands again, noticed there was some dirt under his fingernails, not much.

"With you," she continued, "I couldn't hardly do nothing. Just lie around all day. Watch TV. Sometimes I'd do the hide-a-words but..." She waved her hand.

Through the screen door, they could hear a dog begin to bark down the alley. Fletchers' dog, Boone. She never barked like she was angry, or like she was excited. She just barked. It was something to do. Owen knew it would likely last all afternoon, perfectly measured, like the ticking of a clock.

Owen's mother raised her head, pushed her hair back from her forehead.

"Damn dog," she said.

Owen's hands began to tire and he paused to flex his fingers. His mother looked at him over her shoulder.

"What did you say Lucy Satterley's doing here? Did her mom send her?"

"No," Owen said, using his knuckles now. "I was just talking to her. Over the wall."

"Oh." She straightened her shoulders, rolled her neck. "That's enough, sweetie." She smiled and picked a piece of dried grass from Owen's pants, then stood up, rolling the grass between her fingertips. "How old is Lucy anyway?"

Owen shrugged, took the plastic ice tray from the freezer, twisted it and pried out the cubes with his fingers.

"Must be in junior high now," she said. She stood there at the sink, lips pursed as if calculating. "Is she in junior high, Owen?"

"I dunno," he said, plunking two cubes in each glass and returning the tray to the freezer.

"One thing you'll learn, Owen..." she said.

Owen scratched the back of his arm.

She looked at the glasses. "You should put the ice in first," she said. "You splashed all over the counter." She looked at him a moment, then turned away, sighed heavily. "Looks like rain." She tapped her fingernails on the counter, staring out the screen door.

"Probably not," Owen said. It was what she always said. It was what everyone said. It would look like rain was coming, but the clouds would just slide by.

"No," she said, smiling a little, "probably not."

Past her he could see the roof of the school and beyond that, the tall black peak of St. Joseph's. He wondered if Lucy had waited. His mother sighed again and knelt down to the Mac-Tac. He could feel her watching as he quickly filled a plate with graham crackers.

"You should put that on a tray, Owen," she said. "There's one in that box of kitchen stuff downstairs. The first one, I think, the big one."

He did not want a tray, but he was not willing to say this. He wanted to get back outside. What if she'd already gone into her house? It would be cloudy soon. She wouldn't stay out when it was cloudy.

Halfway down the stairs, Owen heard the baby howl. Would he have to stay in now? To help out? He pulled the string on the overhead bulb, poked around in the cardboard boxes in the corner, considering the possibility of mice, spiders. The floor

creaked under his mother's weight above him, the weight of the baby. He'd held it once. It weighed a lot, for something that size.

At the bottom of the second box he found an old Pepsi-Cola tray, probably from the bar, too. It reminded him of last winter, when he'd had the flu. He'd spent nearly a week stretched out on the couch in the living room reading comic books while his mother brought him glass after glass of flat ginger ale on that tray. That had been a good week, in spite of the flu. Owen closed the box and headed for the stairs. As always when leaving the cellar, he left the light on, unwilling to turn his back on a darkened room.

Upstairs the howl had become a shriek. His mother paced back and forth across the living room, jiggling the baby against her chest. Its tiny feet stuck out absurdly beneath the cotton blanket, rigid and fragile, the feet of a sparrow.

Owen arranged the drinks and crackers on the tray and struggled to open the screen door without spilling.

"Owen," his mother called after him.

He stopped halfway out the door and they just stared at each other a moment.

"Tell Lucy," she said, finally, then shook her head. "Remind Lucy her mother has my good baking pan."

Owen eased himself across the wall. Lucy had rolled onto her stomach and was leaning on one elbow, looking at the Sears Catalogue, her swimsuit straps dangling down over the pinkish tops of her arms. She looked up at him from under her long bangs.

"It's about time." Her face looked red and swollen with the heat. "What are you wearing those pants for? Aren't you godawful hot?"

He set the tray down carefully on the grass. She took one of the mugs and flipped a page in the catalogue. When he didn't answer, she looked up at him. "What you got to wear pants for?"

"Skin cancer," he said, before he could stop himself.

"You got skin cancer?"

He rubbed his palms on his pants. "Maybe."

"That'll kill ya, you know."

"I know."

She let the catalogue fall shut.

"I had a cousin died last summer," she said, selecting a cracker. "Brain aneurysm. Just popped off in the middle of the night and nobody knew nothing about it. Ten years old. Just like that." She snapped her fingers. "Found her in the morning and it looked like she was sleeping." Lucy took a bite of graham cracker and added ominously, "Only she wasn't." She paused to brush crumbs from her lips. "Maybe you got a brain aneurysm."

"No," he said, "I don't." Why had he said skin cancer?

"You better hope not," she said, reaching for another cracker, "you better hope it's not a brain aneurysm. They get you in your sleep. Just like that. You might have one. You wouldn't know it if you did, and then one night..." She snapped her fingers again.

"I don't have an aneurysm," Owen said irritably, poking at the ice cubes in his glass.

"How do you know?" she asked, biting into a cracker. "Like I said, there's no signs."

"My mom would know," Owen said, "she'd know."

"She'd know it when she found you laid out stone cold dead in the morning, that's what." Lucy had finished the crackers and closed her eyes. Owen could see fine bits of graham cracker stuck to the sweat above her lip.

His mother would know. Of course she would. Even with the baby. She'd know. He looked up at the sky, at the fat clouds moving heavily. Soon they would be right over top of them.

"My mom wants her baking pan," he blurted.

"What?"

"My mom wants her baking pan."

"Right now?"

"Yes," he stuck out his chin. "She's baking a cake." He sat up straight and added, "Not for the baby."

Lucy narrowed her eyes. "I thought you said she wasn't home."

She clucked her tongue against her teeth and sat up, the top of her swimsuit dipping low across her chest, the skin there mapped with the creases of the silver blanket. Owen stared at the white rim of flesh. It was the prettiest thing. Like the inside of a seashell.

"What are you looking at," she demanded. "You little perv." She didn't move to pull the straps up.

"I'm not a perv."

"Yes you are. Perv." She smirked, leaning forward. "Snatch."

Owen stood up, brushed the grass from his knees and pulled his shirt on. The sun had made him dizzy and he wobbled a bit as he bent for the tray.

"I'm not finished yet," Lucy said, grabbing her mug. She tilted her head back and drained it, exposing the sweat-streaky white flesh of her neck and chest. Letting her top slip down so he could see the smooth tops of her breasts. He looked quickly away.

"Thanks," she said as she handed him the mug, sucking on an ice cube wedged in the corner of her mouth. "Perv."

II

Lucy'd seen Lillie Gower's kid straddling the wall long before he'd finally jumped down and come over. She'd known it was just a matter of time; he'd sat there every day this week. She hadn't seen him around much since they'd moved in last fall, wouldn't have known him from Adam if she passed him on the street. But she knew Lillie. Everybody did. The kid had her build, real small-boned. And that hair, not quite blond, not quite brown. Sort of cardboard-colored.

She looked back at him through the sliding glass doors. He stood in the middle of the yard, hands jammed deep in the pockets of those ridiculous pants. Who would dress their kid like that on a hot summer day? He turned toward the house then, shading his eyes, and she stepped away from the door. Maybe she shouldn't have done that, flashed him that way. It wasn't really like her. There was just something about the way he'd kept gawking, thinking she didn't even notice. Something sly-like.

Still, with a mother like that, the kid was bound to be a little weird. A cocktail waitress, at her age, in those skimpy shorts? Who was she kidding? She must be at least thirty. No, was she that old? She didn't really look it, not in the face, not really. It was hard to tell. She'd only seen her up close that once, in the alley outside the bar. And it was dark, just the yellow bulb over the back door. And she'd drunk that beer, too, that Rick's cousin snuck out for him under his jacket. When she thinks about that night, she can still taste it. It had made her eyes water. But she'd drunk it anyway, guzzled it to make it go down fast. And Rick had grabbed her around the waist, laughing, falling

against her into the wall. And the cousin, laughing too, cracking open another beer, *This one's on Lillie.*

Bullshit, Rick said, *you're full of shit.*

I'm not shitting you, man.

Shit, Rick said, shaking his head. *So what are you doing here?*

And the cousin grinning, stepping back into the bar, Rick laughing.

And she laughed, too, though she didn't find anything particularly funny, and she remembers there was glass under her shoes, she could hear it crunching, and she was scared it might punch right through her runners, into her foot. She'd heard about that, about people stepping on rusty nails or dirty glass, so she'd pushed Rick backwards a little, just to get away from it. She didn't know why he got so mad then, shoving her back up against the wall. She'd knocked her head on the bricks but it didn't hurt, not really. "Shh," he'd said and for a minute she'd thought it was all right, of course it was, this was just Rick. Only she was crying. She was dizzy and crying and her sweater was off and tangled somewhere down in the dirt. She was freezing, with glass under her feet and all that yellow light like stars falling, and then Lillie was right there, trashy Lillie Gower who wore her shorts too short and her hair too big. Her face was up against Lucy's, so close she could smell her gum, peppermint, and Rick was running down the alley with his cousin. Lillie was draping the sweater across Lucy's chest, saying, *You okay, sweetie, you okay?* over and over, her face a broad orange moon.

And that's when she'd been sick. Lillie had her by the shoulder, saying, *Stay here, I'll get you some water. Stay right here.* And she slipped into the door below the yellow light, a blast of laughter and music blowing out behind her. Before she could come back, Lucy'd wiped her chin with her sweater and run down the alley toward home, tripping against the ruts, wondering if Rick would be there waiting for her, half hoping he would be. He wasn't though, she hadn't seen him since, except that one afternoon down at Boyle's. But he was paying for a Coke and didn't see her walk by.

She'd almost expected Lillie to show up, too, the next day, maybe say something to her mother. She hadn't, of course, they weren't friends or anything, her mother and Lillie. Anyway, Lillie Gower wasn't anybody to be afraid of.

And now here was her kid, leering at her in the back yard.

She pulled the blinds shut and headed for the kitchen. It was freezing. Her mother must be home, pumping the air conditioning again. It was never the right temperature in that house, freezing in the summer, hot in the winter. She grabbed her

dad's old gardening cardigan from a hook by the back door and pulled it on over her bikini.

"Mom," she shouted. "Lillie Gower wants her cake pan." She could hear the low hum of a radio on somewhere above. "Mom!" she hollered up the dim stairs. And waited.

"For jesus sake," she grumbled, banging up the carpeted steps in her bare feet. She'd catch hell for that, there was probably grass all over them. "Mom," she said, swinging open her mother's bedroom door, "Lillie Gower wants her cake pan."

Her mother was sitting in an armchair by the window looking out at the back yard, a romance novel spine-up on her leg. "Yes," she said, turning around, "I heard."

Lucy pulled the cardigan across her stomach. Had she been sitting there the whole time? She fingered the ribbon on top her head.

Her mother sat there, legs crossed, the pale blue house-wrap she always wore on Sundays draped neatly to her ankles. She stared at Lucy, then clicked off the radio that was playing softly on the nightstand.

Lucy rubbed her arms. "Does it have to be forty-below in here?"

"Is that Owen down there?" her mother asked, turning back to the window. Lucy shifted her feet. So she had been watching. Well, so what? She hadn't really done anything. Anyway, her mother should take care of her own problems. She noticed the glass tumbler beside the radio, empty. So that's what she was doing. Until now, Lucy hadn't considered the absurdity of her mother borrowing a baking pan, anyone's, and especially Lillie Gower's.

Her mother rose then and stepped into the adjoining bathroom, closing the door. Lucy crossed the room quietly, sniffed the empty glass. Water or vodka, she couldn't tell for sure. She tilted the glass back to her mouth. Water. She set it carefully back down over its wet ring.

In the yard below, Owen had moved into the shade, sitting with his shirt on, the Pepsi tray balanced on his knees, staring up at the sky, motionless. What was he looking at? Beyond the yard she could see the highway and then the yellow glint of the Sand Hills. Looking just as they always did. She hadn't ever noticed that they looked closer in winter. And how did he know all that stuff anyway? Probably he'd made it up.

Her mother came back in a loose white sundress.

"Does Lillie want it right now?"

"What?"

"Does she need her baking pan right now?"

Lucy stretched the cardigan down over her thighs. Jesus, it was freezing. "What'd you borrow a cake pan of Lillie Gower's for anyway?"

Her mother smoothed her skirt, checked the hem. "I suppose she needs it now. Or she wouldn't have sent Owen."

"So he says," Lucy turned back to the window, looked down at Owen. What was he staring at? "Is he sick?" she asked over her shoulder.

"Who?"

"Owen Gower."

"Is he?" Her mother misted her throat with a spray bottle from the dresser. "Not that I know of. Why do you ask?"

"Just wondering." Lucy leaned on the window ledge, stared down at her legs. She did have grass on her feet. She brushed it off against the carpet.

"You must be wondering for a reason."

"He *says*..." she drew the word out, "he says he's got skin cancer."

Lucy's mother laughed.

"But then he said he didn't." Had he? She thought he had. She pulled at a thread on the cuff of the cardigan.

"I don't think Owen Gower has skin cancer."

Lucy twisted around, looked back out the window. Owen had not moved. Geez, that kid was patient. She put a finger up on the glass right over his small body. She could block him out completely if she wanted to.

"Don't smear that, Lucy," her mother said.

Lucy moved her finger, looked down at Owen, at his small, pale face turned up to the sky. She shouldn't have flashed him like that. Skin cancer. For some reason, it wasn't funny. She picked up the empty glass on the table, watched her mother slip into a pair of sandals.

"Where you going?"

"To take the cake pan back."

Lucy put the glass down, stared at her mother. "That's what he's here for," she said. "He's down there waiting. You can't just send him home, after he's been waiting like that."

"I've been meaning to stop by and see the baby anyway."

"What for?" Lucy said. She wasn't chilly anymore, she felt her body flush, from the stomach upward. Her head began to ache. "You don't even know her." Maybe she'd stayed out in the sun too long. "Send it back with him."

"What's the matter with you?" her mother asked, snapping her hairbrush down on the dresser. Lucy turned away, back toward the window so her mother could not see her face.

"You don't even know her," she said, her head pounding.

She had stayed out too long. She closed her eyes, rubbed her temples. She thought of Owen sitting below her on the grass. Of Lillie, her face so round and soft under the yellow light. She wasn't anybody to be afraid of. She was just Lillie Gower. She was a cocktail waitress. A barmaid. She was trash.

"Lucy," her mother said, stepping toward her in a hot cloud of perfume, "what in the world are you crying about?"

A Hard Witching

Every night last month, Mr. Crosie had come to Edna in what must have been dreams, his hair smoothed back unnaturally from his temples, the dull wool of his good blue suit brightly silvered in the moonlight. *Alf?* she would say softly, though she would be thinking *Mr. Crosie,* just as she had done all through their married life. *Alf?* But Mr. Crosie would just stand there in the space between the tall bureau and the window, his long arms dangling loose at his sides, palms turned strangely away from her. And each time he came, she thought with a certain wonder, *How clean his hands are, right down to the fingernails.* And she would try hard to think back, *Had they been that way for the funeral?* And thinking of that, thinking they might not have been, she felt guilty, as if some urgent and possibly distasteful task had been left undone. *What is it, Alf?* she would ask, edging herself up against the pillows and tugging the blanket higher over her chest, her breath pluming out in the air from the open window at Mr. Crosie's elbow. *What is it?*

It happened that way each night for nearly the entire month of October, while the fields lay fallow and newly damp with frost and the leaves of the shelterbelt slowly yellowed and thinned and the hens in the yard chortled and shivered and plumped their fat, white bodies against the growing cold. But then, on the last Saturday of the month, Mr. Crosie did not come. Edna woke late in the morning with the sun already laid out heavily across the bed and, realizing he had not come, she dropped to her knees and said out loud, half-relieved, half-alarmed, "Oh, Lord, oh, Lord, do not let the flood sweep over me, Lord, or the deep swallow me up, or the Pit close its mouth over me." She did not know why she said it, only that it felt like a thing that should be said. And, feeling somehow better for having said it – and being, above all, a practical woman, a point upon which she took pride – she rose and fried herself a breakfast of eggs and sausages which she ate in huge, heavily-peppered bites straight from the pan, slick with grease and still smoking.

In fact, Edna felt so much better that, for the first time in months, she did not really think any more of Mr. Crosie. Instead, with a fierce energy she had not known in years, she threw open all the windows to the sharp, good air and began her fall cleaning, pulling down curtains and shaking out rugs to the sunlight with a snap of her wrist; rubbing walls, ceilings and floors briskly with water so hot her hands came away a raw, bright red. And she did not think of Mr. Crosie. She worked that way late into the

evening, pegging up the last load of linens on the clothesline under a harvest moon with the coyotes yapping their soulless yap from somewhere far beyond the circle of yard light and new frost faintly scenting the air and she did not think of Mr. Crosie and she did not rest until she collapsed finally in an aching and satisfied heap beside the orange cat on the chesterfield and slept deeply under an afghan she had knitted herself shortly after her marriage; slept smelling the fine lemon smell of a clean house. And she did not think of Mr. Crosie – not until early the following morning, Sunday, when, just as the last batch of butter tarts for the church bake sale was browning nicely in her oven, the well went inexplicably dry. She did not know at first that the well had gone dry, assumed only that it was some small thing wrong with the pipes that caused the kitchen faucet to choke and shudder and spit furiously.

"Isn't that just the way," she said to herself, rather good-naturedly, she thought, "and Mr. Crosie gone not eight months."

But when – after first remembering to remove the tarts from the oven – she checked the rest of the faucets in the house and then the outside taps only to find them all rasping dryly, she realized she might have a bigger problem on her hands. She frowned and propped her fists on her hips, surveying the farmyard through narrowed eyes, as if she might spot the culprit of her misfortune lurking somewhere among the neat red and white granaries.

"It doesn't rain," she said aloud, "but it pours."

Much to Edna's dismay, Heddy Kretsch said a similar thing that afternoon in the church basement as she watched Edna arrange butter tarts on a large paper doily the unseasonal shape of a snowflake. Edna was embarrassed about the doily but it was all she'd had on hand. It annoyed her that Heddy, of all people, had seen it. But Heddy appeared to pay no attention to it, fascinated as she was by the knowledge that Edna's well had gone dry.

"There's one thing you can count on sure," Heddy said, "trouble comes in threes." And then, as if to confirm the fact, she lifted two spiny fingers in the shape of a V, "That's two."

Edna bit her lips. It would take Heddy to say something like that. Likely as not, she was drunk. It was no wonder most people wouldn't give her the time of day. It just goes to show, Edna thought, it just goes to show. She pointedly edged the Tupperware container of tarts away from Heddy, who had begun fingering them as she spoke,

turning them slowly, like dials. It was a well-known fact that Heddy's hands were never what you'd call clean.

"You better watch out," Heddy said. "You got one more coming."

"Oh, baloney," Edna said. "Silliness. And superstition. I've got no truck with that nonsense," Edna stressed. Nor for you either, she wanted to add, but instead said pointedly, "No good Christian should." This was a direct jab at the Kretsches, always the first to arrive, as it was said around town, and the last to leave, be it church or bar. She snapped the lid back on the Tupperware container and waved tightly to Marg Hilling two tables down, hoping she might take the hint and step over for a chat. She did not.

"I don't know," Heddy said. "Your well gone dry," she shook her head slowly, sorrowfully, "and the grass not even grown over Alf's grave."

Edna flinched, as much from the sound of Mr. Crosie's name on those lips as from the reference itself. She set her jaw and fixed her eyes firmly on a jumble of canvas banners rolled up and leaned against each other in the far corner. One had unravelled a bit and Edna could read, in faded purple lettering, *hine is the kingdo.*

"Edna," Heddy said sharply, rapping her knuckles three times against the table, "what you got is no ordinary well run dry. What you got," she said, "is a haint."

Edna, who had at first thought Heddy had said *hate*, stood there feeling offended, though also slightly surprised and disturbed at the word.

"I don't *hate* –," she began distinctly.

"*Haint*," Heddy stressed, taking pains to enunciate each letter, "you got a *haint*. And he drunk up all your water. Ghosts are thirsty."

"Ghosts!" Edna could not at first think of anything to add, the sheer ignorance of the woman in front of her was astounding. She was certain now: Heddy was drunk.

"Water's the first thing they look for," Heddy went on, reasonably. "You get you some buckets of water and set them all around your bed in a kind of horseshoe shape."

Edna was about to laugh, but as she stood there, she remembered the dreams – Mr. Crosie standing silent in his funeral clothes each night in the cold blue light of the moon – and she shivered. Stupid, she thought then, don't be stupid, Edna, you were dreaming. In a dream, she thought, anything is possible.

"—Rod's sister in Val Marie," Heddy was saying. "She give her husband a real nice funeral and didn't wear nothing but black and went to the cemetery every day just to sit by his grave and cry like there was no tomorrow – more fool her because I known

him all my life just about and he was worth maybe three tears at best. Then she started finding her geese dead, necks broke, just laid out in the yard every morning. There wasn't no blood, so she knew it wasn't dogs or coyotes or skunks or nothing. It was a haint for sure. So she up and stopped going to the cemetery and stopped crying and thinking about him all the time, and she put out buckets of water like I said and sprinkled pepper around all the doors and windows—"

"Stop it," Edna said.

"Your haint found its own water," Heddy went on.

"Speak like a Christian for heaven's sake," Edna snapped. "You're in a church."

They stared at each other across the table. Then Heddy pursed her lips, as if considering something.

"If you believe in God," she said flatly, "you believe in ghosts."

For a moment, Edna could not think of a reply and so she just stood there feeling the slow, hot beat of her pulse in her temples, until Heddy shrugged and plucked a pastry crumb from the edge of the table, rolling it between her fingertips. "All I'm saying is it's better to be prepared. Call it what you want." Then she leaned in so close Edna could feel sour breath against her face. "Acts of God," she whispered. And, popping the crumb in her mouth, she walked away, her thin legs moving sharp and precise as the blades of scissors.

Edna fumed. Heddy – how dare she – her and that whole pack of dirty, drunken Kretsches and their scrawny, ragged, thieving kids and never a penny to their names, yes, they should be the ones to talk about God. Shouldn't they just. Then, watching Heddy poke her way alone and ignored from table to table, hands jammed deep in the pockets of her dirty brown coat, not buying anything (of course not, how could she?), Edna relented a little. Judge not, lest ye be judged, she thought. There was a lot of truth in that. It was something Mr. Crosie had always said, and she'd almost always given her wholehearted assent. *Yes, indeed, you said it, Mr. Crosie, that's for sure. Judge not.* It was a good motto to live by. Also, There but for the grace of God go I. That was a good one, too.

Edna watched as Heddy, across the room now, slipped something from the crafts table smoothly into the pocket of her coat, something glittery and round, a Christmas ornament perhaps. For a moment, Edna was delighted with the grace of the motion, with the way the silvery object had flashed briefly, then disappeared into that dark pocket like a falling star, like magic. But as soon as she'd thought it, the beauty was

gone, quick as the imagined pulse of a constellation. Isn't that just the way, she thought then, the minute you're inclined to think charitably of someone, they go and do a thing like that. There but for the grace of God, indeed. How about, You reap what you sow? You reap what you sow (even Mr. Crosie would have agreed with her there), be it in this life or the next. And where would they be – people like the Kretsches – on that final day? Not burned up in hellfire, Edna didn't believe in that holy roller business – she was a Catholic, after all – but maybe just waiting, hands raised to the heavens for a mercy that would never come. Not even realizing they'd been missed. No, not missed, she corrected herself, passed over. That was the sad thing, Edna thought. Well, she sighed, it would all come out in the wash. She didn't know why she let Heddy get to her anyway. Ghosts. No, what had she called them? Haints. What nonsense, she thought, and then laughed a little at her anger. If Heddy Kretsch can get my goat, she thought, I'm a sorry case indeed.

The following morning Edna phoned around about getting someone out to the farm to drill a new well. The estimates they gave her were nothing short of shocking. And there was no guarantee, they said, they couldn't make any promises. She asked them, what did they mean by that? They said, chances are you got water out there somewhere, but how much drilling we do to find it, that's another story. We'll drill as many holes as it takes, they said, but we charge by the foot. I'll have to think about it, she told them. You do that, the last fellow told her, but don't think too long. Once that ground's froze you won't get anyone out there – buggers up the drill bits.

So Edna thought about it. She thought about it as she loaded up the half-ton with clean five-gallon pails, she thought about it as she drove the few miles over to Thauberg's to load up on water, she thought about it as she filled the buckets from the hose by the barn and then, as he was loading them back into the truck for her, she asked Eulan Thauberg what he thought.

"Oh," he said, heaving a bucket up on the truck bed and sliding it back against the cab in one motion, "I don't know, Edna. Seems like a shame, all this at once."

"If you're going to tell me trouble comes in threes..." Edna said, rather sharply. She needed no one's pity, certainly not Eulan Thauberg's. Truth be known, Mr. Crosie might have had many more good winters in him if he hadn't run himself ragged after Eulan Thauberg. *Eulan needs another hand with the seeding* (or the harvesting or the butchering or Lord knows what all else), Mr. Crosie would say and off he'd go, never

mind Thaubergs had two sons nearly grown. Never mind he could never keep up with his own work at home, always a dollar short and a day late.

Eulan Thauberg frowned. "No," he said, "I wasn't thinking that." He scratched his chin, heaved up another bucket. "Just that," he said, leaning over the side of the truck, "it's a long winter out here, you know?"

Edna did know. Of course, she did, she'd lived around these parts her entire life. Eulan knew that. What was he getting at?

"It's just," Eulan went on, heaving up the last bucket with a puff, "maybe you might think about moving to town now."

"Town!" Edna nearly laughed at the suggestion. "Eulan, how can you even think it?" But she knew exactly how Eulan could think it; he had his eye on her land. That was just like him. She was surprised he'd waited this long. "No," Edna said, firmly, "I won't leave the place. I just need to get the well fixed up and I'll be all set." She frowned, considering. "How many holes will they have to drill, do you think?"

Eulan slammed the tailgate shut and leaned up against it.

"Oh, they're pretty good, usually," he said. "They hit the low spots first. You got a good one west of the barn there. Around here they have to go down usually fifteen, twenty-five feet or so."

Edna frowned, calculating the estimate they'd given her per foot. "If they have to drill more than once, that could get pretty costly," she said, mostly to herself. And then, for some reason, a memory came upon her, the way they do sometimes, in a flash, of that hole she and Mr. Crosie had found beside the road allowance, out past the Sand Hills – when was it? – years ago. *Pull over*, he'd said suddenly as they bumped along. *What for?* she'd wanted to know. *Just pull over*, he said. So she did, and he unfolded his body from the cab of the truck and walked back along the road. She waited in the truck awhile. Then, when she saw he was making no moves to return, she followed him. He was standing at the side of the road, holding a flat, roundish piece of metal that she did not at first recognize as an old cream can lid, rusted and dented as it was almost beyond recognition. There was a hole cut in the middle, roughly the size of a quart sealer, or a little bigger. Mr. Crosie turned the lid slowly in his large hands. *What in the world*, Edna said, *have you got that for?* Mr. Crosie nudged the ground with the toe of his boot. *It was over this hole here.* Edna looked down. There was a hole in the ground, about the size of the hole in the lid. Mr. Crosie picked up a stone and dropped it down the hole. Edna counted to herself. It was fifteen, no, almost twenty seconds before they heard it hit

bottom. They blinked at each other. Mr. Crosie shook his head in disbelief, dropped another stone, and they waited again until it hit. Dry. *By the size of it, looks like an old test hole,* Mr. Crosie said, with that note of amazement he often got, *for a well.* Then he shook his head again. *What's so strange about that?* Edna asked. Mr. Crosie lifted his hands, looked around. *There's not a farm around here for eight, nine miles at least,* he said, *never has been that I know of. This is community pasture.* Edna shrugged and took the cream can lid. *This has been here a while,* she said. She ran her thumb around the rim, rusted to a thin, lacy edge. Mr. Crosie nodded. *It was rusted right into the ground there. I had to pry it up.* He took his lighter from his pants pocket – the good silver-plated lighter she'd given him for Christmas a few years back, engraved with his initials – and bent over the hole, trying, quite foolishly Edna thought, to see by that small blue light. *If you drop that,* Edna warned, *I can tell you you'll be coming back here tonight with a shovel.* After a moment, Mr. Crosie straightened and pocketed the lighter. He looked around again, removed his cap. *I can't figure it out,* he said. Edna tossed the cream can lid down; it landed part way over the hole with a soft plunk. *Oh well,* she said, *we aren't going to solve this mystery.* And she started back for the truck. *Come on,* she hollered over her shoulder, *I've got supper on.* She stopped and looked back just in time to see Mr. Crosie straighten the lid so it fit neatly over the hole, then step it gently into place.

He'd talked about that hole for weeks after, months. He'd just pipe up sometimes, while thumbing through the *Producer* or in the middle of *M*A*S*H. Who could have drilled it? Someone from around here? What for? When?* It always took her a few seconds to clue in. *Who cares?* she'd say then. *Forget about it already.* But he couldn't. In fact, she'd bet he'd been back there with a flashlight more than once. Mr. Crosie was like that, just couldn't leave things alone. Silly things. Useless things. It annoyed her.

"Edna?" Eulan was saying.

Edna blinked slowly, painfully, like she was coming out into bright sunlight after a long, deep darkness.

"I said," Eulan frowned, "have you had someone down there even? Might be you just need to dump a load of water in, get someone down to prime the pump. You should get someone down there once before you go and bring the drillers out."

Edna took a long breath. "I hadn't thought of that," she said, exhaling. She scowled. "You'd think they might have said something about that on the phone."

"What have you got there anyway," Eulan asked, "jet pump or submersible?"

"Submersible?" Edna asked.

"A down-hole submersible," he said, then added, "Is your pump by the house or down the well?"

"Oh," Edna said, "I really don't know." I should know that, she thought angrily, why don't I know that?

Eulan shrugged again. "Well, either way it's worth a try I guess," he said. "Hell of a lot cheaper than drilling a new well. Betty's brother had to go down sixty-five feet and she was dry as toast. Hell of a lot cheaper than that."

"Yes," Edna said absently, for she was still trying to think if she'd seen something that looked like a pump near the house, "that's for sure. You said it."

"Well, then, you just hang on there once," Eulan said, and thumped a fist against the truck. "You just hang on," he said. "I know a fella."

Edna drove home, the water slopping out on the truck bed with each bump in the road. It was just as well, she thought, listening to it slosh and roll behind her, the buckets would be too heavy for her to lift full anyway. You'd think Eulan could have figured that out for himself. You'd think, after all Mr. Crosie'd done for him, he would have offered to haul some over for her, or at least have one of the boys do it. But that was just like Eulan. She'd noticed he hadn't offered to check the pump for her. Well, that was no real surprise; she'd known Eulan Thauberg long enough not to expect it of him. No, he had his eye on the land, all right. But he had another thing coming. Typical Eulan – greedy. Greedy and cheap. Lazy, too.

But this other fellow Eulan mentioned sounded promising; a young fellow from near Golden Prairie; she didn't recognize the name. She hoped he worked fast, that was one thing. She was worried. There was that chill in the air even midday now that promised of hard frost. Soon the ground would freeze; it would be too late to drill if she needed to. Besides, she couldn't keep hauling water from Thaubergs', she fretted as she pulled into the quiet yard and unloaded the wet, heavy buckets straight into the porch. It just didn't make sense.

And, thinking about how things did not make sense, Edna pulled off her coat and boots and sat at the kitchen table far into the evening, staring out the window as the sun slowly turned a dull, effortless red and sank beneath the horizon; she sat thinking about wells and waiting for the phone to ring.

Sometimes, she thought wearily, as she laid her head down on her arms, it was just all too much.

Edna slept that night hunched over the kitchen table. When she woke the next morning, the muscles in her neck aching and and the orange cat demanding to be let out and the water frozen over into crusty cylinders in the unheated porch (for she had forgotten to bring any into the house), she began to think maybe Eulan Thauberg was right. Maybe she should think about leaving the farm. She lugged one of the buckets into the kitchen and chopped half-heartedly at the surface with the wooden handle of a butcher knife and thought, for some reason, of Heddy Kretsch, her lean, sharp face; she thought about trouble coming in threes. Maybe Heddy was right, after all. She put a kettle on to boil for coffee, then washed her face in the icy water and sat again at the kitchen table. Mr. Crosie, she thought, the well. Against all her prior reasoning, there was a vague idea forming that there might be some sort of connection between the two.

And that was when Monson appeared.

"It doesn't rain," Edna said, this time forcing a cheerful smile, as he stepped down from his truck, "but it sure does pour." Now that Monson was here, she'd decided it didn't do, after all, to mope around about things that couldn't be helped. She smoothed her skirt and stepped back a little as he turned a slow circle, surveying the yard.

He was smaller, much smaller, than she'd imagined and even a little younger than Eulan had led her to believe, though it was hard to tell when a man kept his hair. And what hair he had, Edna thought, forking up all over his head in sharp black curls. As if reading her mind, Monson jammed his cap down low over his flat, rather pointed ears and peered at her from beneath the brim with bright, dark eyes. Edna peered back. She didn't really like the looks of him. There was something gnomelike, something shifty, unclean. As though he were blurred at all his edges. He looked like a drinker. Finally, she thrust her hand forward and said, uneasily, "I'm Mrs. Crosie."

"Monson." He grinned, rather unexpectedly revealing a row of teeth, white and even and delicate as pearls. Edna wondered if they could be real.

"Eulan said he thought you had a submersible," he said, "but that you weren't sure."

Submersible, Edna thought, there's that word again. "I believe it is a submersible, Mr. Monson," she said with authority, "because there's certainly no jet pump that I can see." She said jet pump distinctly.

Monson gave her an odd look. "Okay," he said, "I guess I'll check the well, then."

"I'll walk you over." She wanted to ask how long this all might take. There had been flurries in the air yesterday, sailing past the kitchen window, though today it was slightly warmer, the sun beaming down on the yard as if heaven itself was sending her hope and good will.

"There it is," Edna said, pointing to the three-foot-high metal wellhouse.

Monson walked over, unlatched the heavy wooden lid and peered inside with an enormous flashlight he unhooked from his belt.

"You got oak casings here," he said, tapping the flashlight against the inside of the well, "original, looks like."

"Oh?" Edna said, following him over, unsure what it meant to have oak casings. Surely not good, not if they were original. Would that need to be replaced, too?

"Don't see that much anymore," Monson said, leaning back and clicking off the flashlight. "This must be the genuine article."

Edna blinked. "Do you mean the original well?" she asked.

"Must be," he said, "you don't find oak casings these days." He laughed. "Not a lot of oak trees around here."

Edna nodded. She didn't like the fellow's laugh.

Monson hooked the flashlight back to his belt with a motion that reminded her of how Mr. Crosie used to knock the ashes from his cigarette without tapping it against anything, holding it backhand between his thumb and pointer fingers, flicking it with his index. A quick, smooth motion that looked as natural as breathing. It was one of the things she'd first noticed about him.

Monson patted the wellhouse. "She's dry," he said, "that's for sure."

Well I already knew that, Edna thought.

"I'll go down and check the pump."

"Oh," Edna said, and peeked over the side of the well. "How will you get down there?"

But Monson was already uncoiling a long, thick length of rope, the kind Mr. Crosie had used for bridles back when he'd still kept horses, before she'd finally convinced him they weren't worth the cost of feed. Pets, they were; useless. The cat, now, at least she was good for something.

"It's wide enough," Monson said, "so I don't have to go down headfirst. I can climb back out."

"Headfirst!" Edna said. "Surely not."

"Usually not enough room for a man to turn around." He glanced at her, with another of those brilliant grins. "Even a man my size."

Edna blushed, looked away. Could he read her mind?

"If you don't go down headfirst..." he said, and shrugged again.

Edna tried to imagine being lowered down a well headfirst, into the earth, like a worm. She shivered and rubbed her arms.

Monson tied a fat knot to the outside of the wellhouse, tested it by throwing all his weight into it, then clipped the end of the rope to a kind of leather harness he wore around his hips. As he climbed over the edge, Edna barely suppressed an urge to shout, "Don't!" Instead she asked, nervously, "Won't you just drop...straight down?" She eyed the loose coil of rope on the ground. "It's all slack."

Monson grinned. "Just watch."

And so Edna watched as he braced his compact shoulders and back against one side of the well, his feet firmly against the other, and began to edge himself slowly down, feet then shoulders, feet then shoulders. It looked so effortless. Still, she was uneasy. She didn't fancy the thought of a dead man tied to a rope at the bottom of her well.

"You got a good wide one here," Monson said as his black curls disappeared into the well. "Hand-dug most likely, considering that casing."

There was a sound of earth falling and Edna pressed her hands to her mouth.

"It's okay," Monson called up, though his voice had a strange, ghostly echo now. "Just dirt behind the casings."

Edna peered over the edge. Even with the sunlight beaming down into the mouth of the well, she could not see Monson, just a shadow maybe, the suggestion of something moving down there. And the shh-shh sound as he edged his way deeper. Soon even that stopped. Edna waited a moment, feeling her skin crawl. It disturbed her that she could no longer see him.

"All right down there?" she called, knowing her palms had begun to sweat.

"All right," he called. And then the flashlight clicked on and Edna could see all the way to the bottom. Oh, she thought, that's not so deep after all. She leaned over the side and breathed the cold smell of earth, like root cellars, like digging potatoes.

Below, Monson moved in the yellow light, twisting around and clanging something against the metal pump. She could see his boots sticking and sucking against the muddy bottom. It was a strange sensation, looking down on him that way, his small shadow moving over and across the light, as though she had captured some elf and held him in a pit for safekeeping. Peter, Peter, pumpkin-eater, she thought, and laughed to herself even though she knew it didn't really make sense. Still, there was something funny about it. Had a wife and couldn't keep her, put her in a dried-up well...

Monson looked up then, his face lit from below, yellow and awful, seeming to leer at her with undisguised malice. Edna stepped quickly back, repressed an impulse to slam the lid shut and run.

"Your pump's done for," he hollered up.

What's the matter with me, Edna thought, trying to breathe evenly, slowly, to calm her thumping heart. I'm so nervous these days. Stupid, she thought, don't be stupid. She approached the well again, but did not look down at him.

"What's wrong with it?" she called.

"Nothing," he yelled, "everything. It's just done for. Old. Worn out."

Edna heard the click of the flashlight being turned off, saw the rope move against the lip of the well, like something crawling in. She peeked over the side, but could see nothing. There was only the darkness and the good earth smell and the thump-shh sound of him climbing up, a different sound from when he went down. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness and the man grew nearer, she could make out his shape, coming slowly toward her and she was overcome by an awful terror, as if everything evil in the world was about to climb up out of that pit. Slam the lid, she thought, slam it quick and lock it. There's still time. But then Monson's face hit the light and she saw that he was, after all, only a man.

"She's pretty much run dry," Monson said, as they walked up the rise back to the house. Monson carried the old pump. "You can try and get this fixed," he said, "but it looks done to me."

"But there was mud," Edna said, "I saw it."

Monson shrugged. "Couple days that'll be gone too. Trouble is she's not filling back up. Wells are ground-fed. She should have filled back up some by now."

"So I'll have to drill, then," Edna said, not quite believing him. If there was water before, why should it just run dry all of a sudden, why now? She wondered if she shouldn't get a second opinion.

Monson spit. "Looks like."

They stood near the porch, staring back down at the old wellhouse.

"Look on the bright side," Monson said. "At least you can get it drilled. At least you don't have to do it by hand. With shovels."

Edna did not, at that moment, wish to look on the bright side. She fixed her gaze on the treasonous wellhouse, its metal sides glinting with infuriating cheer in the sun. Funny, she didn't think she'd ever noticed before that it was metal.

"They used to be wood," Monson said.

Edna started. He's done it again, she thought. She did not turn to look at him as he continued.

"Prairie fires'd come through in the summer, burn 'em to the ground. Men would come back exhausted at night after fighting a fire all day, maybe longer..." He shrugged, spit again. "It was dark. They couldn't see."

Edna shivered. What a terrible thing to say, she thought, why would he say that?

"That's why they're metal now."

Edna looked at him, standing not two feet from her, the heavy iron pump in his hand and she thought, he could strike me down with that, right now, it would take just one blow...

"Thank you for your time, Mr. Monson," she said, "what do I owe you?"

He squinted for a moment out at the horizon. Edna waited. She wasn't really afraid, she knew that. It was the strain. She was tired.

"You gonna drill a new well?" he asked.

Now what? she thought. "I guess I have to."

He worked his mouth, as if he were about to spit again, but he didn't. "I can witch it for you," he said, finally, "if you want."

Edna shook her head, was about to say, "Certainly not, Mr. Monson. I don't believe in that nonsense." Instead she stopped, considered the cost of digging more than one hole. Witching. What could it hurt?

"How much?" she asked.

Monson speculated. "Oh, let's say fifty, for everything."

Edna pursed her lips. That sounded pretty steep. Of course, she thought, I'm a widow. It wouldn't surprise her if this fellow were somehow in cahoots with Eulan Thauberg. She'd have to keep her eye on him, that was for sure.

"All right," she said grudgingly. "Go ahead, then."

They turned to walk back to the house.

"Might take a while," he said, "what with the cold."

"What's that got to do with it? Surely the ground's not frozen yet." She stopped to chop at the earth with the heel of her boot. Monson looked at her as though she were simple-minded.

"Not the ground," he said, "currents."

Currents were froze? she wondered. What currents? She watched suspiciously as he walked to his truck and lifted something out through the open window.

"Energy currents," he said, over his shoulder.

"Mr. Monson," she began firmly, but it was then that she noticed he held an old box, brown and peeling, tied shut with a fraying loop of cord. He noticed her stare.

"Tools of the trade," he said, giving the box a pat and tucking it up under his arm.

"I hope you know," Edna said, resuming her firm tone, "that I don't ordinarily take up with this nonsense."

Monson shrugged. "Desperate situations," he said, "require desperate measures." And he grinned.

So he did think she was desperate, Edna mused with a considerable degree of dissatisfaction, watching from the kitchen window as Monson paced the yard, still carrying that box tucked up under one arm. From this distance, he looked like a child, a boy, scuffing his boots through the dirt. She wondered how she'd ever seen anything threatening in him. Edna glanced at the clock over the stove. He'd been stalking around the yard for the better part of an hour. She wondered when he would get to business. She had to admit, she was curious. She'd heard enough about witching, but she'd never seen it done. She wondered, too, what Mr. Crosie would think. Probably that it was a fine idea. She sighed and shook her head. That had always been the difference between the two of them. Even back before they'd married, Edna could see that Mr. Crosie was gullible, easily taken in. It had appealed to her then, in a way. But it was a characteristic that soon became tiresome. She'd told him as much on several occasions, as recently as

that past spring, just weeks before he'd died. Mr. Crosie had come in late again from helping Eulan seed.

"People take advantage," she'd called out to the porch when she heard him come in. She set a plate of ham and boiled potatoes she'd been keeping warm sharply down on the table and poured a cup of coffee. "You believe any sob-story going around. But you just wait and see if any of them are there when you need a hand. You just wait and see."

Edna peeked around the corner. Mr. Crosie was seated on the darkened stairs leading up from the porch, pulling off a boot in one long, tired motion. He had his back to her, and Edna thought for a moment that he could have been his own father, gone but five years that winter. He looked that old, that hunched, his thin shadow curled on the wall behind him like a question mark. And for a moment, Edna felt inexplicably sad. She had been about to say, "You're no spring chicken," a phrase that always made Mr. Crosie cluck and flap his arms, high-stepping his lanky body in an absurd parody; an action that, against her will, always made Edna laugh. She'd been about to say it and then caught herself, aware all at once of the evidence of his age written on every bone, every hard curve of his body. Aware that he felt it too. And for a moment, for the first time in years, she'd wanted to drop right down on her knees and hold him tightly, so tight he would say, "Easy now, you'll squeeze the life clean out of me," just as he used to, and it wouldn't make her sad that he'd said it because she would know, they'd both know, it was only a joke.

But then, as quickly as it had come, the feeling had gone. What good did all that silly mooning about do anyway? she had wondered. She spooned creamed corn on his plate, shook salt and pepper liberally over everything and sat down, waiting for him to join her. It seemed to take him a long time to remove his other boot. "You don't give them enough credit," he said at last, coming stiffly to the table.

"Aren't you going to wash up?" she demanded as he pulled his chair out and made a motion to sit down.

Mr. Crosie looked slowly down at his hands and forearms, grey and powdery with dust caught between the coarse hairs, looked at them as if he'd never seen them before. "Yes," he said, turning his big palms to the light. "Yes, I guess I forgot."

"I guess you did," Edna said as Mr. Crosie headed for the bathroom. "You see how tired you get, all this extra work." And then, "Who?" she called, as if just remembering. "Don't give who enough credit?"

"Anybody," he'd said, and closed the door behind him.

Edna stared down the hallway at the open bathroom door and for some reason she could picture just how he'd looked that night. It wasn't so long ago, but it felt like years. He'd say things like that to her now and then, odd things. Things that Edna felt weren't entirely justified. She was the first to give credit. Where credit was due.

And there was Monson, stooped down now over the box that he'd set on the ground. He untied the cord and opened the lid. Edna craned her neck to see, but Monson had his back to her, blocking her view. In a moment, he rose and turned toward the house. Edna stepped back from the window.

"Mrs. Crosie," he called shortly.

Edna thought, How rude, can't even come to the door. She opened the kitchen window a few inches.

"I'll try that low spot west of the barn there," he said, "and over by the shelterbelt."

Well, she thought, what are you waiting for? But she said, "Fine, fine, go right ahead."

"Can't make any promises," he said.

No, of course you can't, she thought grimly, closing the window. Now, if Mr. Crosie were here, he'd be out there at Monson's heels, toting that box for him, asking all kinds of silly questions, fascinated by what he would think was some sort of magical gift, a gift from God, maybe. Monson himself had said currents. There was no magic in that, just science pure and simple. Or so Monson thought. Edna knew better. It wasn't God and it wasn't science. It wasn't anything. She should know. She'd often thought she would have made a good scientist if she'd had the opportunity. She just had that kind of a mind. Not Mr. Crosie though. Maybe, she thought, chuckling to herself, maybe Mr. Crosie had sent Monson her way, just to rile her up. That would be like him, thinking he was having one over on her. Testing her, maybe. Seeing if she could be hooked with all this witching business, all this talk of ghosts. She chuckled again and poured herself a fresh cup of coffee.

Yes indeed, she thought, watching Monson cross the yard and disappear behind the shelterbelt, that's a fine joke. That's a good one.

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When, by noon, Monson had still not reappeared, Edna thought, Enough is enough, and pulled on her rubber boots and the old jacket she used for doing chores. For all she knew, he could be having a nap back there. Or worse. Heaven only knows what he carried around in that box. And he did look like a drinker. Lord, Edna thought, that's all I need. That was one thing about Mr. Crosie, he was never a drinker. And she was thankful for it every day of their married life. No, he was never a drinker and he never kept things from her. He'd always said, "Edna, I couldn't keep a thing from you if I tried." Edna always felt a certain satisfaction listening to other women complain about their husbands in that way. She'd just sit back and listen and at the right moment say, "Mine, I can read him like an open book." And she could, too. Problem was, Mr. Crosie was never really all that interesting; it was like reading the same page over and over.

This Monson, now, she thought, zipping her jacket and stepping outside, this Monson was another story. He was cut from a different cloth. Oh, he was easy enough to read in one way, that was clear. He was an opportunist. But he was also the kind you needed to keep your eye on, liable to shift at any second. Edna bent to pet the orange cat that wound itself between her ankles. Yes, she thought, he was a slippery one. Straightening, she noticed that the sky had lost the wide open blue of that morning, had greyed over in one long sheet. The bland look of a snow sky. The temperature, too, had dropped. She turned up her collar and headed for the shelterbelt, the orange cat darting ahead of her, tail twitching.

"Mr. Monson," Edna called, but for some reason not too loudly, as she neared the trees. Her boots cracked across dead branches. "Mr. Monson?" she called, poking through to the other side. But he was nowhere to be seen. The yard stretched out into the edge of the near summerfallow field. Everything had that odd flatness that came with a snow sky, like looking at a picture. All the depth sucked out.

"Hello?" she called softly. But the air settled around her as still and flat as the landscape. She puffed out a long cloud of breath and turned south along the shelterbelt. Maybe Monson had gone around back already, by the barn.

Edna had almost reached the far end of the yard when she noticed the box. She almost missed it, really, settled as it was there in the trees, the same flat brown as the dirt and leaves. The cord was coiled loosely on top of the lid. Edna stepped towards it, across a rotting stump. "Mr. Monson?" she said again. The orange cat minced along ahead of her, sniffing at the edge of the box, then bounding away into the trees as Edna

moved closer, hands stuffed into the pockets of her coat. Edna stopped and looked slowly up and down the shelterbelt. There was no sign of Monson anywhere. Maybe I should just take this along with me, Edna thought, he might be needing it wherever he's got to. Save him the trip back. She looked once more down the narrow row of trees, then bent forward and pushed the cord to one side. The initials *A.M.* had been carved roughly into the lid. It looked like a homemade job, she thought, he probably did it himself. She poked the box with her boot. Really, it wouldn't hurt to have a quick peek. It was on her property, after all, and if there was something in there she should know about, something that shouldn't be there...Edna had not really formed any clear notion of what that something might be, only that she wouldn't abide any ill doings on her property. And with that in mind, she lifted the cord and opened the lid.

She stood for a moment, breathing the cold afternoon air, the cord dangling loosely from her fingertips.

"Why," she said, finally, "it's empty."

She blinked her eyes a couple of times, just to make sure. Then she straightened, her lips pressed firmly together. Empty. Yes, of course it was. The man was no fool, wouldn't leave anything lying around. The place she should have looked, she thought, was his truck. And she'd had the perfect opportunity, too.

Then, just as she let the lid fall shut and was replacing the cord, Monson appeared through the trees. Before he could speak, she said, "I was just thinking I'd bring you your box, here." She guessed he thought he was pretty clever, leaving it sitting there in the open for her to find, to throw her off her guard.

She stared him straight in the face. He looked smaller still, there in the trees, as if the very air was slowly shrinking him. He lifted his hands then and Edna saw he held a long metal rod in each one. She sucked in her breath and stepped quickly back.

"Brazing rods," he said, "get pretty cold on the hands. Might have to switch to willow."

"Willow?" Edna puffed, eager to hide her momentary start at the appearance of the rods. Now that she saw them clearly, they weren't really threatening at all, rather fine and delicate, like kitchen utensils. Almost pretty, really.

"Willow's more accurate anyway," he said, opening the box and laying the rods gently inside, "in cold weather."

"You mean," Edna said sharply, stepping forward, "you mean you haven't found water yet?"

Monson closed the lid and tied it shut with the cord. "Might take a while. Like I said." He leaned back on his haunches and looked up at her. Edna was reminded, briefly, of those garden gnomes Mr. Crosie had been fond of.

"Mr. Monson," Edna said, "You can see for yourself this ground's going to freeze solid any minute now."

Monson blinked at her. "What difference does that make?"

"As I'm sure you know," she snapped, "once the ground freezes, you can't drill."

Monson scowled. "Who told you that?"

Edna could not remember. Had it been Eulan?

"Makes no difference," Monson went on, "they use the same drills to dig oil and gas wells. Up north. In Alaska. Around here the ground freezes maybe six feet, that on a bad year. You can wait till January if you want."

Edna felt the blood rush to her temples as Monson spoke. How dare he lie to her that way? Did he think she was stupid? He was a liar, that's all. A liar and a drinker.

"You think," she began, "you think you can come out here and have one over on me. Because I'm a widow. A farm widow." Here she paused, as if the significance of this had only just sunk in. And in that second, it seemed, everything changed. "If Mr. Crosie were here," she said, "if Mr. Crosie were here..."

But she didn't know quite how to finish and for some reason that she did not understand, tears sprang hotly to her eyes. Mortified, she turned slightly away, looking upward, at that grey sheet of sky, to keep the tears, oh hateful, from edging down her face. Of all the ridiculous things, she thought, both angry and surprised at herself. And what would this Monson think now?

After a moment, she heard him say, quietly, "I'm sorry. Alf Crosie was a good man."

She felt her tears dry instantly, as if scorched by the heat she could feel penetrating from her eye sockets. "I beg your pardon?" she said, without turning around. "Did you just say you knew my husband?"

"Why, sure," he said, sounding surprised.

Of all the low down, disgusting things, Edna thought. To lie about this, to pretend he'd ever known Mr. Crosie.

"How?" she demanded, turning slowly to face him. "How did you know him? From where? Tell me."

"I've known Alf for years," he said, "since...I guess since that summer he took me and Eulan over to check out an old test well site, out at the Sand Hills there. That's the first time I met him, anyway. Through Eulan."

Edna blinked.

"Alf had a notion there might be something more to it. That hole, I mean. Exactly what, he wouldn't ever say. Geez," he said, "that was years ago."

But Edna was no longer looking at him. She'd turned away again when she felt the tears come. It seemed impossible, but there it was: Mr. Crosie had done things, lived things, felt things, that she never had. That she'd never even known about. Of course he had. There was a whole other side of him that she'd known nothing about, had not wanted to know anything about. Or had she? Maybe she'd always known there was that side of him. Maybe she'd loved it. And maybe it had galled her, too. That bit of mystery. Was that it?

"I'm sorry," Monson was saying behind her. "I'll just go hunt down some willow."

But Edna couldn't bear to have him stay. Couldn't bear to hear another word. How dare he? Just walk in and throw everything in her face this way

"No," Edna said firmly, turning to meet his rather surprised gaze full on. "You get off my property this minute. Get off." Then she added, "You never knew my husband."

Monson stared, eyebrows raised. Edna did not so much as blink. Finally, he said slowly, "All right, then." And he turned and headed back up the shelterbelt.

"You never knew my husband," she called after him. The man was a liar. Eulan had probably told him about that well hole out at the Sand Hills. He was a liar and a cheat, probably worse.

When he disappeared through the trees, Edna let out an enormous puff of breath. There was no mystery. The man was a liar. And Heddy Kretsch had been right after all. "That's three," she said, "and it didn't get the best of me." She imagined what Heddy's reaction would be when she told the story. "Oh, trouble comes in threes all right," Edna would say generously, "but it's the weak who let it stay." And then she would tell again how she'd sent this shyster packing. Good riddance to bad rubbish, she'd say. And she wiped her eyes and congratulated herself again as she looked toward the spot in the trees where Monson had disappeared. And then, thinking of that, thinking of Monson disappearing into the trees, Edna had a terrible thought. She'd left

the house unlocked. And everything, her jewelry, her wallet, the new television, oh, it was all there. How could I have been so stupid, she thought as she started to run along the shelterbelt, her body heaving against its own weight. How could I have been so stupid? Already she was huffing to catch her breath in the cold. She'd never make it back to the house on time. He'd take it all, he'd take everything, her wedding ring sitting where she always left it by the sink.

Edna ran faster, rubber boots clomping loosely over rocks and twigs. She thought for a moment that she might make it after all, but just as she was nearing the break in the trees, something small and fast darted between her legs. Edna shrieked and stumbled, one boot pulling free as she twisted an ankle across a fallen branch. She hit the ground hard, harder than she thought was possible, her hip catching the sharp end of a stone. Edna lay dazed as the orange cat bounded back toward her, stopping to sniff wetly at her ear. She pushed it away and rolled over, struggling to pull into a sitting position, but it felt as if she was being pinned down by a tremendous weight on her chest. And there was a hard, shooting pain running from her hip to her ankle. She looked down at her feet, noticing that one of her socks had pulled off with the rubber boot. Struck by how white and absurd her foot looked sticking up that way against the dark line of trees, she began to laugh, in short, painful gasps. She laughed so hard she almost missed the sound of Monson's truck roaring to life up at the house, almost missed that last glimpse of him through the trees as he headed off down the road, cold exhaust fanning behind him like a tail.

Good riddance, Edna thought again as she laid her head back, still puffing to catch her breath. But this time there was no satisfaction in the phrase, no sense of justice. "Good riddance," she said out loud, testing the words on her tongue. They were flimsy, could have been any words at all. She stared up at the sky, now the dull, hard color of iron, and noticed the snow had started, just barely, the flakes so fine they could have been dust. So fine they could have passed over someone else unnoticed, someone who didn't happen to be looking up. And much to her dismay, Edna felt the tears start again. She opened her eyes wide as the cold. "What is it, Alf?" she whispered, snowflakes dissolving in the palms of her hands, "what is it?"

Small Comfort

The summer Cora Mae Clark and her brother Boyd turned up, I'd only just kicked my habit of sleeping with a nightlight. It had been a long overdue though nevertheless painful adjustment, learning to fall asleep with all that darkness edging up against me, settling itself against my bones like a skin. There were nights I'd lie awake for what seemed like hours, holding one hand up close to my face, just to have something familiar to focus on, amazed at how even my fingers no longer seemed my own; amazed at how the loss of such small comforts could change everything. There were nights when I would easily have cried a little if not for the knowledge that tears would be a further humiliation. But that was something I would never have admitted to Cora Mae, not with her tight smile, the fearless blonde arch of her eyebrows. She wasn't the sort of girl you confided in. Not about something like a nightlight anyway. And Boyd...well, Boyd was something else entirely.

He was three years older than me and almost two years older than Cora Mae, though you never would have guessed it to look at them. Despite the advantage of height, there was a certain looseness about Boyd's limbs that made him seem younger, as if he had not yet gained control of his muscles, as if he could shoot off in any direction without warning at any time. It was not just adolescent gawkiness; he was a being in perpetual, erratic motion. Next to the neat, precise, oddly adult movements of Cora Mae's compact body, Boyd was like some clumsy marionette, capable of sudden bursts of absurd energy – a characteristic that seemed to annoy his sister.

"That's just Boyd," she'd said dismissively the first time we'd met, "trying to get attention. Ignore him."

I watched him from where I sat on the concrete steps outside the Lucky Dollar grocery store waiting for my mother. It seemed to me that getting attention, that the fact that I at least, if not his sister, was tracking his every movement, was of little interest to Boyd. He was hunched over something halfway down the block, at the mouth of one of those weedy little alleys that ran between the few buildings on main street, rocking back and forth on his heels, fluttering his hands in quick, nervous movements at his sides. There was a certain fragility in the way all his parts seemed to work, or not to work, in unison, as if a puff of wind could easily collapse him. As I watched, he stood up,

crouched down, stood up again, his feet tapping an erratic dance, his whole body quivering.

"Cora," he called back over his shoulder, waving one white hand, "c'mere."

Cora Mae bent to rub a smudge of dust off the top of her sandal. Then she straightened with that decisive grace and looked down at me, wrinkling her sunburned nose. "I used to have a barrette like that."

It took a moment for me to remember the plastic butterfly I'd used to jam my overgrown bangs out of my face. It was an old yellow one, part of a set I'd received several Christmases ago when my mother had begun selling Avon. I raised my fingers to it, flushing with embarrassment as I touched the rough corner where I'd chewed most of one wing away.

"We're staying with my Uncle Alec," Cora Mae said, gaily "for a week. Our parents are in Florida. They're always somewhere." Then she added unnecessarily, "We don't live here, of course," and looked up and down the wide, bald expanse of main street – empty, just then, except for us – with an expression of semi-amused wonder that anyone could. I hoped that Barney Burkenchuk would not choose that moment to drive his tractor down main street, as he sometimes did.

"You want some gum?" she asked, thrusting a pack under my nose.

I did but said no anyway, staring down at my thongs, worn to a thin edge at the heel, and at the jagged curves of my untrimmed toenails. "You could gut a fish with those things," my mother had quipped the night before. Ever since she'd started selling Avon she'd thought of me as a kind of walking advertisement for what she called the "junior miss" products, making my life a living hell of crème rinse and talcum powder and those little plastic brooches with scented pomade inside, the ones shaped like animals. I eyed Cora Mae's white sandals. They had a bit of a heel. Hardly any of the girls in town wore white sandals. None of them wore heels. "They're just not practical, Audrey," my mother would say, sniffing. "Grooming, now that's what counts. It wouldn't kill you to wear a little lip gloss." Cora Mae's toes poked from the tips of her sandals, the nails trimmed into neat, pink squares. I slid my feet up under me on the step and turned partially away, pretending to peer off at something interesting in the distance. I thought Cora Mae might take the hint and leave, but instead she flashed her hand in front of my face.

"Ever seen a mood ring?" she asked. "They're the latest. It changes color depending on your mood. See? Light green. That means I'm calm." She turned her

hand so the sun caught against the silver setting. "My boyfriend gave it to me," she said, and sighed. "*Ex*-boyfriend." She twisted the ring off her finger and handed it to me. "Here, you try."

I hesitated. I could tell just by looking that it would be too small. "You have your father's hands," my mother was fond of saying, "literally."

"It's okay," Cora said, misreading my hesitation, "we broke up." She looked critically at my hands and added, "Try it on the pinky. It doesn't matter – your mood's the same in every finger."

She squished the ring down onto my pinky and we sat there staring at my hand propped awkwardly against my knee. I wondered if Cora noticed how my skin dried in white cracks across my kneecaps. "Moisturize," my mother would say, "moisturize." I slid my hands to cover them.

"You have to wait a while," Cora said, and tapped her sandal against the concrete.

"Cora," Boyd called again, "hey." But this time, neither of us looked.

"There. See?" she said. "It's changing." It was. Slowly darkening against my hand like a beetle. "Purple!" she cried. "For passion."

I tried to slide the ring off my finger. "Purple," Cora repeated in a breathy voice as I bent my head, trying to hide the fact that I was twisting mercilessly, "that's rare. It hardly ever turns purple. You must be in love. Are you in love?"

I briefly considered the boys I knew from town.

Cora tapped my hand. "Don't worry about that. The ring, I mean. You can get it off with baby oil."

"Oh." I didn't know what else to say. "Okay." I kept twisting anyway, but discreetly, hoping she wouldn't notice. I had begun to sweat and thought, optimistically, that might help.

"You shouldn't do that," Cora said. "It looks like it's swelling a bit."

It was a relief when Boyd's pale, tense face appeared over his sister's shoulder. "Hey, Cora," he said, "look what I got." He offered his cupped palms.

"So," said Cora, picking a piece of lint from her skirt, "a dead bird."

"It's not dead," Boyd said, "just hurt."

I stood up to look closer. "It's a meadowlark," I said.

"Yeah," Boyd stroked the bird gently with his thumb, "I know. Young. A female. You can tell by the colourings. There's not much yellow. See?" I had not known

there was any difference. It just looked like any old meadowlark to me, but I leaned in closer anyway, pretending to examine the bird. He shifted his feet on the sidewalk, as if anxious to go somewhere. "You think they'd give me a box for it?" he asked, looking up at the store.

"You can't take a bird in there," Cora said, "it's probably got lice or something."

I had to agree. My mother alone would have at least one fit at the sight of it. "I could go see," I offered.

Boyd hesitated, bouncing a little on the balls of his feet. "Okay, sure," he said finally, "but not too big. About the size of a shoebox maybe. With a lid."

"Do you always have to make a *scene*," I heard Cora say as I swung through the door, thongs slapping at my heels.

My mother was standing at the counter talking to Elise Halson, who worked the cash. I didn't know her well, she'd graduated the year before and then gone away to beauty college in Medicine Hat, but I still admired her with that mixture of fear and awe reserved for all the high school girls. She was leaning with one hand on the cash register, the other hooked in the back pocket of her jeans.

"All I'm saying," my mother was whispering, "is it's time he grew up. She's already got three kids, she doesn't need a fourth." As soon as she noticed me, she hooked my arm and pulled me over.

"Here," she said to Elise, "you see?" I winced as she snapped the barrette from my hair and scooted my bangs down over my face. "You see? If you could just give her something shorter, something...perky. For the summer."

"Sure thing," Elise said, flicking judiciously at my bangs with her fingers, "that's a cinch."

I brushed the hair out of my eyes and noticed Elise was looking past me.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

I turned to find Cora Mae standing just inside the door. She looked at me, then back at Elise.

"I wanted to see about the box for my brother," she said politely. "Please."

"You need a box," my mother said, "for your brother?"

"It's for his bird," I said, sticking my barrette in my pocket.

"He's not bringing it in here, I hope," my mother said, craning her neck toward the door. Boyd was standing there, his face pressed up against the glass. She frowned. "Is that him?"

"A small one," I said to Elise, "but with a lid."

"Sure thing," she said, unhooking her hand from her jeans pocket. I noticed her T-shirt had a big pink heart with *Foxy Lady* written across the centre in silver glitter that had flecked off in places.

The three of us stood there, waiting.

"So, Audrey," my mother said finally, beaming at Cora Mae, "who's your friend?"

"It's nice to see you *socialize* more," my mother called to me through the open kitchen window. "I can't stand you lurking around the house all summer like you do. It gives me the creeps. I hope you changed your shirt."

I was slumped against the front steps waiting for Cora Mae to arrive. My mother had invited her. I was hoping Boyd would come too, though the invitation had not included him. "*She* gives me the creeps," I said, meaning Cora Mae.

"Don't be silly," my mother said, and closed the window.

I spotted them as soon as they turned the corner onto our street, Cora several brisk steps ahead, her yellow skirt swishing, Boyd trailing behind, balancing the mandarin orange crate Elise had given him as carefully as a fishbowl. I straightened up, rubbed dirt from my hands where I'd been idly digging, with a certain degree of undisguised resentment, in one of my mother's flowerpots.

"I told him not to bring the bird," Cora grumbled as she came up our sidewalk.

"That's okay."

Boyd minced his way across the lawn, delicately, as if he were walking on tiptoe. It was funny, but I didn't laugh. I walked down the steps and sat on the grass. Cora joined me but Boyd stayed over by the cotoneaster hedges, tucking his box gently in the shade. He had on the same pair of brown corduroy pants and light blue T-shirt he'd been wearing the day before and for some reason this made me like him immensely. He opened the lid and bent low over the box, speaking earnestly in tones that did not quite reach us. I thought I heard *hello* and *bird*, or, possibly, *Boyd*.

"He thinks he can teach that bird to talk," Cora snorted. "That's pretty stupid. Don't you think so?"

I knew you couldn't teach a meadowlark to talk. At least, I didn't think it was very likely.

"Don't you think that's stupid?"

"I guess."

"Trust me," she said, "it's stupid." Then she leaned back, propping herself up on her elbows. "He's in for a surprise next year, though. They don't let a person get away with that kind of thing in high school."

"High school?"

"Yeah," she said, plucking at the bands of her white knee socks, "they skipped him ahead. He should only be in eighth."

High school. I could hardly imagine it, could hardly imagine Boyd with his skinny arms and quick, nervous gestures circulating in that realm populated by Elise Halsons in Foxy Lady T-shirts. I couldn't picture him there any more than I could picture myself. I looked over again to where he crouched by the orange crate, collecting cotoneaster leaves in fat bunches. And then I thought, *Why not a meadowlark? If you could teach some birds to talk, why not others? Why not a meadowlark?*

"You have dirt on your knees," Cora said.

I licked my fingers and rubbed it off. Then we both sat there, silently watching Boyd, the faint buzz of a lawnmower rising from down the street.

"Anyway," Cora said, "he just does it to get attention. He's not half as sick as they say he is."

"He's sick?" I said. I looked over at him. He didn't really look sick. "What's the matter with him?"

"Nothing," Cora snapped. "It's all up here," she said, tapping a finger to the side of her head. "If you know what I mean."

I didn't, but did not say so. I felt uneasy with the subject, with the way Cora talked as if we were old friends. She reminded me, in some weird way, of my mother, of the way she and her friends would talk over coffee, making thinly-veiled allusions to matters of a intimate nature.

"Anyway," Cora said again, after a while, "I could care less. I'm changing schools this year. That's exciting, don't you think?"

"What are you changing schools for?"

She shrugged. "Just for a change," she said, sounding annoyed.

She scowled and stretched her legs out in the grass. I noticed with a strange touch of alarm that they were covered in a sort of soft, blonde fuzz that made me think of the skin of a peach.

"I have to go," I said abruptly. "I have an appointment." It wasn't a lie, not really. I was supposed to be at Elise's for a haircut by three-thirty. It couldn't have been much past one. "Here's your ring," I said, digging into my pocket.

Cora Mae looked genuinely disappointed. "What kind of appointment?"

I held out the ring but kept it low, away from her face; it still had a kind of fatty smell from the lard I'd used to squeeze it off my finger. Some of it had seeped into the setting. I'd tried to dig most of it out with a toothpick. "It's way on the other side of town."

"Oh," Cora said, standing up, "we can walk you."

I got up reluctantly, brushed grass from the back of my shorts. "Here," I said, pushing the ring at her.

"You keep it," she said. "I'm kind of sick of it anyway."

I both did and did not want it, but seeing that she'd already turned away, I stuck it back in my pocket, thinking she'd probably ask for it later. Maybe by then the lard smell would have worn off.

"Come on, Boyd," Cora said. Without asking where we were going, he carefully packed up the crate and followed us out of the yard. Cora walked quickly, as before, with a sense of purpose, as if it were she who had the appointment, and Boyd trailed behind, weaving back and forth from the sidewalk to the pavement and back again. I dragged my heels a bit too, partly because, even though Elise did live on the other side of town, it was only a fifteen-minute walk at most. Partly because I was hoping Boyd would catch up with us.

"How's the bird?" I asked him.

His face looked grim. "I don't know. She doesn't seem much better. I thought it was her wing, but it seems worse than that."

"Like what?" I asked.

"Is that your school?" Cora interrupted crisply.

I nodded, embarrassed by the bland, flat-roofed building, the weeds in the dusty playground. I hadn't been up there since classes had let out, and for some reason, when Cora asked the question, it looked much smaller than I'd remembered it.

"Uncle Alec said all the kids in town go there, from grade one right to twelve."

Actually, it was from kindergarten to twelve, but I wasn't about to tell Cora Mae that. I kicked at a stone in the road and it skipped ahead to ping against one of the metal fence posts that surrounded the schoolyard.

"Everybody?" Boyd asked. I was walking so slow he couldn't help but catch up to us. Even walking as slow as he was, I noticed, there was still something erratic about his movements, the potential for disaster. He reminded me of that party game my parents sometimes played when, well into the first bottle of rye, they'd fill a cookie sheet with water and take turns with their friends racing haphazardly across the living room, shrieking with laughter. I always thought there must be more to that game than I was seeing. Boyd reminded me of that – a strange combination of intensity and lack of control and some other element I couldn't quite put my finger on. I kept watching him out of the corner of my eye, thinking, He's going to drop that box any minute.

"Everybody?" he asked again.

I blinked at him. "Everybody what?"

"Goes to the same school?"

"We're not all in the same room or anything," I said, defensively. "The high school is down at one end and the little kids are at the other. *Way* at the other."

"And you're in the middle," Boyd said.

Really, the grade five classroom was pretty much at the little kids' end, so I didn't say anything. It wasn't exactly a question anyway.

"That must be terrible," Cora sympathized.

I hadn't really thought about it before. It wasn't terrible. It just was.

But before I could answer, Boyd said, apparently without animosity, "Cora doesn't understand the meaning of terrible."

Cora's face stiffened. "What do you know," she said, her voice low.

Boyd shrugged. "I'm just saying there's nothing terrible about that. I think it's pretty amazing. Just think."

"Just think of what?" I asked. Cora was walking a few steps ahead of us, shoulders braced. She did not turn around.

Boyd stopped in the road and stared at me. "Why, the potential for..." he lifted the box slightly, "for all kinds of things."

Halsons lived at the "new" end of town, on the last street before old man Cassel's summerfallow field. My mother always said you couldn't pay her to live over there, not even for one of those "new" (she always used her fingers here to make quotation marks in the air) houses. "Too much wind," she said. "And you get all the dust. Who needs it."

They had the very last lot on the block which meant they were bordered on one side by Cassel's summerfallow and on the other by what I called "the pond" but which was really just a rather deep slough inhabited primarily by ducks, frogs and salamanders and which was covered over with a spongy layer of lime-colored algae that smelled a little in summer. There were rumours of rattlers, too, but I'd never seen one. In fact, I'd always been envious of Halsons' proximity to the pond. It seemed like a kind of status symbol, like having a swimming pool in your back yard. I doubted that Elise appreciated it, doubted whether she valued, as I would have, the slow croaking of frogs through her bedroom window on summer nights. She didn't seem the type to appreciate something like that, something like frogs.

"I thought you were getting a haircut," Cora said sulkily. She had not spoken since the schoolyard.

"I am."

"At someone's *house*?"

"She has a diploma," I said, just in case Cora imagined some grandma hacking at my hair around the edges of a soup bowl. "From Medicine Hat."

"Why doesn't she have a salon, then?"

I shrugged. Cora Mae looked skeptical as the three of us filed into Halsons' back yard where we found Elise reclined in a lawn chair, flipping the pages of a haircutting magazine. She wore a tight yellow tank top with spaghetti straps and cut-off shorts rolled as high as they would go. Cora Mae brightened at the sight of her.

"Wow," Elise said, "you're early. Your mom said three-thirty, right?"

I nodded, aware that Cora had come up beside me and was beaming at Elise. Much to my surprise, she took my hand. I couldn't see Boyd, but I sensed his movements somewhere behind us.

"I guess that's okay," Elise said, closing her magazine. She squinted at us. "Are your friends staying?"

Cora Mae piped up. "I'm going to take hairdressing," she said, "when I graduate. It's the neatest."

"Well," Elise said, modestly, "I'm still pretty new at it." She looked at Boyd who was pacing up and down the sidewalk.

"That's just Boyd," Cora said. "He'll wait outside."

"Okay." Elise shrugged. "Whatever." She led us to the back door. Cora Mae had dropped my hand and was at her heels in a flash. I hesitated, looking back at Boyd. "If you leave the bird out here," I said, "you can probably come in, too."

Boyd glanced up at me briefly. "What for?"

I couldn't really say, so I left him under Mrs. Halson's gooseberry bushes and followed Elise and Cora Mae inside.

"Down here," Elise called as I closed the door behind me. The house had a faint, sweet odour, like overripe fruit, and all the blinds were drawn against the afternoon sun. I slipped off my shoes, imagining it was expected, and went downstairs.

Though there were no windows to speak of, it was brighter in the basement, lit as it was by two bare overhead bulbs. Cora Mae was already posed primly on an old vinyl chesterfield next to a sink and an odd contraption on cinderblocks that looked like it might once have been a tractor seat. The rest of the basement consisted of a concrete floor and fiberglass insulation running up the unfinished walls. But behind the chesterfield and the sink, Elise had hung old blankets and sheets and rolled out a section of purple shag carpet. "For ambience," she said. There was also a battered dresser with jars, combs, scissors and sprays, two large handheld mirrors and a vase of silk flowers. In one corner was a stereo where Elise stood flipping through albums. Above it hung a poster of horses running across a misty field.

"I like to play a little music when I work," she explained, "it relaxes the customers. What do you guys listen to?"

I sat down on the chesterfield next to Cora Mae. "Oh, anything," she said.

Elise slipped a record from its sheath. "Have you heard this one?" She dropped the needle and swayed her hips with the opening few notes. "It's Barbara Streisand."

"Oh," Cora cooed, "I love this one."

"Yeah," Elise said, "me too. I love it."

"Don't you just love it?" Cora said to me, closing her eyes.

"Did you see the movie?" Elise asked. "I loved it."

I shifted away from a spring that was digging into the back of my leg, watched with unease as Elise sang, "Ev-er-greeeen."

"This is the song I'll have played at my wedding," she said. "Here, listen to this." And she turned the volume up. "This is the best part."

Cora Mae was swaying now too, beside me, and I leaned away from her, focused instead on the neat rows of bottles and scissors gleaming on the dresser. I felt hot and

embarrassed, unable to look at Elise sliding her feet back and forth across the purple carpet. I stared, instead, at the poster of the horses. It read in elaborate script across the bottom: *If you love something, set it free. If it comes back, it's yours. If it doesn't, it was never meant to be.* The backs of my thighs stuck wetly to the vinyl chesterfield and my skin pinched each time I shifted. I was beginning to feel something would be required of me.

"Can I use your bathroom?" I blurted.

Elise and Cora Mae stopped swaying and opened their eyes. Elise turned the volume down a little.

"What?"

"Can I use your bathroom?" I repeated. This time I was careful to suppress the panic in my voice.

"Yeah," Elise said, motioning vaguely, "upstairs, through the kitchen." She took the record off and slid a new one on the turntable. "Do you know this one?"

It was another song I'd never heard, this time with a quick tempo, and Cora Mae was off the chesterfield in an instant and dancing beside Elise. "Ooh," she squealed, "I love this one."

"Me too," I heard Elise say as I headed up the stairs. "I really love it."

When I reached the landing, I peeked out the back door and saw that Boyd had gone down to the pond. I could just make out his blue T-shirt among the cattail reeds that surrounded the boggy edge. I stepped into my shoes and slipped quietly out the door.

"What are you looking at?" I asked, coming up behind him, my feet sinking a little in the wet bank.

"Tadpoles," he said, without turning around. "There's a lot of them." The orange crate sat open at his feet and I peered inside.

"Hey," I said, alarmed, "the bird's gone."

Boyd picked up a stick and poked it into the water, swished it around a bit.

"Boyd," I said, lifting the crate and looking quickly around, "your bird's gone."

"I know," he said, standing up and walking further down the bank, down towards a cluster of ducks.

I followed, my thongs squelching in the mud, the cardboard orange crate bumping against my legs. I slipped up next to where he was standing watching the ducks bob their slick heads and resurface, bodies quivering.

"Those ones over there," Boyd pointed, "those are mallards. That's a drake. See the green?"

"What about the purple ones?" I asked, though I didn't really care. I wanted to know what happened to the bird.

"Those are drakes, too," he said. "Teals. Females don't have those colors. They're the brown ones. It's like that with most bird species."

"Why?" I asked. It didn't make sense for some reason.

"Mating mostly," he said, "the males use their color to attract a mate. And the females are that brownish color so they blend in with the ground and the grass and stuff. For nesting."

I sat down on a rock and settled the orange crate across my knees. Boyd paced the bank of the pond, pointing at various things with his stick. After a while he stopped talking and stood there quietly again, just staring out over the water. I realized I'd never seen him still before. He was like a different person. But it wasn't a sense of peace I got from his stillness. It made me think of how my hand looked in the darkness of my bedroom, at once familiar and strange. It made me uneasy.

"I didn't get a haircut," I ventured. "I guess my mom'll be pretty mad."

"You were supposed to get a haircut?"

"Yeah." I shrugged. "It was my mom's idea. She'll be pretty mad, I guess."

He turned around and squinted at me. "I can cut it for you."

I was doubtful. "You can?"

"Sure," he said, pulling a folding knife from his pants pocket. "I cut my own all the time. It's easy."

I squirmed a little at the sight of the fine blade glinting in the sun. "Does that work?"

"I just said so, didn't I?" He pointed the blade toward me. "Here. Feel how sharp it is."

When I didn't move, he poked it closer. "Here," he said. I touched a finger against the edge of the blade, just barely. It was sharp all right.

"See?" he said, twisting a chunk of his hair, "you just take it like this and saw at it like so." He made a sawing motion in the air. "Easy."

I looked at the knife again, then at Boyd's hair. It didn't really look any different from that of any other boy I knew. "Well..." I hesitated.

"We can start at the back, where it's the longest," he said sensibly, "that way if anything goes wrong the rest of your hair will hide it."

I looked over my shoulder, toward the Halsons', wondered if Elise and Cora Mae were still dancing, if they'd even noticed I had gone. "Okay," I said, taking a big breath and dipping my head, as though I were going under water, "go ahead."

He started, as he'd said, at the back. I'd expected it to hurt a little, but the sensation was more like a persistent tugging at my scalp. More than once I felt a shiver at the thought of that blade so close to my body. After all, I hardly knew this boy. Didn't know him at all. But Boyd worked silently, efficiently, directing me with single-word commands, *tilt*, *lift*, and I soon relaxed into the pleasurable feeling of his hands in my hair, as if I was being stroked peacefully into sleep.

He was finished in no time. I ran my hands across my head, felt a strange sort of dizzy elatedness, as if my whole body was lighter.

"There," Boyd said, stepping back to admire his work, "I cut it really short. That way you don't have to do it again for a while."

I kept running my hands over my head, loving the feeling of it beneath my palms. Like the fur of some small animal.

"Does it look like yours?" I asked.

He cocked his head to one side. "Yeah," he said, flipping the blade shut, "pretty much."

I was pleased.

Boyd bent to pick up the long hanks of hair that had fallen in the mud around the rock. "You want this?" he asked.

"What for?"

"I don't know," he said. "You can make things with it. It's good for nests, especially. Or whatever. Human hair is interesting. It's not just dead cells. Not really."

"What is it?"

"It's," he said slowly, thinking, "it's...I don't know. But there's something in it. Something like your soul. That's why there's so many myths about it. Samson. Rapunzel. Medusa, even."

Rapunzel, at least, I knew. He handed me the hair he'd collected, but I shook my head. "You can have it," I offered, "if you want." I didn't believe that stuff about soul.

"Really?" he said. "Geez, thanks. I never get this much of my own." He picked the orange crate up from where I'd placed it at my feet and stuffed my hair inside. It was strange to know he would take it with him somewhere.

"Boyd," I said, quietly, "what happened to the bird?"

He kept his head bent, as if he hadn't heard me, fiddling with the lid of the box. Out on the pond there was a quick flapping and splashing of wings and I imagined, without looking, that a duck had just landed.

"Did you let her go?" I asked. "Was she better?"

There was a long moment during which I thought he would not answer, a moment during which the very air around us seemed to turn leaden.

"Yeah," he said finally, standing up and tucking the box under his arm, "she was better."

I didn't meet up with either Boyd or Cora Mae the rest of that week, which both did and did not disappoint me. It was Boyd I wanted to see, of course, but the thought of Cora Mae filled me with a feeling of near dread. I spent my afternoons concocting impossible plans for getting to Boyd without Cora Mae. I kept thinking I'd run into him somewhere around town, but I never did. In fact, I only saw him once, from a distance, as my mother and I were driving out of town. He was down by the pond behind Halsons', pacing the bank in quick steps, arms raised, swinging a stick out across the water in broad strokes, like a wizard. "That boy is so strange," my mother said. "I don't want you playing with him." I hadn't even told her about the haircut, had taken the blame for that entirely upon myself.

After that, I made a point of walking by the pond a few times each day, but either Boyd had not come back or my timing was off, for I did not see him again. I thought I'd seen the last of Cora Mae, too, but the Sunday they were supposed to leave, she stopped by my house. She had her blonde hair twisted back in two French braids that made her look old – not older, just old. I came out to greet her on the steps.

"Hi," she said, beaming as though we'd seen each other every day that week, "I just came to say *au revoir*." I half expected her to make some comment on my haircut, or ask what had happened to me that day at Halsons', but she said nothing about it.

"You probably want this back," I said, holding out her mood ring. It no longer smelled like lard, not as much anyway.

She looked surprised. "No," she said, shaking her braids, "I gave it to you. So you have something to remember me by."

"Oh," I said, wondering if that meant I was supposed to give her something in return. All I could think of was the butterfly barrette in my pocket.

Cora Mae shifted her feet on the steps and we both stood there uncomfortably. I looked across the yard to where the two younger neighbour girls were running through the lawn sprinkler. I'd been dying to join them all afternoon. The summer before, I probably would have.

"Kids," Cora Mae said, shaking her head again.

"Yeah," I said.

"Well," she said, "I guess I should go. Why don't you give me your address? We can be pen pals or something."

"Okay," I said, and went inside to get a pen and some paper.

When I returned, Cora Mae was seated on the bottom step, knees together, staring across the street at the neighbour kids with something that looked almost like wonder – almost, but not quite. And I felt sorry then, in the safety of her leaving, that I had not made more of an effort to befriend her.

"Here," I said, handing her the paper. And then I asked, casually, "Where's Boyd?"

For a moment, she looked hurt. That stiffness passed down over her face just as it had that day by the schoolyard, but then she shrugged her shoulders and said, too gaily, "You know Boyd!" As if he and I were old friends. And so I just stood there, scratching stupidly at a mosquito bite that had scabbed-over on my elbow, wondering why Boyd had not come to say goodbye, but knowing the answer in my heart: *What for?*

"Well," Cora said, rising with that unmistakable poise, "I guess I'll be going. I'll write. But you have to write back."

I nodded as she marched off down the street, her sandals clicking against the hot concrete. At the corner, she turned around briefly and waved. *"Au revoir!"* she shouted, and then she was gone.

It wasn't until my senior year of high school that I really thought of Cora Mae and Boyd again. Cora Mae had written twice after she'd left town that summer, but I felt I couldn't quite live up to the stylish, looping writing, the purple ink, the i's dotted with circles instead of points. I never wrote back. I didn't really have anything to say

anyway. And Boyd, well, I thought of him, of course. Quite a bit for the first few months after they'd left. I couldn't shake the feel of his hands moving so detached and efficiently through my hair. Once, I caught myself writing his name in the back of my math scribbler. But as the months passed, I thought of him less, and wondered, just briefly the following summer, if they would return. They didn't, and I soon forgot them almost entirely. By then I'd found other friends, other interests. I say almost entirely because I could not help but think of him each time I got my hair cut, could not help but think of that afternoon down by the pond. I got a strange kind of comfort from that memory, from knowing that Boyd was out there somewhere in the world. I wondered what he had done with my hair, if he still had it. And for years, whenever I drove by the pond, the image came back to me, of his thin, nervous arms stretched wide across the water.

So when my mother returned from the coffee shop one afternoon just before graduation to tell me that Cora Mae was in town, it was Boyd I thought of first.

"Oh, Audrey," my mother said, in that dramatic way she had, "you should just see her. To think she could let herself go like that. All that make-up, and her skin such a mess. She bleaches her hair now. It looks just terrible, of course. And I always thought so highly of her. I always told Alec and Marion so. I was sorry she never came back to stay with them. I always thought she would have made a good companion for you. But to look at her now..." She shook her head.

I was stretched out on my bed, doodling in my biology textbook, daydreaming about my future life as a college student. "Who?" I asked, absently.

"Why, Cora Mae. That's what I've been saying. You remember Cora Mae."

To be honest, it took me a few seconds, but when the name clicked, it was Boyd, as I say, that I was curious about. "What about her?" I asked.

"Exactly what I've been telling you," my mother said, exasperated, "she's come to stay with Alec and Marion. Problems at home, I think. And to look at her I can believe it. But they've had a hard time, that family. Alcohol and drugs and God knows what else. It's no wonder." She sighed. "Such a shame. She was such a delightful little girl. You should just see her now."

Try as I might, I could not imagine Cora Mae looking any different than I remembered her, could not picture her as an adult. To me, she'd seemed an adult back then.

"What about her brother," I finally asked, "Boyd?"

My mother stared at me blankly, as if she'd never heard of him. "Boyd?"

"Yes," I said, annoyed, "the one with the bird. Skinny kid, always moving. Glasses."

My mother shook her head. "Yes," she said, in a strange voice, "I know who you *mean*."

"Well," I said, flipping my textbook shut, "is he here too?"

My mother just stood there, one hand on my dresser. "Audrey," she said slowly, as if I'd suddenly gone stupid, "he died. That was ages ago."

Her words did not immediately register. I stared back at her.

"Lord," she said, "that was years ago. I'm sure I told you."

I looked down at the cover of the book in my hands, tried to make sense of the words there, but they seemed foreign and obscure, as impossible to read as that unexpected stillness that seemed to descend over the room, my own body. I wanted to ask how he'd died, but couldn't bring myself to form the words. It didn't matter anyway. I knew.

"Audrey," my mother was saying, "I'm sure I told you."

It didn't matter. That was all years ago. Ancient history. *She was better*, Boyd had said back then. And I'd believed him.

Light Of My Heart

At the age of 71, Perpetua Resch could honestly say she had loved only four people: her mother, her father, her brother Martin and her sister Magda. She had hoped, at one time, to include Joe in their number, but she had long since recognized this as a hope fueled by the romantic illusions of a teenage bride and the expectations attached to a young and promising marriage. This was not to say she felt no affection for her husband. On the contrary, she was very fond of him. There had been, over the years, almost nothing to complain of about Joe. The worst she could think of to say was that he tended toward complacency. But even this was a minor flaw given his easy nature, his generosity and, of course, his patient and seemingly unwavering capacity for love. But to speak in terms of loving him in return...no, there was none of that fierce blood-rush of feeling that could thrum music from the ribcage and swell one's throat to bursting as though it contained some beautiful, terrible balloon. She had never got beyond suspecting that, though she would rather not do without Joe, she could certainly make the adjustment, were it necessary, with little emotional strain. Once, long ago, in a tender moment (there was a moon, she remembers), Joe had said to her, "Don't you ever die on me first. I don't know what I'd do without you." And she'd looked into his shining eyes, so pleasantly dark, and thought, *Well, all right*, even though she knew her heart should have wrenched at the thought of living without him. Oddly, it had not dismayed her to discover, early on in marriage, the truth about her feelings for Joe. After all, it was not particularly rare in those days – when romance was often dictated by economics and geography – to be married to someone you did not love. It was not unusual at all. So she had waited, instead, for the arrival of children to kindle the sort of love she knew she could expect with some degree of certainty from motherhood. When it became clear that the long-awaited arrival was not to come, Perpetua began to suspect that the number of those she could say she had truly loved would remain limited to four. And she had briefly grieved.

The more she thought about it, the more Perpetua realized her inability to love Joe (or anyone else she had met – there had certainly been opportunities) was the result of a too-happy childhood. Looking back, it seemed to her that there had been none of the petty tensions and jealousies, none of the potentially grave resentments that she knew sprouted frequent and deep-rooted in other families. There had, of course, been quarrels

and sometimes tears, even the occasional fit of temper (Martin, once, after an argument with their father – Perpetua could not now remember over what – had broken his knuckle taking a swing at the barn wall), but these had all been rare and short-lived and, once they had passed, entirely forgotten. What made possible these easy family relations, Perpetua could not suppose. But it was not really, after all, the lack of conflict and strife which amazed and puzzled her – for her own marriage had rolled along easily for fifty-five years – rather, it was the absolute, unshakably deep feeling of love that they – Magda and Martin and herself and their mother and father – had all seemed to feel for one another...and only for one another. Even now, when she conjured up an image of Martin, sickly always, with his too-skinny legs, walking to school through ditches bloated yellow with buffalo beans, or the unbeautiful Magda coaxing a kitten to take milk from a saucer in the little sunless back porch, she felt that huge swelling of her heart, at once so agonizing and so tender. And she was aware, yet again, that she had never once felt this feeling for Joe.

She liked to believe that Joe had never been aware of this lack. She had certainly always done her best to conceal it from him. She had cooked his meals and washed his clothes and once, before they were married, when all things still seemed possible, she had danced with him under the stars on a summer night choked with the scent of hot sand and wolf willow and sage. She had held his hand and changed his sour sheets when he lay delirious with rheumatic fever, she had worked beside him in the field and in the corrals, and they had prayed every Sunday shoulder to shoulder in the little church at Johnsborough. She had lain her body next to his each night, peaceful or tired, sometimes angry. She had stayed, after all. And had been happy, more or less. There was still, back then anyway, Magda and Martin and, for a few years after her mother's death, her father. And that had been enough. They had always been enough for each other.

Perpetua supposed it was her parents who were to blame. Somehow, they had produced such a tight, iron band of love that it could not be expanded or reshaped or broken. They were good people, unexceptional people. Perpetua's father was a quiet man, a German, from Odessa, given to long absences, days sometimes, out in the hills, from which he would return peaceful and oddly rested – younger-looking, Perpetua had always thought, as though the sandy blasts of wind across the land had polished him smooth, like a stone. He could read and write German fluently; unusual, she learned later, for a man of his background and means. He took the German papers and read each

carefully, all the way through, puzzling his forehead in the light from the coal stove as though there were some unpleasant mystery to be solved in those pages. And on Sunday mornings, without fail until the children were too old for him to do so, he would take each of them in turn on his knee – Magda and then Martin and then Perpetua – and he would tell them in German, *You are the light of my heart.* And then, while the children stood there grinning expectantly, he would rise and wrap their mother's thickened waist in his big hands and whisper something in her ear – they never knew what, but they could tell by the look on her face it must be the same thing each time. And she would smile and put the palm of her hand just so across his lips, as if she had placed a kiss there. She seemed to do this secretly, as she seemed to do all things, almost as though there were some sort of magic she worked in the everyday acts of living – in coaxing brown, hot loaves of bread from the oven, or conjuring from that terrible, gritty earth string beans fat and green as elves' stockings, or polishing the scuffed old pine-board floor to a shine that made Martin giddy with sliding in his stocking-feet and Perpetua and Magda foolish with imagined chrysanthemums and dancing shoes and shimmering satin gowns the color of birds' eggs. She was a large woman, broad-shouldered and wide through the hips, but she moved quickly and lightly, with the grace of love upon her limbs. No one outside the family would have called her beautiful. But there she was, nevertheless, soft and sudden and full-blown for them all like the wild roses by the gate in early summer. And love, love, it was as if someone had dreamed them.

It was only later, much later, that Perpetua realized her loving family had not, after all, taught love, but only collected it and stored it selfishly like the bushel baskets of potatoes and mealy apples in the root cellar. No, they did not teach love. What they taught was this: everything for the family. All your love. For it was always just them. There were no friends to go visiting on a Saturday afternoon in December, no skating parties, there were no fall suppers, no group picnics at the river with baskets of other women's roast chicken and pickles and chokecherry strudels, no brandings, they did not graze their cattle in the community pasture at the Sand Hills. There was not even church, for they prayed at home, led by their father in German from the great black Bible he'd brought from the old country. It was always just the five of them. Yes, her parents were certainly to blame. When Perpetua thought this, she always paused uncomfortably over the word "blame." But when she considered the effects of their love, that neither she, nor Magda, nor Martin, had ever been able to allow anyone else into their exclusive circle, it seemed that perhaps a little blame was necessary after all.

For many years, Perpetua had thought this failure to love was something wrong only in her. Then she had received a letter from Magda, poor Magda, alone in Saskatoon with a child, on the edge of her first divorce, who had written, unsuspecting of the truth, *Tell me how it feels to go to bed each night and wake up each morning beside the man you love* (she had underlined *love*). *I feel sickened and empty. And my child, who is blood, asleep in the next room, her I can't even speak of, can't even look at some days without the shame of my awful lie.* And Perpetua had read the letter twice over and wept terribly, wept big wrenching sobs, her apron up over her face, and her shoulders shaking as though her body would break itself apart – wept, not for her husband, whom she did not love, nor for the children she had never had, whom she could not love either, but for poor Magda, whom she did love. She had wept that way until it was time for Joe to be home for supper and then, seeing him step heavily across the yard, she had slipped the letter into the bread box, washed her face and greeted him, as she did each day, with a smile and a kiss.

And that letter had made everything clear for her. This is how it was always to be for them. They would love only each other: there was Magda, ending her marriage because she was waiting for love, and there was Martin, never married, alone now on their parents' farm, and here she was married to a man she did not love. It was tragic. And it was terribly unfair. But, nevertheless, it was. Now, past seventy, with her parents and Magda long since buried in the little Catholic cemetery on the outskirts of town, and Martin rarely able to know her anymore, and only Joe to fill her days, it seemed a thing beyond worrying about, this love.

So when she looked out the window that Wednesday morning to see a woman in a yellow hat talking to Joe by his woodworking shop, she was taken aback by the great swelling she felt expand her old ribs almost to bursting. The feeling came so suddenly and so powerfully that she was forced to step away from the back door and sink herself into a kitchen chair, her head swimming with the impossible rush of emotion that trembled her fingers and sheathed her body in a fine layer of sweat. It was not for Joe, of course, that her knees threatened to give way beneath her, but rather for the woman in the yellow hat. It took her a few moments to reassure herself that, certainly, it was not Magda who stood awkwardly among Joe's larkspur, but Magda's daughter Myra, who had written weeks ago that she might be passing through. Perpetua had not seen Myra since before Magda's divorce, not since she had gone off to live with her father in Manitoba. But that had been almost thirty years ago. The woman who stood now in the garden was not that rather homely, rather unhappy little girl she had known, but a

woman approaching middle age, a woman who, for all Perpetua's rationalizing, *was* Magda, was Magda's blood, as she had once said, and was Magda's body – with the same swelling thighs and narrow shoulders, the same straight yellow hair, the same uneasy stance, the stance of someone slightly cowed by the acceptance of their own graceless appearance. Perpetua had consumed all this detail in a flash as she'd looked briefly out the back door, seeing first Joe standing and nodding, clearly pleased with this visitor (so rare now), and then the woman in the yellow hat, wearing white bermuda shorts and a striped T-shirt, holding a big straw shopping bag over one shoulder (did she mean to stay?).

Perpetua rose heavily and went back to the window, but both Joe and the woman (she could not, no matter how she tried, think of her as Myra) had disappeared. Perpetua felt a small shiver of panic before she realized that Joe had no doubt invited her into his workshop. They were probably standing there right now beneath all those jars he'd glued by their lids to the low ceiling, in neat rows, to hold nails and screws and bolts; she was probably smelling wood shavings and pretending to admire (or genuinely admiring) his carvings – tiny cowboy boots and miniature horses, trains and racing cars and semi trucks (these latter mostly for children around town, and now their children). She would ask politely if he'd done the enormous, elaborately-carved wood slab of varnished cedar out front which announced, *Dunworkin*, and below that, smaller, *Joseph and Perpetua Resch*. He could keep her there for hours, pointing out the intricacies of detail in a boot or a wheel or a horse's mane, the character of each different wood, the density, the weight, the hardness or softness, the variations in color and texture, the shine that could be brought to any piece through patient sanding. How one could make even the softest wood gleam like marble. He could keep her there all night. But just as Perpetua was deciding whether or not to go out to them (she rarely left the house now, not much at all since the surgery), they both appeared at the doorway to the workshop. Joe pointed toward the kitchen, and the woman looked up, shading her eyes. Perpetua stepped back from the window, even though they probably could not see her. She knew what Joe had said as he pointed, "Your Auntie Pet's up at the house there. She'll be real glad you're here. Go on up."

So Perpetua busied herself around the kitchen, wiping the already spotless counters, moving canisters a fraction of an inch into alignment, her hands shaking, and all the time thinking, *Magda, Magda.*

And then the doorbell.

"Come in," she called, trying for that tone of pleasant, half-surprise.

When the woman opened the screen door and stepped into the air-conditioned kitchen on a wave of hot, dry heat, with all that sunlight still streaming in ribbons from her yellow hat, Perpetua came slowly toward her, trying as much as possible to hide the limp from the surgery, trying to swallow that terrible lump in her throat that threatened to bring awful, hot tears of love. She took a breath and tried to smile, holding her hands out. "Well, well, look at this," she began to say, but before she had finished, the woman had turned away and covered her face with her big red hands, Magda's hands.

Perpetua took her in an awkward embrace. The woman held the tips of her fingers pressed to her eyes, she was crying. "What is it, dear?" Perpetua asked (she could not say Myra). "Tell me. What's wrong?"

The woman shook her head, still half-turned away, returned Perpetua's embrace with one fumbling, fleshy arm that Perpetua thought smelled faintly of geraniums. The woman shook her head, lifted her crumpled face as though in a tremendous effort to stop her tears. She shook her head again and said something which Perpetua could not hear, and in spite of the fact that she hated to do it, Perpetua said, "What? What's that?" and the woman repeated herself, but Perpetua could still not hear what she said, though she thought it was either "...glad to come back" or "...sad to come back." It would be impossible to ask again.

The woman was embarrassed by her tears, Perpetua could see that, so she said, "Come in," and walked her slow, rolling walk to the table, knowing it would give the woman a moment to pull herself together before she followed. Perpetua sat down first, folding her hands in her lap to still the trembling, then looked across the table as the woman pulled out a chair for herself, planted the heavy straw bag with great care at her feet and adjusted the waistband of her shorts. She removed her hat, lifting it in an odd movement too dainty for her hands, with two fingers at each side of the brim, and, finally, raised her face, gave that same crumpled smile. And it was Magda's face, streaky red and swollen from the tears and the heat, Magda who had never been beautiful but who could look at you with a kind of light in her eyes that would set your very bones gently humming with pleasure. That pure light of love. And Perpetua stared at the woman, so hungry for that light, just one small glimmer, that she almost reached across the table and grasped the woman by her shoulders to bring her closer. Perpetua looked, and she saw no light there. And then it was not Magda, finally, but only Myra, with the red and swollen and lightless eyes. And Perpetua felt her heart spill over again with

love, not for Magda now, but finally, after all this time, for Myra. This woman. How could it be?

"So," Myra was saying, her voice soft and still trembling with tears, "it's been a long time."

Perpetua could barely catch the words. These last years, her hearing had been growing gradually worse, was so bad now that all conversation had a strange, dreamy quality. She leaned forward a little, working her hands in her lap, forcing the strange, awful clenching of her heart to subside.

"How are you?" Myra asked. "What's going on with you these days?"

And before Perpetua could stop herself, she'd said, surprised at the sudden feebleness of her voice, "Nothing good. Joe had a heart attack last summer" – she thought Myra said, "I'm sorry, I didn't know" – "and I had surgery on my leg and they put a pin in that's giving me a lot of trouble, it's painful, I don't sleep much anymore." And then she thought, Why did I say that? I didn't mean to say that. How terrible I must sound to her.

Myra was saying, "I'm sorry," again, and, then, she thought she heard, "Uncle Joe looks good. How is he?"

"What?" Perpetua said. "Joe?"

Myra's face got that look of slow realization. She raised her voice a little, leaned forward also, "Yes, how is he? He looks good."

"Yes," Perpetua nodded, "he's good. He's the same."

"He keeps busy out there, I guess."

"Yes," Perpetua said, "he keeps busy."

She thought of Joe out there, every day now since he'd retired, puttering around, sawing and sanding and patiently scraping. He wouldn't admit it, but his eyes were going. He wasn't as good anymore with the fine detail.

"He didn't know me," Myra said, pushing out a little laugh. "I guess he wouldn't. He thought I was selling something."

Perpetua smiled and nodded. "Yes, they come around sometimes. Always selling something." She shrugged. "We never buy. Just from the Hutterites."

The woman nodded, leaned her elbows on the table, took them off again. "And how," she said, "how is Joe's family? He has a sister, doesn't he?"

"Yes," Perpetua said, thinking how strange it was that Myra should remember that. "In Medicine Hat. We don't see her much now. She's busy. With the grandchildren."

"Oh," Myra said, "she has grandchildren?"

"What?"

"She has grandchildren?"

Perpetua nodded. "Yes. Great-grandchildren, now. Two of them. Joe has pictures up," she said, rising slowly and leading Myra into the living room. Her hands had stopped trembling now, but she was so conscious of the nearness of Myra's breath and her arms behind her that she still felt a little flutter of her heart. She wanted to touch her again, but it would seem strange. Myra would wonder. So instead she pointed to where the pictures stood on a little shelf, all of them, in their brassy frames.

"There's more," she said, "out in the shop, all their school pictures. Joe probably showed you. Don't ask me their names. There's too many now."

Myra looked at the pictures, each in turn, making polite comments Perpetua did not always hear. She wished she would remember to speak up. She didn't like to keep asking her to repeat. Myra paused over a big black and white one in a wooden frame.

"That one," Perpetua said, "is me. And Joe. Our wedding picture." Stupid, of course it was their wedding, she could see that.

Myra picked it up. "You were lovely."

"Oh," Perpetua said, shrugging. She knew she was not.

Myra placed the photograph back gently, then picked up a small, blurry snapshot of Magda and Martin sitting on one of their father's horses – Shotgun, Perpetua thought, though she couldn't really remember.

"This is Mother isn't it," Myra said, pausing.

Perpetua wondered if she saw herself in that face. Surely she must, she must have pictures of her own. Wouldn't she?

"And Uncle Martin," Myra said. "How is he?"

Perpetua was about to say, "Not good," but instead she said, "The same," and wiped a bit of dust away from the frame with her thumb.

"I'd like to see him," Myra said. "Is he still on the farm?"

Perpetua looked up in surprise. "No," she said, "he's been in the home for years now."

"Oh," Magda said, and put the picture down on the shelf.

She is embarrassed, Perpetua thought, she thinks she should know these things. Her heart went out to her. How could she know? She had been lost to them all for years, to Magda even. To Magda most of all.

"Your father," Perpetua asked then, because she felt she should, "how is he?"

"Fine. In Brandon, still. With Lois. They're fine."

This was the stepmother, Perpetua remembered. The one who'd sent Magda Christmas cards faithfully, each year, with a brief letter and a picture of Myra standing posed in front of their upright piano, always the same pose, to show how much she'd grown. Lois, a stranger, who knew more of Magda's daughter than Magda herself did. It was too sad. Perpetua would not let herself think about it any longer.

"Where do you live now? Brandon?"

"Nipawin."

"Where?"

Myra raised her voice. "Nipawin. I teach there. Two and three."

Perpetua nodded. She watched Myra pick up pictures, set them back down, the same ones she'd already looked at.

"What, are you on a holiday?"

"Yes. Sort of. It's summer vacation." She smiled. "I guess that's my holiday."

"Out here?"

Myra shrugged, turned away again quickly. Was she crying?

Perpetua straightened a couple of the frames. "You picked the worst time, July. I hope you have air-conditioning in your car."

"Yes," Myra said, without turning around, "it's hot all right."

"I was never one for the heat," she said. "Everyone here complains about winter. Not me. Joe neither. Nothing bothers him."

Then, finally, she asked.

"Are you married?"

"Yes," Myra said, replacing the photograph she was looking at. "Robert Russell. We met at the university. His family is from around Kindersley. The Malcolm Russells. His grandparents are Aida and Clemens Russell...?"

She trailed off. Perpetua smiled. "Where is he? Working?"

"Yes," she said, "he had to work."

"Do you have children?"

"No."

Perpetua gave Myra's wrist a little squeeze and, though she was reluctant to let go, went to sit in the armchair by the window, slowly so as not to jar her aching leg, made a motion for Myra to take a seat on the chesterfield.

"Do you want coffee?" she asked. "Or pop?"

"No. Thank you."

"Juice? Water?"

"No, I'm good, thanks."

Perpetua folded her hands in her lap. The clock ticked out from the mantle, softly. Beyond the yellowed blinds, a car rolled past on the gravel road. She tried not to stare at Myra, though she felt as if she could swallow her whole with her eyes. That face. When she thought of it, tears came and so she thought, instead, about Joe, working steadily out in the shop, listened for the sound of his radio or the high whine of the saw. But it was quiet.

"I guess," Myra said finally, fiddling with the hem of her white shorts. Her eyes had reddened, they glistened in the yellow light; she looked as if she might cry again. "I guess you and Mother were pretty close."

Oh, Perpetua thought, oh, my dear child. And she wanted more than anything to pull that sad body to her, hold her close against her chest. Poor, unlovely child. Child of my heart. My sister's child. Perpetua hid her hands beneath her apron.

"Yes," she said slowly, "there were just the three of us. We had no close neighbours. It was just us always."

Myra nodded. She wiped the tip of her awkward nose, stared up at basket of silk flowers, then a brass cat, then a framed sampler Perpetua had been given years ago as a gift, *Act and suffer in silence*. She couldn't remember now who had given it to her, only that she had hated it always. She watched as Myra cast her eyes about the room, rolling them from wall to wall like dull marbles. Finally, she could stand it no longer.

"You want to know about your mother?" she asked. "What do you want to know?"

Myra stared back at her with those lightless eyes.

"She was a good singer," Perpetua began. "She liked all animals. On the farm, she liked to be with the animals. Except mice, which she was afraid of. I don't know why, she wasn't afraid of anything else. She liked the horses, her and Martin both. I was always too scared. She liked the garden. She worked hard. We all did. She wasn't much of a one for housework." Perpetua smiled. "She got in trouble with Mum all the

time for not doing this right, not doing that right. She baked an apple pie once, Mum left all the directions, but she used salt instead of sugar. We tried to feed it to the dogs so mum wouldn't find out, but they wouldn't eat it. She got in trouble for that. She liked to sing." Perpetua shrugged. "I don't know. My memory is getting worse. If you ask me questions, maybe I'll remember."

But Perpetua felt like a fraud, looking across at that unhappy face. This was not what Myra wanted to know. Not really. She leaned forward over her knees, as close as she could get without rising, and said slowly, clearly, "She was my sister. And I loved her. Just as I loved Martin. And my mother and my father. It was all we had. Do you understand? We didn't know anything but each other." She stopped here, hoping Myra *would* understand. "Our family, it was everything. More than that, I can't tell you."

Myra covered her face again with her big red hands. Perpetua rose and seated herself on the chesterfield next to her. She put one arm around her shoulders and thought, this is what we've all come to, all that love. How could she explain it?

"The truth is," she began, "the truth is..."

She looked up then to see Joe standing in the doorway, holding a small, carved horse, a black one, gleaming softly with all the light of new marble. She could tell by the way he turned the horse slowly in his hands that he'd been standing there for some time. The horse, she knew, was for Myra. Though his carvings fetched quite a price in the city, he'd always given away far more than he'd sold. It was his way. She stared back at him, with Myra between them, her poor, sad face in her hands, crying silently. They listened to the clock tick. And then Perpetua finally said, still looking at Joe, "That's enough now." And she smoothed a hand across the back of Myra's hair. "That's enough."

Sand Hills

It wasn't that she lied. At least, I don't think she did – not what she would have considered lying, anyway. The thing about my mother was that she always loved a good story, right up until the day she died, tucked under my grandmother's wedding quilt on the chesterfield in the airless and darkened front room. She simply believed in a little embellishment for the sake of a good story, a little bending of the rules. She believed in constant and impromptu revision to keep things interesting.

It was a family trait that, apparently, had ended with her. I would try sometimes, at her urging, to produce an adequately dramatized version of some dry bit of information I'd learned at school, something from history or science class, even bits of gossip I was privy to in the girls' washroom. I tried to recreate these stories the way my mother did, vividly, punching life and color into everything; but I always ended up losing my place, confusing details, forgetting that I should have provided a vital bit of information sooner – *No, wait a minute, there were actually* two *Indians waiting around the bend, and one was really tired, or, no, he was sick, really really sick, and, uh, it was dark out, I should of said it was dark, and one of the Indians, well, no, let me go back a bit.*

This failure was a flaw in me my mother could not reconcile herself with, as if I had been born of alien and uncultivable flesh.

"That's all right, dear," she'd sigh, patting my leg halfway through some dull and tortured tale, perhaps sensing my misery or simply no longer able to listen. Releasing us both from my inadequacies. She would pat my leg and smile a little to keep me from feeling discouraged, I guess, scanning my face in a way that made me feel she was still trying to decide whether or not we might come to like one another.

Once she said abruptly, "I never told you enough," and I'd thought at first she meant stories, that she was excusing me, taking responsibility for my failure. But then she closed her eyes and shook her head, patted my leg again, and said nothing more. Her silence was my cue to read from one of the books we were studying in school, *A Tale of Two Cities* or *The Old Man and the Sea.* She liked best those set somewhere else, somewhere other than the prairies, somewhere exotic, tropical, unleashing the possibilities in a shell, a vine, a fish. She had me read *The Pearl* twice during her illness and once more toward the end. She was so small by then that I would tiptoe in quietly some afternoons when the blinds were drawn and the winter light was a dull, dusty

gold, and think for a moment that she had disappeared, simply evaporated from beneath the smooth blue of the quilt, that it was her dust that floated all around me, turned and glowed in the heavy light cracking from the edges of windows where the blinds did not quite meet. Once I thought, I could breathe her in now, her body like this, in such fine particles. I could take all of her in. And I stood there enchanted by the thought, both desperate and afraid to breathe, caught in that one moment of pure, terrified longing.

"Mom?" she said then, and for a second I thought I'd spoken out loud, felt my heart thudding against the back of my throat. But the quilt rustled and her still-dark head turned on the pillow.

"Oh, Del," she said, half-apologetic, half-disappointed, "I thought it was Grandma."

By the time my mother's illness transformed the front room into a sickroom, my grandmother had been dead nearly a decade, following fast on the heels of my grandfather. Everyone knew the two of them would go that way, so close together. After her funeral, people stood around at the fenced edge of the cemetery on the outskirts of town, smoking or dabbing at lipstick or simply leaning their bodies into the wind, agreeing on the inevitability of such near departures.

"A testament to their bond," the priest had said, the very words that seemed to be on everyone's mind. "A testament to God's will," he'd gone on to say, at length, encouraged by the nods he'd received, "a testament to the glory of God and to the bond of man and wife, for each one of us, sinners all, each one of us, lambs and sinners all, which no thing, not even the cold hand of death, can put asunder."

Many thought this was going too far, though they agreed, in theory, that it applied well to my grandparents.

"It's a fitting thing, Rose and Herb," they said, grinding the heels of their shoes in the patched grass.

"It's only right."

"We should all be so lucky."

The occasion of her death may, in fact, have been the only time my grandmother had been considered lucky. Rose Krusey came from hard-on-their-luck people, the Sand Hill Mayhews (to distinguish them from the Town Mayhews, who owned the grocery store and were known to be fine, hard-working people despite the shocking mark-up on

produce and perishables). Her father, Philip Mayhew, was seen as largely to blame for the family's misfortunes.

"Any fool can see that land over there isn't worth a rat's ass," they'd say around the coffee shop, "can't grow nothing. Run some cattle, sure, but if you can't grow nothing..." And everyone would shake their heads and tip back their caps.

No one knew what made Philip Mayhew select for his homestead a wretched few acres on the edge of the Great Sand Hills – the worst possible tract of land in the R.M. – only that, on the long trip back to town from staking his claim, he'd stopped to drink from a slough, fell into a fever and died eight days later, in a rooming house in Maple Creek, leaving his teenaged sons – dazed and stupid with grief – to break the land the best they could. Some said it was the lack of a father figure that made the Mayhews run wild, that their mother, left alone with five children on a farm that wouldn't grow hardly anything but sagebrush, kocia weed and thistle, just gave up, let those kids do as they pleased.

"Drinkers and fighters," they said in town, "four boys and no father – well, it's no wonder."

My grandmother, the youngest and the only girl, was tagged as guilty by association though she herself had never been known to take a drink, not even a sip from the proffered bottles of her brother's friends, and she was too small to be much of a fighter. I've seen pictures of her in my mother's album, a skinny child swathed in hand-me-down boys' sweaters or roughly made-over grownup dresses (donated by town ladies to the needy, a word basically synonymous with Mayhew) that somehow gave her a disturbing air of unwholesomeness, the way the too-shiny fabric gleamed in the light and flapped low across the narrow bones of her chest. From the pictures, it's hard to tell what my grandfather saw in her, unless it was a certain waifishness, a vulnerability that appealed to his harder and less noble instincts. If the truth were known, the Kruseys weren't a far cry from the Mayhews, either in habit or spirit. The only difference was that the existence of the family patriarch Ted Krusey well into his nineties lent the illusion of family stability and discipline.

When Rose Mayhew married into the Kruseys, few would have claimed she was lucky, though some may have gone so far as to say she wasn't likely to do much better. But to the surprise of most, Herb and Rose seemed to fare well in married life. Rose grew plump and pinkish, could not, for instance, from the way she looked in those later years, have possibly been named anything but Rose. I've often wondered how her parents

could have chosen so accurately, why they had not selected the more popular Rosemary or Constance or even Violet. It has become a strange source of pride for me, the selection of that name, as though it spoke of a greater understanding and insight than the Mayhews were generally given credit for.

There was the fibbing too, I suppose, that made the distinction between Krusey and Mayhew. My grandmother, using what I came in later years to recognize as a considerable degree of creative license, called it storytelling.

"We come from a long line of storytellers," she'd say to me sometimes when the Mayhew reputation around town (kept alive largely by the doings of her two youngest brothers, who still resided together on the family farm) came once more – as things in a small town are likely to do – to my attention. "Mayhews always were fine storytellers," she'd say, pointing her little chin, "that's a thing to be proud of."

My grandfather, on the other hand, was known to remark that he'd never seen such a pack of BS-ers in all his born days.

"The whole bunch of 'em," he'd mutter, knifing into a pork chop, "talk you senseless. And what have they got to say for themselves? Not a goddamn thing."

My grandmother would murmur, "Herb," in that way she had and then lift her eyebrows toward where I sat at the end of the table, pretending not to listen.

"What," he'd bark, "it's the God's truth." Then he'd wink and say, "I got myself the best thing that ever come from them hills."

And my grandmother, I swear to this day, would duck her head and blush clear up to the roots of her hair, saying, "Herb," again but not in the same way. And, sometimes, seizing the moment, she'd add, "I wonder how Bob and Carl are doing." If my grandfather didn't respond, it was as good an answer as she could hope for. She'd sweep crumbs from the table into the palm of her hand and say, "About time we made a trip out there." Then smile over at me, and add, "Make sure the old place hasn't blown away."

I'd been out to the Sand Hills frequently as a child, usually with my mother and my grandmother, sometimes with my grandfather in reluctant tow. When he did join us, he'd stay in the truck and smoke while my mother, grandmother and I went inside the unpainted farmhouse to visit with Great-Uncle Bob and Great-Uncle Carl. At first, I enjoyed those visits, sitting belly-up to the sagging kitchen table, sucking on a warm, dusty bottle of Dr. Pepper from the crate by the fridge, kept there solely for the purpose

of mix. The two women cleaned and cooked and the two men creaked back in their chairs, feet up against the edge of the table, drinking. And all four of them talked. It was dizzying, really, that chatter, intoxicating to sit there all but ignored, with my pop bottle wedged between knees drawn up to my chest, just listening.

"People can laugh all they want but I'm telling you I seen it with my own eyes, that light, it was ghostly blue and it came each night and skittered over the same spot in the floor till one night we pried up the boards with a shovel and there it was, a tin box stuffed to bursting with dollar bills, two hundred and twenty seven of them, to be exact. Old Man Dubyk had come back for his money sure as I'm sitting here today."

"What, Dubyk? Never had a penny to his name."

"Well, now you know why. Ha ha."

"That was the summer Forsby tried to swim his horse across the river."

"You were all down there drinking after Tom Fidder's branding."

"No, that was later, years later, you're losing your memory."

"It was a dare, wasn't it?"

"Emil Schlacht dared him."

"No, it was a bet."

"No it wasn't, it was just Forsby. He was on his horse and halfway across before anybody realized."

"Well it was in the spring, I know that because there was ice yet on the river and Mazey Cross was still alive."

"Mazey Cross! There's a name I haven't heard in years."

"That's where we carried the body, through the moonlight, I remember it was a full moon or near about, and she opened the door, all white-haired and holding up that candle just like an angel, you remember? And the light fell on poor Forsby and she looked at us all and then led us inside where we laid poor Forsby on the kitchen table and all of us dripping wet and shivering like anything and Foxy Eavell, who'd got to him first, crying and shaking like he might bust apart and Forsby so still it didn't seem possible. And then she covered him over with her good tablecloth and then we knew it was done and Mazey said, so softly, 'You're through now, boys. Go on home. I think you're about through.'"

"Poor old Forsby."

"Poor old Mazey Cross. It was her heart got her in the end."

I sat quietly and listened and hoped my grandfather had dozed off in the truck outside, as he sometimes did. We all knew when he leaned on the horn it was time to go.

As I got older, I began to suspect that my presence in that kitchen wasn't forgotten but rather indulged, that I was undergoing some rite of passage. Bob began to glance at me frequently, gauging my reaction to different stories: Did I laugh, was I embarrassed? Did I understand? Carl, on the other hand, continued to ignore me until one day late in the summer before my tenth birthday, when he turned to me abruptly and asked, loud enough to make me start, "And what have you got to say for yourself?"

I froze, hands pressed to my kneecaps, toes curled around the edge of the chair.

"Well," Carl prompted, louder, "what can you tell me, Delly Mayhew." He said it with an odd and inexplicable sneer, drawing it out in an ugly way, *Maaay-hew.*

Until that precise moment, it hadn't occurred to me that I was one of them, a Mayhew. My last name was Krusey, of course, the same as my mother, my grandmother. But they were Mayhews, too. I was amazed that I hadn't yet really included myself in their number, not consciously.

My grandmother and Bob had stopped mid-conversation and my mother turned from where she stood at the kitchen sink, scouring a frying pan. Her long, dark red hair had pulled loose in the heat and hung down over her face, but I thought I saw alarm there, as if she was about to say something, then stopped, unsure herself what it might be.

I sat there dumb, looking from one face to another, sweat springing up all over my body, terrified by the weight of that moment, the expectation, Carl's sneer still hanging in the air over all of us. *Maaay-hew.*

The long blast of the truck horn startled everyone, even Carl. I sprung instantly to my feet, forgetting the sweaty pop bottle wedged between my knees. It hit the edge of the table and bounced to the floor, spinning absurdly on the cracked linoleum like a party game. I stood there stupidly while the sticky pop foamed out around my feet.

My mother was the first to move, coming toward me with the dishcloth in hand.

"She's a Krusey," Bob said, excusing me, swishing a mouthful of rye down his throat.

Carl looked at me narrowly, then at my mother, on her knees, mopping at the linoleum. "No," he said, flatly, "she ain't."

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It's strange how some things so obvious don't occur to you until someone points them out, like a deer at the edge of the highway at dusk, or those puzzles in children's books: How many rabbits can you spot in this picture? Then you wonder how you could have missed them. The fact that I was descended of the Mayhews was, of course, no surprise. But the real connection, the blood and flesh and bone connection, had not occurred to me until that day at the farm. In much the same way, it did not occur to me until the following autumn to really wonder about my father.

Up until that time, I'd been living under the assumption that I simply didn't have one, period. Oddly enough, I don't remember ever having wondered about him much before then. Perhaps on some level I wished to believe that, like Thumbelina, I had been found by my mother in the petals of a tulip. Or, it might have been that my grandfather's presence more than adequately filled what might otherwise have been an obvious void. At school, for instance, I simply made the felt card or clay ashtray or whatever happened to be that year's Father's Day art project, with him in mind. And each item was duly brought home and duly received without a sign of awkwardness on the part of any member of the family.

It must, then, have come as a considerable shock to my grandmother that day, not long after the unfortunate afternoon at Bob and Carl's, that I turned to her in the car as we drove down main street, with all those poplar leaves scattering across the road like sunlight, and said, without preamble, "What happened to my father?"

She appeared, as ever, unruffled. Simply pulled the big old Impala to a stop in front of the post office, retrieved her purse from where she always kept it when driving, at her feet, and said pleasantly, "He ran away." Then she opened the car door and said, "Coming?"

I sat there, watching my grandmother swing neatly through the post office door, and pictured, instead, my father, inexplicably in top hat and tails, trudging away across the Sand Hills. It was only natural, considering he was running away, that I should picture him from behind, but I've always thought it spoke largely of my creative inadequacies that, in this only vision I ever had of him, I did not give my father a face.

When Bob married, much to the surprise of everyone, a widow woman from up near Swift Current, he left the farm and Carl for the first time in his life. Everyone wondered what Carl would do without him. What Carl did, after about six months of

solitary hard drinking, was load up a flatbed of rye bottles, some still half-full, and drive them out to the nuisance grounds. Then he stopped at the store, purchased five crates of Dr. Pepper, a paper sack of jawbreakers and all the cartons of Number Sevens they had in stock and headed back to the farm, stone cold sober possibly for the first time in more than forty years.

I had just turned seventeen, both my grandparents had been dead a few years, though not long enough for the crabgrass and sand flowers in the cemetery to completely cover their graves, and my mother was still simply, as she said, "feeling poorly"; the cancer on her throat had not yet developed into the baseball-sized lump she would eventually keep hidden beneath the prettily scalloped edge of my grandmother's quilt.

Carl called one Saturday morning to say he'd been out in the Sand Hills after a yearling – the same damn one as last week, if we could believe that, she must have some jack rabbit in her, or antelope more likely, something wild anyway, that was for sure – and saw the chokecherries were ripe for picking and hanging as thick and heavy as grapes on the vine.

"I wouldn't mind putting some jam up this year," my mother said after she'd hung up the phone.

"Jam?" I said, thinking how I'd seen her just that morning sit down heavily on the back steps for ten minutes after only taking a few towels from the clothesline. I was catching her in these moments of exhaustion more frequently and it was making me feel anxious and irritable. "You must be kidding."

She lifted the long red coil of hair from over her shoulder, then twisted it, the way she always wore it in hot weather, in a neat bun at the nape of her neck – a motion that reminded me how young she still was. "We haven't had a good year for chokecherries like this since you were a little girl." She smiled and I turned away. "I remember because it was the same year Uncle Bob killed that rattler in the stable. Ten feet long if it was a foot. He kept the skin. It was the same year..."

She trailed off here, as she had begun to do lately, looked instead down at her hands spread out on the kitchen table, fingers splayed.

I was seated across from her, folding a washload of socks and underwear, not much now, just hers and mine. I stopped, staring at her across the table, at her thin wrists, so white they were almost blue, and for a moment, I thought I hated her, hated them all and their stupid lies. Why couldn't they ever just tell the truth about something? And before I could stop myself, I'd said, "Where is it?"

"What?" she said, looking surprised. "Where's what?"

I held a pair of socks balled-up in my lap. "The ten-foot skin. Where is it?"

My mother just stared at me, what I thought was a funny kind of half-smile skittering across her lips.

"I've never seen it," I went on, hating myself. "You'd think I would have seen it. All these years."

We stared at each other that way across the table, shame already worming its awful way up from my belly. Finally she said, quietly, "Maybe you have. Maybe you don't remember."

"I'd remember," I said, though thinking now that maybe, in fact, I had seen it. "I'd remember that."

It was a trick all the Mayhews could do well: convince you that you'd seen things, done things, you never had. It reminded me of that card trick where the magician made you think you'd selected a card, though he had really just slipped it ever so gently into your palm.

"You'd have to ask Uncle Carl," she said. "I wouldn't know what happened to it."

She had me. She knew I'd never ask Carl. Though he was a different man since he'd stopped drinking, I still harboured a certain distrust of him bordering on fear.

"Anyway," she said, "I think I'll go. I sure would like to see Uncle Carl." She turned away, took two plates from the cupboard, two forks and knives, two glasses, and began to set the table. "Who knows how much longer he's got."

So after dinner, we loaded the car with empty ice cream buckets, filled a jug with ice water and headed north toward the Sand Hills. My mother was quiet and I looked over more than once to see if she'd fallen asleep, her head rocking on that thin neck as if every bump in the narrow road would snap it. I was hot and tired and filled with a terrible shame that lapsed, every few moments, into anger. Of course it wasn't anger at all that I was feeling then, in those days before and during her sickness, it was simply fear.

"Should've gone this morning," I said, irritably. "It'll be hot."

Her head bumped against the side window as the car lurched from the grid road onto the prairie trail that led out through the hills. "Sorry," I said.

I flicked the radio on, fiddled briefly with the one station we sometimes picked up out of Medicine Hat, flicked it off again. We both rolled the windows down, now that

we were driving slower, listened to the pitched whirr of grasshoppers in the brush and across the sandy trail. It was high summer by then and the wild roses had dried into their bright pink hips like crabapples, and the hot stench of sagebrush and ground cedar and the reeking hides of cattle baked in the sun blasted across the hills, seemed to shimmer the very air with its awful weight. The sun off the hood of the car was like a blade. I watched from the corner of my eye as my mother shaded her eyes with one hand, then turned in her seat and looked backwards out the rear window, watching the southern edge of hills slide past us.

"You know," she said, after a while, "those hills are moving all the time. Every day they move a little bit. I never knew that. To think I've lived here my whole life and didn't know something like that. Did you know they were moving?"

I did. We'd studied erosion in science the year before, had made a class trip to the Sand Hills to see it first-hand, but no one had really listened to much the teacher said, unimpressed by something at once so familiar and so disdained. "Not all of them though. Less than one per cent."

"Who told you that?"

"Mr. Stasiak.

"Hm," she said, shortly. "He's not from around here is he?"

I knew she didn't expect an answer.

"Lloyd Stolley was saying the other day that in fifty years they could be to Maple Creek," she said.

"What," I scoffed, "the Sand Hills?" I shook my head in scorn. My mother caught my look. "Probably not all the way to Maple Creek," I added, part apologetic. I hated for things to be this way with us. "They don't move that fast."

"Lloyd'd know," she said definitely, facing forward again, "he's got a nephew in engineering in Saskatoon. Or a cousin." She frowned. "Anyway," she went on, as if we'd been talking about this all along, "this is where Uncle Carl had his accident, somewhere around where this break in the hills falls."

"What?" This was news to me. "What accident?"

"His pelvis was crushed," she said, with an air of surprise, as though, of course, I should have known.

"How did that happen?"

She sighed. "There was a party." In stories involving Uncle Carl, there was often a party. "He was standing between two cars parked along the side of the road.

One of the Rawling boys pulled up behind, he was drinking of course, and ran into the rear car. Not hard, just enough to pin him."

That explained Carl's limp, but there was still something puzzling about the story. "The Rawling boys?" I said. "But they're young aren't they? They're younger than you. What was Carl doing at a party with them?"

My mother smiled briefly. "Looking for me."

I wanted to ask more but I felt baited and uncertain – was this just another story? I looked out the side window, watched juniper and snowberry blur smoothly together a moment then jolt as I hit another gully in the road. My mother sighed, shifted on the seat. For some reason my arms felt heavy and sluggish, as if I carried weights on my wrists, as if the blood was not quite reaching my fingers. I took an arm off the wheel and shook it.

"What's wrong?" my mother said.

"Nothing."

"Tired?"

A gopher skidded across the road and I winced at the small, soft thump it made under the tire.

"No." I felt her eyes on me and I turned toward the side window again. "No," I said, a bit sharply, "I'm not anything."

She sighed again and looked past me, up ahead a few yards.

"There's the boots," she said. She said it every time we passed them. I took my foot from the gas and let the car roll itself slowly by, knowing she wanted to look. "There," she said, "those three are mine. She pointed to two small cowboy boots and a rubber boot, all worn to shreds, turned upside down and jammed over the top of the fence posts. But I already knew this, too, knew each one that had belonged to a Mayhew.

"Most are the boys'," she said, meaning my grandmother's brothers. "I guess they wore out the most boots."

I frowned at the long line of boots turned absurdly upside down. There was something disturbing about the way they stuck up into the air like that, all those boots, heels turned skyward.

"Those aren't all Mayhew," I said, knowing I'd said it before, possibly more than once.

"No," she said, "there's others."

"Who?" I asked, though I already knew.

"Oh," she said, "other hill families. Fidders have some, I guess, and Wagners. I don't really know. Everybody."

"I don't have any," I said, after a moment.

"No," she said, watching the last few posts slide past us, "you don't."

I didn't know what I was waiting for her to say that day. I knew I was fishing but I couldn't say why or for what. Maybe for one of her stories, not a lie-story, just a story. Already I missed the sound of her voice, the lulling rhythm of her words, *Those boots have been there as long as you and as long as me and as long as your grandmother, as long as people have lived and died on this land, and the first boot belonged to a boy, a small yellow-haired boy who was the first child born out here in these hills one autumn just around harvest time on a still evening when the moon rose fat and red from the dust of the men threshing hot, endless rows in the fields back of the hills, the first child, Henry was his name, and he was a beautiful child with yellow hair and the bluest eyes, blue like flowers you hear of in stories, yes, he was the first child born here and the first child to die, poor Henry, to die in the winter here is a terrible thing* ... Maybe it was that story I wanted, one of the first stories I remembered hearing from her, of yellow-haired Henry and that one terrible winter, maybe something more. It wouldn't have mattered, though. By then, she had already begun to change the endings. Soon the stories would stop altogether.

Up ahead we could see the farm wavering like a mirage in the afternoon heat, a trick of the atmosphere making it appear closer than it was. Making it appear larger than the great yellow dunes that surrounded it.

My mother's voice came so soft and unexpected it made me start a little.

"Where *will* they be in fifty years, then?"

I turned onto the long road that led into the farmyard.

"Delly," she said, after a moment, as if I hadn't heard, "where will they be?"

Carl had already loaded buckets into the back of the half-ton and was waiting on the steps drinking a Dr. Pepper when we pulled up to the house. He looked much smaller than the last time I'd seen him, as if all the flesh had simply dissolved on his bones. I glanced over at my mother to see if she'd noticed, too. But she was already hoisting herself up out of the seat and as I watched her I thought, Her too, how thin they are, how terribly small. I followed her up to the house where Carl was saying, "We picked ourselves a hot one." He cracked open another Dr. Pepper that had been waiting in the shade against the steps and handed it to me. I didn't want it but took it anyway.

"Get you a coffee?" he said to my mother who shook her head and looked up at the sun glaring against the house.

She shook her head again and shaded her eyes. "Should've brought some hats."

I looked over at her, puzzled.

"Plenty inside," Carl said, as if it had been rehearsed, "straw ones are back of the kitchen door." Then he added, "Your mother's." As if there needed to be an explanation. As if she hadn't known all along they were there.

"I'll get them," I offered when no one moved, setting my bottle on the narrow step and squeezing past Carl who leaned to the side, allowing me room.

"Back of the kitchen door," he said again.

We all knew they were there, of course, we'd used them plenty of times before. My grandmother had kept them there specifically for that purpose, the annual berry picking. I grabbed two wide-brimmed ones off their hooks and then, realizing I had never in my life been alone in that kitchen, stopped and listened to the rhythmic ticking of the stove clock. The blinds were all drawn, curled and yellowing at the edges, and the linoleum had pulled up at the corners like tongues stiff with disuse, exposing the dirty wood beneath. Otherwise, it looked pretty much the same. The crate of pop still stood by the fridge and the table still swayed beneath stacks of newspaper, tobacco tins and stained coffee mugs. Over the back of the nearest chair hung what looked to be an old rag. I hooked it with my finger, held it up. It was an undershirt, worn and washed and worn again to a yellowy-gray, so thin I could see the pink tips of my fingers through the fabric. The initials C.M. still showed faintly in blue ink on the tag. I quickly dropped it back on the chair and left the room, embarrassed at having held something at once so intimate and so sad.

"You ever heard of a fella name of John James?"

Carl and I were under the chokecherry trees, and my mother had gone back to the truck to rest in the shade. I slapped at a mosquito on my thigh.

"John James," he repeated. "Said he come from around here but I never heard of no Jameses."

I squinted up at him briefly from where I knelt in the hot, soft sand but he had his back to me, stretching his thin arms high up into the branches, pulling down the ones that couldn't quite be reached.

"Best ones always at the top," he said, bending a long branch toward me, pinning it beneath his arm. I noticed that he picked by closing his thumb and index finger over a bunch of berries and then pulling straight down so they fell into his palm. Both his hands were stained a bluish purple. I hooked my bucket over my wrist and continued plucking neatly, berry by berry.

"Anyway, this John James," he continued, "I thought maybe your mother might've said something about him one time."

I plunked two berries in my bucket, slapped at another mosquito. This time it left a smear of blood on my calf. "No," I said, licking my thumb and rubbing it away, wondering with distaste as I always did, whose blood it was, "never heard of him."

I glanced at Carl, but he was busy pulling and dropping and pulling again. It must have been hard on him, I thought, out on that farm all alone. Mayhews weren't meant to be loners.

"There were some thought he might have come from the Hutterites over in Estuary," he went on, "but I never did. He didn't have that Hutterite look."

I grimaced but said nothing.

"What I think is he wasn't from around here at all though he told everybody in town he'd come from the hills and wasn't nobody questioned him. We all thought he meant Sand Hills, of course, but I guess he could have meant any hills at all."

I shifted my nearly full bucket to the other wrist, rubbed at the welt the wire handle had left in my flesh.

"Here," Carl said, handing me an empty one from the pile behind him. "He come to town, must've been about '66 or, no," he said, thinking, "it was '67 because we had the big centennial do that year. Anyway, this John James come to town and do you know what he was selling?"

I shook my head in spite of myself.

"Bibles." Carl spat a little when he said it and a drop fell on my forearm. I forced myself not to wipe it off on my shorts, not right away, not while he was looking. "Not just any bibles," Carl said, beaming at me as if about to deliver a punchline. "Bibles," he paused for dramatic effect, "he wrote out by hand."

I looked at him skeptically and he nodded.

"Two of them," he said, shifting the branch to his other arm, "one finished and one still in the works." He chuckled. "I can see you don't believe it, and I didn't believe it neither. Till I saw one for myself."

"You saw one?"

"Yup." He nodded. "And if you still don't believe me, you got someone that'll back me up right there." He pointed his chin in the direction of the truck and my mother's head resting in the corner of the open window. I stared at him.

"She never mentioned anyone named John James."

He shrugged. "That's neither here nor there. But he come to town with them Bibles and made quite a laughingstock of himself. People made fun of him, called him names and such, on the quiet at first, but it wasn't too long before people started calling him 'The King' to his face, short for King James. And worse. But your Grandpa, he got kind of friendly with him, not to put that past a Krusey, and took him under his wing, sort of."

"Why would Grandpa do that?" I asked suspiciously, for Grandpa was not the kind to take anyone, especially a stranger, under his wing.

Carl shrugged. "I can't speak for them that don't speak for themselves. All I know is he let him stay in the attic room for a few weeks." Carl shook his head. "I knew from the start he was trouble."

I'd stopped picking now but Carl kept raking his fingers through the leaves, so mechanically I wanted to slap his hand.

"What kind of trouble?"

"Oh, the usual kind. He was heading east, he said, looking for work. And you know what that means."

I didn't but nodded anyway.

"Your grandpa put him up for a while thinking sooner or later he'd figure out there wasn't nobody going to buy them Bibles. But John James thought he was on to something, I guess, because he just kept going door to door, peddling. Of course it didn't take long before he'd gone to the same doors two, three, sometimes four or five times."

Carl let go of the branch, and I jumped back as it thwacked against the sky. He reached up, grunting, to pull down another, and I noticed the sweat stains under his armpits had an unhealthy-looking brownish tinge.

"Started to make a nuisance of himself and one day a few of the men from town went over to your grandpa's and told him to pack up his Bibles and head on out, keep right on going."

"Did he?"

"Oh yeah," Carl bent for a new bucket, "he left all right." He paused again, looking up at me to see if he could draw out the suspense any further.

"And?" I said impatiently, "that's it?"

"No, ma'am." Carl shook his head. "That is not it. He left town all right ... but not before he nailed every one of them Bible pages to the church."

"What," I said, "the Catholic church?"

"Yes, ma'am, the Catholic church. I was there that morning we found them and so was your mother, and we just stood there along with a bunch of others from town and stared, those pages flapping away like a million wings, like that old church might suddenly go skyward." He looked up as he said it, as if he might see it there among the clouds. "I'm surprised your mother never said nothing about it."

I stared for a minute at Carl to see if he would laugh, but he just took out a hanky, wiped sweat from his upper lip and said, "Are you going to keep picking or not?"

I looked back over at the truck, at my mother's dark red head leaned up against the open window, at the fine, pale curve of her chin. It looked like she'd shifted position, and I wondered if she was really sleeping or just lying awake listening to Carl's story through the hot hum of grasshoppers. I knew without a shadow of a doubt that if I asked her later, she'd say she never heard a thing.

I never did ask her later. Not later that day at the Sand Hills nor on the long silent drive home, nor in the following months, when I spent most of my free time at her side, reading stories or just sitting, pretending not to notice as she gradually grew smaller and smaller under that quilt until finally she just disappeared – though not in the way I imagined it that afternoon as I stood there mesmerized by golden bits of light. It was a darker thing, in the end. A sadder thing. There wasn't much beauty in it, after all.

And I never did ask her about John James. I harboured, instead, for many years, the firm belief that Carl was trying to tell me something that day under the chokecherry trees, that he was trying, either with or without my mother's consent, to tell me something about my father. And for many years, I wanted to believe, did, in fact, believe my father to be that mysterious John James, the drifter, the zealot, the man from the hills of nowhere. I was wrong, of course. John James wasn't my father. I heard the whole story, years later, from an aunt I'd got friendly with, my grandfather's youngest sister. It wasn't very interesting. He was just a farm boy from across the line in Alberta. They were both kids. They made a mistake. Life went on. End of story.

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I have an image of my mother in a lavender dress, her body awkwardly canted against the white rails of a farmhouse porch, shoulders erect, one foot arched neatly outward to lend the illusion of confidence. It is late afternoon and the spindled shadows of rails stretch away from her, casting slats over clumps of crabgrass sprouting slow and painfully from the dirt. She is young, younger than I am now. Her hair, long and a brighter red than I remember it, is held back in a tight, unflattering fashion by bobby pins at her temples. I couldn't say whether or not she is smiling, or what she is doing with her hands, whether they are propped graceless and freckled against the railing or fall lost and anonymous in the folds of her skirt. I don't know where the image comes from. Likely, it's one of my own fabrication – like that image of my father running away across the Sand Hills. And there are others, of my grandmother, my grandfather, even of myself. I have carried them around with me since childhood like malleable photographs I could add detail to over the years as I chose or did not choose to expand the narrative. At least, that's how I've come to understand it. This image I have of my mother could be her lie or my own. I only know that behind the porch rails, behind the house, there is a red barn with the loft door hanging slightly off one hinge, causing it to flap and creak heavily in even the slightest wind. There is a rusted-out half-ton behind it and three granaries weathered to the same gray as the dirt, and just a few yards further, sunk oddly down almost below the level of the horizon, a sparse row of cottonwood and caragana someone once intended for a shelter belt. Beyond them, so far in the distance they can hardly be seen, the smooth, pale Sand Hills shoulder up from the prairie.

After my mother died, I saw it as a kind of duty to stop by the farm every so often, just to see how Carl was getting along, if he needed anything. Sometimes I cleaned a little, washed the dishes, swept the floor. Carl would sit at the kitchen table and watch me.

Almost always he said, "I guess it's just me and you now."

"There's Bob," I'd say each time. And he'd mutter "Bob," and flick his hand dismissively. It became a sort of routine for us.

"You don't look much like your mother," he said one day. I kept sweeping, my back turned toward him.

"No," I said, bending to reach the dustpan, "I guess I don't."

"No," he said again, as if to reinforce it. And then, "You ever ask her about that John James I told you about?"

I tipped the dustpan into the garbage bag.

"No," I said, propping the broom in its place behind the fridge.

"Hm," he said, a short, sharp sound. And I could see from the corner of my eye that he'd leaned back in the chair, propped his feet awkwardly on the edge of the table, trying for the old easiness in his bones.

"You need a wash done?" I asked, tying the top of the garbage bag shut.

"That's funny you never asked her," he said. "Seems like maybe you would've."

I lugged the bag to the front door, set it outside. The sun was just beginning to dip below the bluing hills and the air had turned cold. I stood watching for a moment before I returned to the kitchen.

"I'll run this garbage to the burning barrel on my way out," I said, taking my coat from a hook by the door.

"I guess I never told you I read one of them Bibles," he nodded, his eyes shining in the fading light. I wondered if maybe he'd started drinking again. "That John James," he said, "he had nice handwriting. Must've took him a long time to write it because it sure took me a hell of a long time to read it." He tipped forward, the chair hitting the linoleum with a thud that seemed too loud for the moment. "I read it all," he said, "ask me anything."

I sighed and pulled my coat on.

"Go on," he said, "anything."

"Okay," I said, trying to be funny, "how does it end?"

Carl frowned. "That's the thing," he said, "it's a good story, but it don't end well."

Just for a moment, I caught that image of my mother, not standing on the porch rails in the sunlight, but the other one, her small body under the blue wedding quilt, barely making a rise in the fabric, and all that yellow dust turning slowly in the air, as if I could touch it.

Carl leaned forward across the table.

"If it'd been me," he said, "I'd of told a different ending. But not John James." He gaped at me, wide-mouthed and toothless across the gathering darkness. "He stuck to that story word for word. Didn't change nothing."