

SUMMER, 1996,

by
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A Thesis project submitted to the faculty of the Department of English at Washington and Lee University in candidacy for a Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors in English.

June 2, 1997

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank:

Dabney Stuart for taking time to direct this project, for giving me so much support and the benefit of his editing powers, and for looking beyond my ignorance regarding punctuation.

Heather Ross Miller for years of encouragement and for being my second reader.

My mom for reading this thing first and telling me that "parts of it are OK."

Everyone who asked how I was progressing and bugged me to read it.

ON MY HONOR,
I PLEDGE I HAVE RECEIVED NO UNACKNOWLEDGED
AID ON THIS PROJECT.

Erin R. Gindlyjko
6-2-97

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Waiting, Little Bill hears an advertisement for the Summer Olympics on the television behind him. He hears somebody typing down the hall in the nurse's station. Faintly babies cry.

Every so often a brown-haired nurse pops her head through the door to tell him how his girlfriend, Crystal, is coming along. She says how many centimeters dilated Crystal is, the names of the drugs they've been giving her and what the drugs're supposed to do, but mostly Little Bill's been in the waiting room alone. Weeks ago, when he and Crystal talked about the baby's birth, he knelt on the carpet beside Crystal and pictured the baby inside her. Crystal smiled at him and gave him her hand to hold. Tonight he clasps his own hands; they're sweaty and sting where he dug his nails.

Crystal's water broke in the middle of the night. Little Bill didn't know what was happening until he woke up and figured it out. He dressed and drove the car right up to the trailer's porch steps and helped Crystal get inside. She moaned and whimpered but when he tried to hug her, she slapped at his neck.

"Get me to the hospital, you asshole," she kept screaming on the wild foggy drive to Red Lion Memorial. Little Bill and Crystal live eight miles outside town on Brogue School Road which twists garden-hose style and has no painted center line. Crystal's voice made a noise like a band-saw and every time she yelled, Little Bill started and nearly lost control of the car. The fog was lush and spitty. Little Bill

had to turn his wipers on.

The doctor told Little Bill to come into the delivery room if he wanted. Crystal said “no”.

That hurts. Little Bill’s scared about the baby coming and about all the things that could go or may be going wrong. What if the baby is stillborn and Crystal dies having it? He’ll be all alone. If just the baby dies then he and Crystal will be one of those miserable couples you see in old movies. Babyless and sad, they’ll waste away until they die, too. What’s worse than a dead baby? What do you do with one? Would you have a funeral? What words could people say about a baby that died before anyone got to know it? Nothing, only that it was so-and-so’s baby. Would you dress it up in some brand new outfit from The BonTon? Or do you just wrap it in a blanket? How many people does it take to carry a baby’s coffin?

Do you name a baby that dies? Say you selected your favorite name in the world to name your baby and it dies before you get to call it by that name. Do you save the good name for another baby or maybe for a cat or a dog, or do you waste the name on the dead baby? Crystal’s ultrasound showed that the baby is going to be a girl and Little Bill and Crystal already picked out the most beautiful name in the world. Ambrosia Esmeralda. Ambrosia means “nectar of the gods” and Esmeralda is what the beautiful gypsy girl is called in that cartoon movie with the hunchback they keep seeing previews for. In the ultrasound, Ambrosia Esmeralda was swimming

around in Crystal; she looked a little like a sea monkey, but alive. Ambrosia's not the kind of name you'd give a dead baby.

If Crystal dies during delivery, Little Bill'll have to raise the baby himself. He'll drop the name Esmeralda and call her Ambrosia Crystal--to honor her mother's memory.

Little Bill doesn't know anything about raising kids. He doesn't know how to change a diaper or what kind of baby food to buy or how to burp a baby or what to do when it gets a rash. Don't you need to take little kids to the doctor to get shots and all that, the same as if you have a puppy? How do you find out when to do all this stuff? He'd be lost if Crystal died. He'd never be able to do this baby thing alone.

Plus if Crystal dies he'll never get to say all the things he should've said to her. Like he loves her and good luck; that stuff he forgets to say. That he's sorry he gets so angry when her hair clogs up the drain in the shower and all that.

Maybe she's scared or embarrassed to be in the center of things in the delivery room. That could be the reason she didn't want him there. He's never been in a delivery room but he's seen it enough on that show ER. Everyone rushing around being loud and impersonal and confusing. He knows he'd knock over a tray of instruments or bump someone's arm during an incision.

Crystal must feel like her body belongs to someone else. It's got to be

humiliating under all those bright lights with your feet up in stirrups. Little Bill couldn't possibly understand because he's a man, but he thinks he knows how bad it would be. He doesn't like the idea of all those doctors looking at Crystal when they pull up her sheet to deliver the baby. Even if they are doctors, they're still men and he's not sure Crystal is safe back there. She oughta have him around to protect her. He could at least hold her hand and give her sips of water when she's thirsty.

Even though having babies is women's work and all that, he'd like to be around for it. He's heard when you get a baby, especially the first, that it's a big deal. Somehow, he doesn't feel like a very important part of it. He scuffs his feet around on the floor, leaving black marks with his soles.

Underneath the thin layer of noises--the TV and the typing--the hospital is inert. Nobody clatters through the halls in heeled shoes or jets water in the fountain. Being alone in a place normally full of people is disturbing. Little Bill's Uncle Harris used to be a security guard for the Dolphin Deposit bank in Red Lion. He worked nights for years and he'd always talk about how freaky it'd get sometimes; how he was sure someone was in there with him and how jumpy it'd make him. Uncle Harris eventually died of a heart attack on the job but they said it happened because he'd eaten too many Whoppers at Burger King, not because someone scared him to death.

Little Bill's folks made it clear they don't like Crystal or any baby she's bringing into the world, even if it is their own grandchild. They hit the roof when

Little Bill let her move in with him without them being married or anything. The baby will only make all that worse.

Little Bill'd feel stupid calling Robby Jr. all the way up here from Brogue even though they've been his best friends since high school. Robby Jr.'s surely got better things to do that hang here just to wait for some baby to come out. Robby Jr.'s girlfriend Colleen'd get pissed if Little Bill woke them up in the middle of the night. Plus Robby Jr.'s got work in the morning--he's got to show up at Little Bill's dad's tooling shop where he and Little Bill work. So Little Bill waits alone under the flourescents, poking at his own oily and itchy skin. He's sure he smells, too.

Little Bill's decided that life will change after he and Crystal bring the baby home from the hospital. Crystal won't be going out every night drinking anymore. She'll have to stay in and take care of the baby. All her drinking got to Little Bill. It was OK at first--it even brought them together (since they met at a keg party it had a lot to do with everything) but recently Little Bill's been wondering if she has a problem. In the nine months they've been together, she's always had a beer in hand. In bed her sweat smells like beer.

He tried talking to her once about it--he saw on OPRAH how bad it was for pregnant women to drink and take drugs. There are things the baby can get-- something called Fetal Alcohol Syndrome where your baby ends up looking funny and can't learn right. A baby whose mother drinks can end up retarded. Smoking is

bad for babies, too, but that might be after they're born. Crystal says there's no way the smoke can get in there at the baby. That makes sense but Little Bill's prepared to tell Crystal she can't smoke near the baby after they bring it home. He has a say--it's half his baby, too.

The nurse looks in the door. "How is she?" Little Bill asks. "Has it come yet?"

"Not yet," says the nurse. "Maybe not for a while still, but she's hanging in there. She's strong. And the baby has a strong heartbeat."

Little Bill gets up and stretches. He puts his hand over his chest and imagines his baby girl's heartbeat. He looks at the depression his ass has made in the vinyl waiting bench and decides he needs a coffee. He walks quietly since the hospital's so hushed. He's surprised people aren't getting sick all the time. Maybe it's just the maternity wing that isn't full of visitors now.

He buys a coffee in the cafeteria and carries it back up the elevator. On the way to the waiting room he looks through the nursery window. He counts fifteen or sixteen babies behind the glass. It's like an aquarium in the pet store. A tank of guppies or something. Little Bill pokes the glass at several of the babies. "I want that one and that one and that one," he whispers to himself. He pictures a giant hand with a net coming down from the ceiling and scooping up the babies he picked.

Their cotton blankets trail like fins. Little Bill shakes his head. He's spilled coffee on

his hand which drips onto the floor and splatters, taffy brown. He must be exhausted. It's making him weird. What the hell would he do with that many babies?

It seems strange that none of the parents are here watching them. Little Bill's afraid when he finally gets this baby he won't be able to leave it alone. Can you hold your baby too much? Can you hurt it or make it turn into a midget or something? Make its limbs in weird directions from pressing on it? Once, when he was young, Little Bill got a duckling in a cardboard box for Easter. He named it Henry and played with it the entire week he was home from school. Cupped in his hands, Henry's heart beat, a tiny hammer against his palms. Every so often, Henry'd lunge to one side and Little Bill'd tighten his grip so he wouldn't get away. Once Little Bill felt something crumble and Henry's babywings fluttered and went limp. His neck became a loose shoelace swinging between Little Bill's fingers. Little Bill's mom didn't yell or smack him. She just gently placed Henry in his box and took it away.

What if you're trying really hard not to hold your baby to death and you don't hold it enough? Nobody's holding the babies in the nursery. That's OK, isn't it? What if they should be held all the time but the hospital people don't think they'll get caught not doing any holding in the middle of the night. Most of the ones in the nursery are sleeping but a few are lying on their backs screaming. He watches a red-colored one stuff most of its fist into its mouth.

Most of the babies are fascinatingly ugly. Their heads and faces wrinkle and fold like dried apples. Their movements are rhythmic, repetitive; mechanical toys or beetles overturned. He knows all newborns look like this--like baby hamsters or something--he's seen enough pictures. But he hopes his own will appear different somehow.

Some of the babies in the nursery are tinier than others. They don't kick around and cry like the bigger ones. A few are hooked up to machines and they lie still and curved like sea horses. Nervously, Little Bill looks up and down the hall. Those babies are a creepy thing to see.

Back in the waiting room he sits where he's been sitting all night. The hospital has cable but the TV's turned to one of the two channels Little Bill gets at home--NBC on Channel 8 and FOX 43. In this part of rural York County, Pennsylvania, cable runs only to the largest towns. The line stops in Red Lion and anyone living in the country gets limited TV. There are too many rolling-hilled farms, and cows, and not enough people to make it worth it to the cable company.

On the early morning news there's some ridiculous feature about a lost dog named Blondie who got adopted from the Red Lion SPCA by a woman with a bunch of kids. Apparently the original owner saw one of the kids on George Street walking the dog and tried to take it back. The kid yelled and a cop came over and got into it. The whole thing's in the courts now. Little Bill tries to focus on this and not worry

about Crystal and the baby but by the time he figures out what's going on, the news is over.

His skin takes on greenish tones not unlike the waiting room walls and couches. His wide, flat face droops, expressionless. Chameleon-like, Little Bill's blended into the furniture. He seldom blinks. Sometime tomorrow when people come in here to do their own waiting, they won't be aware of him, if he's still enough.

Waiting sucks. He gets wondering if maybe Crystal already had the baby and they just never came in and told him about it. Could he have slept through the whole thing? That happens to people sometimes. Little Bill's mom once told him a story about some guy who slept for twenty years or so. When he woke up his wife was dead and all his children were grown up and he had a long white beard. All the guy could remember was bowling with a bunch of midgets in the mountains.

The nurse comes in. "The baby's almost here." She smiles like something's wrong.

"What's wrong?" Little Bill asks.

"We have to give Crystal a cesarean. That's her name, Crystal, isn't it?"

"Yeah. What's that thing mean? What are you going to do to her?"

"Well it means that the baby is turned around and won't be born properly. We have to make an incision and lift the baby out."

"Will she be OK?"

"There's a risk, but it's a pretty routine operation. Everything should turn out fine. She said it worked out fine the first time." The nurse smiles and walks out.

TWO

Marcy starts going to Think Thin when little Julia, the neighbor's seven-year-old daughter whom she babysits, tells her she looks like the fairy godmother in *Cinderella*. "Why's that?" Marcy asks her, smiling down at the magical-wanded woman dancing on the page in front of her.

"Because you're both fat," giggles Julia, bouncing on Marcy's lap and planting her hand in the center of the book. That kid needs slapping. Julia's mother, wiry and twenty-four, keeps herself thin picking alongside the migrants at the Brogue Lawn Peach Orchard. She's the sole breadwinner in the family. The husband doesn't work, as far as Marcy can tell, but cannot be bothered to tend the child either. Marcy's seen him stalking around in the woods and nearby soybean fields at all hours. The few times Marcy's spoken with him, he's murmured in response to her questions and fixed his glance on something behind her. Julia says her daddy writes poems. This makes Marcy angry. Apparently he believes that stroking his bushy white beard (he's at least thirty years older than Julia's mother) and writing down his rhymes gives him an excuse to stay at home, jobless.

At forty-seven, who could expect Marcy to have the same lean figure she had at twenty? She defines her success in ways more constructive than swimsuit appeal: she and Buzz have been happily married for twenty-four years. They have a daughter in college and their mortgage is almost paid off. Julia's parents don't even send her to

school. Anyway, she's not fat, is she? Sweat tickles her back as she moves Julia off her lap and goes to throw a frozen pizza in the oven for lunch.

Marcy worries for the rest of the day. In the gilt-framed mirror in the hall she notices her triple chin. Even when she strains her neck up and out the skin on her chin sags and sways. She lifts her skirt in front of her mirrored closet door and gazes at her heavy, pale, corkboard thighs. Her calves and feet feel like full buckets of milk.

Through the bedroom window she watches skinny Julia weave through the flecked sunlight under the maple tree, envying her narrowness, despising her candidness. Why is she letting what a child says get her so worked up? Should she diet? Damn. She's always liked herself for enjoying the body she'd been born with and not looking at herself through other people's eyes.

Her daughter, Geraldine, who's in college and unhappy, starves and binges constantly, never getting any thinner. She has a low self-esteem to show for it. She's always watching music videos on TV, going on about how much she hates whatever waif happens to be singing. If anyone really needs to diet, it's her. Marcy can flip painlessly through women's magazines in the supermarket and scoff at TV like 90210 and Melrose Place. In her opinion all those kids do terrible things to each other because they're hungry and grouchy. They make up for food denial by practicing aggressive sexual habits. She's never watched them with any kind of envy. Marcy eats when she's hungry. Still, she's taken to wearing print dresses because her slacks

and shorts feel tight and bunchy.

Buzz comes home from work about twenty minutes after Julia's mother picks her up and reclines his chair immediately in front of the TV. He doesn't think about his work until the next morning; he just relaxes. Marcy can't relax with him. She plans a small portion for dinner, but her anxiety forces her to have seconds and thirds.

Marcy envies Buzz eating ice cream during the Orioles game. Buzz's O's are on a streak--they've won eight games in a row and they're ahead in this one. All Buzz's been talking about is how they might have a chance at the world series for the first time since 1983. Buzz's spooning ice cream without taking his eyes off the screen. He has terrific aim. The spoon never misses his gaping mouth. He notices Marcy and wipes his chin with his sleeve. "What are you staring at?"

Marcy's stomach rumbles but she's trying to cut back. This afternoon the scale read 177. "Honey, do you think I'm fat?" she whispers.

"Damn," goes Buzz as Cal Ripkin strikes out. A commercial for McDonald's comes on. Buzz watches it without speaking for a minute, then he says, "I bet those Arch Deluxes are good."

"Do you think I'm fat?"

Buzz rubs his chin. Lately it's been covered with white bristly hairs. He smiles at Marcy. "Do you think I'm stupid?"

"I may start going to go to Think Thin," Marcy says. "A diet club"

"Isn't that shit expensive?"

"Not if it works." Marcy takes Buzz's empty bowl into the kitchen to load the dishwasher. A pool of melted ice cream covers the bottom of the dish. She has an urge to lick it out.

Marcy wants Geraldine to join Think Thin with her and on Saturday morning she corners her in the bathroom. As soon as Marcy mentions Think Thin, Geraldine gets tense and defensive. "Are you saying I have a weight problem?"

"Well-no. I'd just like you to come along and keep me company."

"Isn't it a little expensive for me to just come along for the ride?" Geraldine winds her bangs around the curling iron.

"I guess it's a dumb idea." Marcy goes alone.

Geraldine's a worry. The girl lives in a dormitory at York College but most weekends she's home by Friday afternoon. Why won't she spend her free time at school? Doesn't she ever go out on dates? When Marcy was Geraldine's age, she was already serious with Buzz. Marcy knows times have changed and women are growing up more independent these days. Geraldine should think about her nursing career first and be able to support herself, but isn't it abnormal that she spends her weekends watching TV and sitting around with Marcy and Buzz? During the week she logs a lot of time at the hospital in some nurse-training program. Marcy

imagined for a while that eventually she'd bring home some nice young doctor, but now Marcy doesn't think she goes out, ever. Buzz refuses to admit there's anything wrong. "You've got too much extra time," he tells Marcy. "Pay closer attention to that kid you babysit. I think she stole twenty bucks off my dresser the other day."

Maybe if Geraldine lost that weight some boy would ask her out. What would it take? 20 pounds? 25? She's got such a nice face and large, innocent eyes. She dresses in pretty, nice-smelling clothes and her hair and make-up are always fresh. Perhaps after witnessing her mother's success with Think Thin, Geraldine will be compelled to try it for herself.

What they do at Think Thin is weigh you every week and stamp what you weigh in a little book they give you. They use a scale like those at the doctor's office--the kind that makes you register about ten pounds more than you weigh on the scale at home. Then you have to sit down in a circle of other fat women and say how much you lost. Or gained. Marcy gains two pounds the first week.

For some reason the more she thinks about watching her intake the more she obsesses about food. Not just any food, either. She never craves the things that get the green light--the vegies, the tall glasses of water; Marcy desires precisely the food she can't have--the extra fats and starches. The tiny servings whet her appetite. She becomes an insomniac, sneaking out of bed to gorge in the dark kitchen. Starvation makes her grouchy; she's afraid she'll snap at Julia during the days and at Buzz at

night. In mirrors her skin shrinks and pales under her eyes.

She tries to laugh off the first week's weight gain--it's not her she's here for; Geraldine's the one with the problem. But the other women stare at her with dark, hungry eyes. Marcy is afraid to participate in the ensuing discussion about bread and fruit allowances. She cringes when the five-and ten-pound awards are distributed. She wants to hide her eyes when a woman is rewarded for losing ten pounds overall--welcomed into "new numbers". Failure; she feels shunned and embarrassed. Think Thin is a survival of the fittest. The next week she eats only suggested meals and starts walking five miles a day after Julia goes home. When her stomach rumbles and her muscles tremble she envisions those terrible fat women's eyes. She thinks thin.

It's one of the hardest weeks of Marcy's life, but when they stamp her book with -4 it's all worthwhile. That's too much, they tell her, but Marcy is elated. She is so sore from walking she can barely move but she wriggles in her seat for the remainder of the evening. A trim woman who introduces herself as Terry shakes Marcy's hand. "You oughta be proud."

At home she tries to explain to Buzz the effect of the women's stares but he just teases her by singing that old Eric Carmon song, "It's no surprise I got...Huuuungry Eyes" Marcy retreats to the kitchen and drinks a quart of water in rapid gulps.

After the first week, things get a little easier. Marcy adjusts to portion control.

Monday afternoon, she and Julia eat cucumber sandwiches for lunch. Julia tells Marcy about the Alien Retreat her father hosted over the weekend. Downright weird, Marcy thinks. From what she hears around, Julia's father always has an obsession. His new thing is that he has been kidnapped by aliens and they've installed some sort of chip in his brain. Julia's not absolutely clear what the circumstances are supposed to be--he suddenly announced that aliens had picked him up on one of his walks. He claims now that in his wanderings he's trying to communicate with them. The chip is like a beeper or a cellular phone.

He's trying to make money by hosting seminars out in the field by their house. So far he's held two \$75 "Alien Weekends"--where guests sit around a bonfire and listen to him relay and expound upon his experiences in the alien ship (Marcy can't understand how she missed hearing about them). He speaks often of a sort of holy humming energy. Everything the aliens had--furniture, food--radiated a kind of aura. Then the guests hold a group chant and throw spices and colored sand onto the fire--an attempt to reach the aliens by imitation of ceremony Julia's father witnessed on the ship--then they retire to tents further out in the field and sleep in expectation of their own alien visitation. In the morning, over herbal tea they relate their experiences, then they leave. So far three people have attended. Marcy wonders if Julia's mother is embarrassed and disgusted. "How do people find out about the retreats," she asks Julia.

"We made posters and put them up at the library and the Brogue Store," Julia says, wiping her hands on her shirt. Marcy wonders how all of this affects her.

She prepares low-fat dinners from her Think Thin gourmet cookbook. Buzz calls them "interesting", but he eats and seems to enjoy them. On the weekends Geraldine eats with her parents, twisting in her chair, face in a grimace. She talks little and after dinner usually goes driving. Marcy suspects she goes to the Brogue store for the candy and chips Marcy no longer keeps around the house.

There are all kinds of tips for losing weight. The most effective ones are portion control and awareness. Whenever you go out to eat, have the waiter bring half of your meal in a box for home. Chew slowly, counting. Never eat alone. Or if you do, eat in front of a mirror. Don't skip meals or eat in front of the television.

Marcy buys a pair of expensive cross-training shoes and a spandex workout outfit. In the evenings she lies on the floor and does stomach crunches while Buzz watches baseball on TV. Geraldine has to step over her to get to the couch. School lets out for the summer. Geraldine still works at the hospital three days a week but she's moved back home. She spends too much time in her room, reading--she says. The phone never rings for her.

After six weeks, Marcy's lost 17 pounds. In celebration of getting into new numbers, she goes to the mall and buys a bikini. She's been buying a lot of new clothes lately. Once your clothes are too baggy for you, you need to get them out of

your closet. For some reason if they stay around you may gain weight so they fit again. Marcy vows never again to don 'Fatclothes'. On the way home she drops three trash bags of old clothes off at the Good Will, picturing some poor, corpulent woman running her fingers along the sleeves of the size 14s. Marcy touches her toes ten times before getting back into her car, trying not to think that when she was bagging them, she noticed her flowered 'fatclothes' look a lot like what Geraldine wears. She still hasn't been able to get that girl into Think Thin with her.

Marcy talks about weight loss with Terry, a woman from Think Thin. Terry has been with the program for over a year. She says she's been fat ever since she had her third child. She reached her target weight and is on a maintenance diet and only has to come to meetings once a month to keep her membership, but Terry is afraid to quit coming every week. She says with all the junk food her kids eat, she needs help or she'll break. Marcy pictures a dam bursting. An iceberg breaking up. Terry's svelte figure exploding into waves of blubber.

Terry said when her daughter, Tonya, started looking like a woman, Terry took a look at herself and next to that fresh young thing she felt like an old cow. That was her inspiration to slim down. She must be addicted to climbing on the scales. That's why she's still losing weight. People get addicted to bizarre dangerous things like mountain climbing all the time. This is kind of the same thing. She is in her third weight-stamp book. Terry is getting too thin and it bothers Marcy when she asks if

she looks fat--usually when they're trying on clothes together. She'll edge around fitting room dividers and squeeze handfuls of skin. It's embarrassing when she does it in front of people. Still Terry is a lot of fun. They live fairly close and get together sometimes to walk for exercise. On rainy days they drive to the mall and walk there. The Galleria has two floors and it is easy to avoid the food court. They've never eaten together.

Marcy can spend hours in front of the mirror. Twirling. She has never felt this good. Her new bikini still doesn't look as good on her as she'd like, but she's confident it will in time for vacation in August. She invites Geraldine to the beach with her and Buzz. Maybe the girl will get inspired to want to look cute in a swimsuit.

THREE

Tonya's fifteen and what her parents don't know is she met this guy, Tommy, who works at the Sunoco along Rt. 74. She's been watching him for a couple weeks now, smiling at him every time her friend Cara stops for gas. Last Saturday he came over to the car. He's a lot older. They talked for about two minutes and he asked her out. She'll have to sneak around her parents, but she's going.

Tonya picks her cuticles when she's bored. "Oh, I guess you can come over," she sighs to Joel on the phone. Joel's this boy from school. He's a year ahead of her. He's got a crush on her and he's boring. She's been bored all day. She woke up depressed and hasn't left the house except when her mother made her help carry the groceries in. Her head hurts from watching too much TV.

Her mother looks up from the dishes and rolls her eyes. Both Tonya and her mother think Joel's an idiot. He shaves his legs. He told Tonya and her mother it's to be a better biker. "It makes me streamlined." He's a bad biker anyway. Tonya asked why he didn't shave his head then. "I wear a helmet, silly," Joel smiled and tried to pat her knee but she saw it coming and got out of the way.

Joel's always trying to touch Tonya, but he's clumsy about it and she can usually dodge him. She's not interested in Joel, but she doesn't want to hurt his feelings by rejecting him outright. She drops plenty of hints, but he never gets them. Her mom calls it cruel; Tonya's giving him mixed messages, but it's not her fault he

won't give up. Anyway it's nice to have a guy to take her places and since Tommy isn't exactly in the picture (yet), Joel's better than nothing. Most of Tonya's friends have jobs so it's not like she has anything else to do but go out with him. It's only bad when they run into someone she knows. At least he pays every time they go out--good because Tonya's parents say she's too young for a job. Her dad's a dumb foot doctor; says he guesses he can afford her allowance--wouldn't want her to waste away in the mines at fifteen. Her dad's always making stupid jokes like that. He goes into overdrive around Tonya's friends. As if anyone'd believe there were mines around here. Around here, there's nothing but corn and soybeans and cows. Tonya's parents are such idiots.

Tonya's parents say she can't get a job because she's too young. But she'll be a sophomore in the fall. Tonya knows the real reason they won't let her is because they don't want her wearing an apronned uniform and meeting the wrong kind of people--guys. They like Joel, though, probably because they know Tonya doesn't. He's the first boy she's ever been allowed to go out with. Joel's safe, her parents say. Tonya doesn't like to think about the fight there'd be if she asked permission to go somewhere with Tommy. She'd probably get grounded for a month for even asking.

Tonya hangs up the kitchen phone and runs upstairs to get ready for Joel. She has a new pair of shorts she wants to try out. Joel can get to her house in nine minutes if he drives really fast and drifts through stop signs. He teases her that one

day he'll get there quicker and catch her naked. It takes him thirty-two minutes on his bike.

While she's brushing her hair and doing her face, she pretends she's getting ready for her date with Tommy. It makes her stomach a little jittery. What will people think when they see her with him? He's at least twenty-two. Tommy's not the best-looking guy she's ever seen. He could probably lose a little weight. He's not hot like Brian Ford at school or anything, but he's OK. What's really interesting about him is how old he is. He works at the gas station, too. Her parents'd hate that. They only want her to think about boys headed for college.

Tonya's little brothers find out from her mother that Joel's coming over and they hang out on the other side of her door to tease her about primping for him. Tonya hates them but she doesn't let yelling at them screw up her make-up. She's finally allowed to wear it and it's a lot easier to put on in front of her mirror than blindly on the school bus. It looks better, too. She no longer ends up with a line of foundation around the edges like a pumpkin mask.

Tonya's brothers didn't used to make fun of Joel. They liked him when he first started coming around, but now they know better. They talk about him when he's in the room by pronouncing his name in Pig-Latin. Oeljay.

Now Tonya's whole family calls him Oeljay, and sometimes Tonya feels mean for making fun of him. But not for long because he's such a dork. Not a nerdy dork-

-he's not a brainiac and he dresses OK and he even looks OK, Tonya's mom said once. Ugh. He doesn't have to be such a dork, though. That's his own fault. He does things like hanging around with teachers after class and showing up at the cool kids' houses even though he's not cool and they don't want him around. He's always timing things on the stopwatch on his watch and blurting out how long everything takes. Even her brothers know that's dumb. They'd never make fun of Tommy. They'd be afraid to do that.

Tonya's been spending a lot of afternoons tanning in the yard, so her shorts look good. Her mom'll kill her, but what she really wants is to lighten her hair with Sun-in. She's got a bottle ready in her closet. Maybe she could convince her mom her hair just lightened naturally. All the cute boys at school date blondes.

"Oeljay just pulled up," Tonya's mom yells up from the kitchen. She's always in the kitchen. Ever since she decided she was big and fat about a year ago, it's like she lives in there. Tonya never sees her eat, but she needs to be around food or something. She's skinny now--she's kept with Think Thin and it's worked.

Tonya's glad she never has to worry about her weight. She can eat pretty much anything she wants and still look good. Her dad keeps warning her it'll catch up with her in a few years--her metabolism will slow down--and she'll be signing up for the "chub club" too. He's always trying to ruin everything with what Tonya calls his "public service" announcements. What does he know? He only messes with

people's feet. God. Tonya would be so embarrassed if she had to go to a meeting and talk to a bunch of other fat women about being fat. If she was fat she'd just hide in the house and never come out. She'd kill herself if she was fat.

Tonya looks at herself out of the sides of her eyes. She dips her chin to smile. *Teen* magazine says that's a good way to get boys. She made sure she smiled like that when she was talking to Tommy. Also, she's choosing poses for her senior photos even though that's not for two years. Maybe her parents will let her get Glamour Shots taken at the mall. She'd look great in a strapless dress with smoky eyes and her hair curled high. She's have to hide those from her folks, though. They want to keep her a baby. They'd kill her for looking sexy.

Downstairs, Joel gives her a handful of blown roses from his mother's garden.

Tonya smirks and sticks them in a glass.

"How are you, Joel?" Tonya's mother asks.

Joel flexes his stubbly calves. He's wearing a pair of those dorky surfer shorts that went out years ago. "I'm good, Ma'am."

"Let's go for a walk, Joel," They can't go anywhere in the car because Tonya's parents grounded her until next Sunday for telling her brothers to shut up at the dinner table. Tonya's brothers giggle around the kitchen door. God, she hates them. She could wring their necks. The red roses drip petals on the kitchen island.

"Those flowers mean something," Joel says as they walk down the road away from her development.

Tonya looks out over a cornfield and doesn't answer. She feels small and trapped. It's such a drag living here. It's ten miles to the nearest stoplight and even further to the nearest McDonald's. Her family still has a satellite dish because they can't get cable yet. Living in the city would rule. She'd get to hang out with cool people whenever she wanted because she wouldn't have to get a ride to go see them. She could walk to the mall anytime she liked. She wouldn't be stuck with Joel. Tonya stuffs her hands in her pockets so he can't grab them.

"Do you know what they mean?"

"Huh?" Tonya says. She gets a whiff of something dead. Some kind of road kill lying on the shoulder. She glances at Joel and takes off running. "I wanna run," she yells.

"The roses," she thinks he says but her sneakers on asphalt drown him out. She wants to outrun his questions and the sickly-sweet smell of rotten groundhog or rabbit, whatever. It's starting to get dark and purple shadows haunt rows of infant corn edging the road. Once before her relatives moved to Florida all the kids played hide and seek in a cornfield. That corn was silk-eared and mature. Tonya crouched with her cousin Jeremy and he told her about the movie *Children of the Corn*. Kids with red eyes and scythes creeping around. Far off the younger cousins giggled and

chased each other through the rows. Tonya had to pee but felt too scared to go over a couple rows so Jeremy wouldn't see her. Jeremy called her stupid being scared-- those kids only chase grown-ups and she was just a baby, but it was OK anyway. Girls peed in front of him lots of times.

Last year Tonya's parents dragged her to Florida to visit. Jeremy'd got taller. He showed her the hair growing on his chest and her face flushed. She was thinking Jeremy wouldn't be safe from the Children of the Corn for much longer. All he did was talk about kissing and sex and stuff. He made her feel crawly so she stayed away. Stupid. There wasn't any corn in Florida. She hadn't seen any, at least. Florida was awful; she'd missed out on stuff at home and it was boring watching her little brothers all the time.

Her legs pump the humid dusk. She runs until the big muscles on top of her thighs burn. Joel runs beside her. It bugs her she can't outrun him, but at least he's keeping quiet. When Tonya stops she's sweating and wants to hide it.

"Where are we going?"

"In the cornfield," she tells him, ducking and twisting into a waist-high row. Stalks and leaves brush her body like fingers. "I go walking down here a lot. It's lonely and peaceful." Joel crashes behind her. What'd he do if she squatted down to pee in front of him? Ask her to marry him?

She imagines what would happen if she were walking with Tommy. Somehow

she'd act relaxed. He'd fall for her humor. He'd meet her eyes in the middle of a laugh and his face would go serious. Her favorite song plays--Tommy brought a boom-box with him. His arms go around her; they dance. Their lips drift together; their breaths mingle. She knows the drag of his mouth.

"Listen to the tree frogs," Joel says. "Did you ever notice they stop singing by the end of June?" He strips a cornleaf but Tonya, who has stopped to listen, can't hear it over the frogs.

Joel tells her the school gossip he hears at his job at Pizza Hut. Some boy got arrested for bashing mailboxes. He's the same one who got suspended from school last year for getting a picture of a pot leaf shaved into his hair. Two girls in Tonya's class got pregnant. She doesn't like them, so it's funny. "They're both keeping the babies," Joel says. "I would never do that to a girl," Joel says.

Joel would never get a girl pregnant because he could never get close enough to one. There's no way Tonya would ever even let him kiss her. Actually last winter, Joel had a girlfriend but she was a loser. Tonya and her friend Cara saw them holding hands at a basketball game once. They imagined what it was like when Joel and the girl made out but it was too gross to think about for very long. Then the girl dumped Joel during lunch period in front of everybody and Tonya wondered if she did it because he did something stupid like time their kissing.

Joel faces her in purple shadow. His shoulders are broad and his cheekbones are cut like Lincoln's on a penny. His solemnness unnerves her. Nearby, an irrigation sprinkler kicks on and Tonya jumps. Joel pulls Tonya into an embrace.

"Stop, please." Tonya wriggles. She feels something crawling on her leg. Tommy's been her secret love since school let out. She wrote his name on a piece of paper and ate it. She wrote his name on another piece of paper and put it inside the 'L' volume of *Encyclopedia Britannica*. It all has to do with fate.

"I love you." Joel says to her hair. "Listen to me. Those roses mean I want to go with you."

Tonya bets her family's together watching TV right now. Some baby show her brothers like, but she wants to be there. If one of her little brothers had followed, he'd distract Joel and let her escape. Tonya wishes wildly for her stupid brothers. Joel's face presses the side of her head but she'd never kiss him even to pretend it was Tommy. She turns her face down. She hears the spray from the sprinkler coming around. "We're gonna get wet," she says and he lets her go.

She feels itchy. "I have to go back now. I need a shower," she says. "My legs got all scratched up in this corn."

"I'm tired of being just friends," Joel tells her.

When Tonya runs this time, Joel doesn't hurry to catch up. She runs all the way home and from the safe kitchen window, she watches him come up the walk. He

offers her a driving lesson in his car next week but doesn't sound too eager about it.

"I don't know," Tonya says.

They say goodbye through the screen door. Joel stands under the bug light for a second, staring, then goes away.

Tonya edges around the living room door jamb with her toe. Her hair's a mess. She feels crappy. Depressed. Sometimes she just wants to die. She fingers the spines of the encyclopedias. Her brothers zombie-eye the TV: something about that dog the newspeople have been talking about for weeks. A tape of a courtroom. Her mother, eating rice cakes, asks, "Where's Joel?"

"He left," Tonya says, kicking a couch leg.

"Cut that out!" Her dumb brothers say.

"Go fold the laundry then," her mother tells her. "You didn't do it this afternoon."

Tonya stands there.

"Cut that out!" her brothers say.

FOUR

Colleen makes sure the two men are seated in her section. It is Monday night--slow--but the men ought to tip well enough.

"How are you all?" she asks setting napkins on the table next to their elbows. They're dirty-looking, like they've been working hard all day in their brownish coveralls. Factory clothes. They look like men who would work with her boyfriend at the tooling company. A metallic smell comes off them like warm coins. "I'm Colleen, your server."

"How about an ashtray, Blondie," says the one in the Caterpillar hat, waving his cigarette. People've been calling Colleen 'Blondie' ever since that thing about the golden retriever hit the news. She knows it's because of her long, white-blonde hair, but she's getting sick of it. If she wasn't trying to get a tip off these guys she'd bitch them out for it. Instead she just smiles. "Make it quick, I need to ash," the man tells her.

"Give us a pitcher of Bud,"

"Make that two pitchers, why don't you."

"All right," says Colleen, stalking into the waitress station. Sometimes she flirts with men to get better tips. She knows tricks to use when talking that make her seem available and she's mastered the little art of swinging her hips and flipping her hair when she's walking away, always an attention grabber. She'll flirt with these

guys even though she doesn't find them attractive. She's pretty good at pretending stuff like that if the men flirt back with her. These two might be tough to warm up, though. She can tell right off by how they're asking her to get stuff that flirting could be a waste of her time.

Colleen's pretty good at judging people right off. It's intuition. Seeing them for what they are. Like the first time she met her boyfriend, even though it was way back in high school, she knew how he was. She knew he wanted to ask her out but was too shy to do it. She had to let him see her with a few of his friends before he ever got up the nerve.

She gets the men their ashtray and their beer and the food they order. She watches them from the doorway of the waitress station. They're her only table.

Robby Jr. doesn't mind when she flirts. He doesn't say much but she knows he likes to watch her take the phone numbers she gets out of her apron and set them on the dresser. He always burns them one by one with his cigarette lighter and lets the ash flutter into the trash can. He always waits up for her when she's working late. Then he'll follow her through the rooms of the house they rent together while she drinks a beer or two to unwind.

Sometimes he likes her to tell him about the men she flirts with, how they looked and dressed. Sometimes, when they're getting ready for bed, he likes to pretend he is some of those men. Twice he's come into the restaurant when she's

working and watched her take tables. He ordered beer and watched Colleen flirt with men for bigger tips. Both times Colleen pretended she didn't see him. He finally went away.

There's no reason he should mind her flirting because he knows she never goes out with the men and they don't touch her. She always tells him all about it. He'd know anyway; he's always watching her.

Colleen goes over to the table again. "How is everything?" she asks, interrupting a conversation about lawn mowers. The older man stares up, annoyed.

"I'm sorry," Colleen tells him.

"It's fine," he says. His eyes are dark blue and set deep in his skull. The left one has a twitch.

When they're filling salt shakers, Lindsay, the other waitress, says, "I'm so tired I feel like I'm gonna die."

"I'm with you, Girl."

"I oughta just go home. I haven't had a table in twenty minutes."

"It's slow tonight, isn't it?"

Lindsay looks into the dining room. "Your table wants you, Colleen."

"Let me clear your plates," Colleen tells them, approaching the table.

"Get us another pitcher, Goldie," the older guy says, twitching his eye at her. She can't tell if it's a wink or something that just happens. She smiles to be on the

safe side. She's glad the men have stopped calling her after Blondie, the golden retriever.

"You got a cigarette machine in here?" The guy in the hat smiles vaguely at her. The ashtray overflows already.

"I'm sorry, we don't"

"Aw, I really need a smoke. I'm out." He spreads his fingers, indicating their emptiness. His nails are splintered, dirty. He looks out from under his hat brim at Colleen. "You don't got any cigarettes, do you?"

"I don't smoke."

"Well maybe one of your little friends back in the kitchen has a smoke for my buddy," The old guy tells Colleen. "Run along and find out."

Colleen hates customers who do this to her. Lindsay has cigarettes but won't give them up. She does have a cigar from when her cousin's baby got born. It's in the bottom of her purse somewhere because Lindsay doesn't smoke cigars.

"This is all I could find," Colleen says. "I hope it's OK."

"It's a baby cigar," the old guy says. "Who has a little boy?"

The guy in the hat turns the cigar over in his fingers, playing its length. He sneers with his mouth but his fingers slide languidly along the cellophane wrapper.

"Get us more beer," the old guys goes. He doesn't look at Colleen; his eye is flashing at the cigar.

Black smoke fills the corner where the men's booth is. Colleen finds herself holding her breath when she goes back there. It reminds her of when the neighbors burn their trash out in the ditch by the road. The men have started talking to her in a friendly way. They keep asking her back to get them small things.

Once she is replacing the loaded ashtray with a clean one and the old man grabs her wrist. "What's your name again, Honey?"

"Colleen," Colleen says, stiffening, breathing slowly. The cigar tip glows red under the smoker's hatbrim.

"You're a nice looking girl. You have pretty hair," the old guy says. He holds her wrist for a few more seconds before letting go.

Colleen tells Lindsay she's going to check the bathrooms. Instead of wiping the counters what she does in there is stare at her face in the mirror. Her skin is pale, her eyes ringed in black. The skin under them feels stretched.

"How 'bout a kiss?" The smoker asks when Colleen comes back.

She laughs lightly.

"He's serious," says the old one. "Give him a little kiss."

"No."

"Why not? He won't bite."

"I don't know you guys. Besides, I've got a boyfriend."

"Well sit down and get to know us." The smoker slides over to make room on

the bench for Colleen. "I just want a little kiss."

"Why?"

"Because you're pretty."

Colleen puts her hands behind her back and steps away. "Cut it out, you guys."

"We'll give you a good tip."

"No, I have stuff to clean in the kitchen. I don't do that kind of thing." She walks away.

"Those guys wanted me to kiss them," Colleen tells Lindsay.

"Drunk?"

"I guess they kind of are. They've had about a million pitchers."

"You'd probably get a big tip."

"Would you do it, Lindsay?"

"It's only a little kiss."

Shouldn't she be flattered? Nobody ever made that kind of offer to Lindsay. A kiss isn't even a very big deal. It's just a couple of drunk guys, it doesn't mean a thing. How much will they pay her? What would her Robby Jr. think of this? Men offering to pay for her kisses and she's considering it. What would Robby Jr.'s old mother think?

"Can I get you guys anything else?" Colleen's fingers shake. She tries not to

look at the smoker. She looks at the cigar stub in the ashtray instead.

“You can get us our check...unless you changed your mind about that kiss.”

Colleen takes a deep breath. She sits in the booth next to the smoker. She sits far away so half her bottom hangs off the bench. “Why should I have?” she asks him. He stares at her from under his hat brim. His face is chubby, pale. The men don't smell like money anymore. All Colleen smells in the booth is the cigar. It reminds her of burnt tires. The man grabs her around the waist--she can feel his stiff fingertips through her blouse--and leans in to kiss her. The hat brim bumps her forehead and the man's lips are worm-fat and damp. When she feels his tongue Colleen jerks away. She stands up quick and slaps the check face down on the table. “Have a good night,” she says, walking away fast before they answer.

In the bathroom she stares at herself in the mirror. Her face feels flat as pavement, her mouth tastes like a garage. She rinses it under the faucet and spits down the drain. She stays in the bathroom until she's sure the men have gone. Then she goes out to bus their booth. Smoke lingers in the air and makes her want to gag. Her ten dollar tip is under the ashtray. She folds it into a tight square and stuffs it in her pocket.

FIVE

The first time Little Bill hears Crystal's got two more kids is when she leaves him a message at work to pick up a couple more cribs at Jamesway because her ex-boyfriend is dropping the twins off Friday. Little Bill tells Robby Jr. when they're on lunch break. "You never told me she had a bunch of kids," Robby Jr. says.

"I didn't know," Little Bill tells him, biting into his sub. "I'm as surprised as you."

At home Crystal explains. "Their father's moving in an apartment with his new wife. It doesn't allow kids."

"How come you never told me about them?" Little Bill asks.

"I don't know," says Crystal. "It never came up."

"I'm not altogether thrilled." Rent's due. Both cars have holes in their mufflers. Crystal and her ex-boyfriend spent hours of long-distance time arguing about what to do with the kids and now somebody has to pay the phone bill. "They don't have nowhere else to go."

Little Bill and Crystal already have their daughter Ambrosia. Two more kids is a lot to feed. Kids equal work. He's not pleased, but what can he do? He can't turn them out like their real father. He can't be responsible for two children growing up orphans. Not after watching all those orphan movies--the poor orphans are abused and kicked and forced to work. No, he can't drop that on some child's shoulders.

It's not an easy responsibility to take. But he grew up an only child and remembers always being lonely. (He learned to play Battleship by himself. Hide and seek.) He doesn't want his daughter to grow up the same way. Siblings will be good for Ambrosia. It's not like he never planned to have any more children. He and Crystal are just so young. Ambrosia was a surprise and Little Bill thought that after her, they ought to hold up a few years--at least until he has some money saved.

He inspects the makeshift nursery, wishing there was more room. He's set the new cribs up in a line. The baby's sleeping in the crib closest to the door and the other cribs are wedged in behind it. That's the only way they'd all fit. There's no room between, just a narrow passageway to squeeze through at the head of each pressboard crib. The baby is a month old. The two coming are a little over a year. He and Crystal will have their hands full looking after all these babies.

Ambrosia's beautiful. She has thick brownish hair like Little Bill and Little Bill's rounded fingers and toes. When she was first born she had an extra finger on each hand, near her thumbs, but higher up, close to the wrist. They were smaller than her other fingers and hooked with no nails. They wriggled like little worms. Little Bill was devastated when he saw that and he blamed it on Crystal's drinking while pregnant. The baby waved all twelve fingers and screamed as Little Bill and Crystal and the doctor peered down at her. The doctor explained that it was fairly common for babies to be born with extra fingers and toes. It's something genetic--a

dominant trait--likely that Little Bill or Crystal'd had the same thing when they were born. He's too ashamed to call his parents and ask, but Little Bill's never heard about anything like that on his side of the family. It must have been Crystal. Her fingers are spatulate with fish-white skin and black and silver nails. It wouldn't surprise Little Bill if she'd had extra digits at birth.

Anyway, all the doctor had to do was remove the extra fingers. Easy as that; they healed right up and left no scars. Nobody'd ever know Ambrosia'd been weird when she was born. When Little Bill looks at her hands now, they appear perfect. He can't even picture the other way, but he likes to think of it as Ambrosia's state of over-perfection.

What do the other babies look like. Crystal? Her ex-boyfriend? Little Bill suddenly pictures a pair of monsters like the ones in the movie *Gremlins*, scaly green with spiky hair and sharp nails. He can imagine the babies chewing through the phone cords and multiplying when they got wet.

OK. What if being reunited with her twins makes Crystal want to be with their father again? Has she been spending her evenings at his place with him and their twins? She says he's married but that could be a lie. Little Bill's never heard about this guy. He doesn't know where he lives. Maybe he should follow Crystal the next time she goes out. Maybe he should examine her body the next time they have sex. Little Bill gave her Ambrosia. One baby. This other guy gave her twins. Does that

make him better than Little Bill? What would he do if she left? He needs her.

Maybe he ought to ask her to marry him. Is he ready? Weddings and churches and all that scare him. Also Crystal. Little Bill's considered it but never brought it up.

Maybe the other kids'll work out fine. Little Bill likes the one he's got. If she's awake when he gets home from work, he gets her out of her crib and holds her while he watches TV. He tried bouncing her on his knee but her head flopped around; she's too young for that--can't even hold her head up yet. Sometimes at work he thinks about how his pretty baby sticks her ten pink fingers in her mouth and works around them with her shiny babylips.

Sometimes, even though he and Crystal aren't married, Little Bill wonders if he settled down too soon. Somewhere there's a foggy idea he'd rather be doing something else. But what? He's happy, isn't he? He's got a job, a car, a home, a girl, and now a family. What more could a guy ask for?

Still, maybe he and Crystal should have given it some more time. He's got an OK job sharpening saw blades for his dad, but money got tight right after Crystal moved in. She went to the doctor so many times and she shops constantly. That's a woman for you. But it's going to get a lot worse. Little Bill's folks let him know they didn't like him living with Crystal in the first place. They were even madder when they found out Ambrosia was on the way. Little Bill doubts they'd be willing to help out with the other two babies. They won't even come to the trailer to visit their

granddaughter. Can't expect Crystal to help out--she's got to stay home and take care of them all.

Why didn't she tell him about the kids earlier? True, they moved in together pretty quickly; maybe they didn't know a lot about each other then but they've had almost ten months to get comfortable. All winter when the snow drifts kept them in the trailer, watching infomercials and talking, you'd think she would have dropped some little hint. Sure, maybe it didn't come up in regular conversation, but you'd think that's the kind of thing you'd tell the person you're living with. You'd think they'd know everything there is to know about each other. Why didn't she ever talk about these kids to him? It seems a little bit dishonest. He's told her everything about himself. He feels cheated that she didn't respond. Were they terrible monster babies that made her ashamed? No, they couldn't have been that bad--they would have been too young at the point she left them, even younger than Ambrosia. *She's* not terrible. She eats and sleeps and cries, but she's pretty quiet actually.

And why did Crystal abandon her babies in the first place? Maybe she had a bad break-up with the ex-boyfriend, but you'd think even then she'd try to see them.

Crystal didn't help set up the cribs because she was getting ready. Crystal likes to go out when he gets home. Usually she leaves as soon as he walks in the door. It's like handing off a relay baton only it's Ambrosia instead of a baton. Crystal complains about being cooped up all day with dirty diapers. She fixes up her hair

real big and squeezes into her tightest jeans. Little Bill doesn't know where she goes. "It ain't your business," she told him. Today she circled around his questions and locked herself in the bathroom.

Little Bill knows Crystal is nineteen years old and that her parents worked at Key Plastics before the car wreck. He knows she likes Coke, not Pepsi, and her dream is to become a beautician at Holiday Hair. She talks about it a lot--about how she could go to cosmetology school and get certified. She tells Little Bill how important certification is, but even without it she's ten times better than any of those girls they have over at Holiday now. "Just look at my hair, if you want proof!"

Little Bill knows her eyes are brown and she's got a Guns-n-Roses tattoo on her shoulder and a sword with a snake round about it on her chest. What else is there? That's what he thought but suddenly the girlfriend he's shared everything with has two more kids. Friday, *they* will have two more kids. There's really no way he can refuse to take them in, is there? Why would he want to? After all, he likes kids. But how strange it is to think about Crystal's past.

Funny. He can't get over it. For some reason, Little Bill never really thought about Crystal existing before she became part of his life. The things she relayed to him float disjointed. Sure--she told him she wanted a pony as a little girl--what of it? It doesn't have anything to do with what she wants now. Crystal and another guy. How long were they together? Did she call this other guy pet names the way she

calls Little Bill "Buns"? Was she in love with him? Did they live together, wake up mornings and stretch together? Why did they break up?

How come she never told Little Bill? Having babies is a major experience. Little Bill knows what a big deal it was when they went through it with Ambrosia. Crystal never let on she'd done it before. He should have suspected from her stretch marks but she told him they were from when she was so fat before she met him. He thought she meant she'd eaten too much. While he was sweating and praying in the waiting room, she'd done it before. She knew it the whole time they set up the baby's room. Bought her toys and little outfits. Crystal looked through the book of baby names with him and agreed when he said Ambrosia was a wonderful name for a first baby. It poured over your tongue like champagne at New Years. She smiled at him and she agreed.

When Crystal appears, dressed to go out, Little Bill wants to talk to her but he doesn't know where to start. She holds her palm out for money. "I'll be back sometime," she says.

Little Bill watches her walk down the hall, remembering suddenly the first night they met last July at a Delta bonfire near the Peach Bottom power plant. People in the park were setting off sparklers and the reflections looked like stars and comets on the river. He stood next to her in the keg line and they got to talking. Later they walked out on somebody's dock and drank warm beer and dangled their

feet over the water. She must've sent Little Bill back for five or six more beers and he had an idea she was trying to get rid of him. But he had to've done something right because when the party was over Crystal walked up the hill in front of him and waited for him to unlock the car. She has a powerful, purposeful walk. Her strength drew him. She's the kind of woman could walk across the river on heads of babies if she had to.

After listening to the car start up outside, he goes into the kitchenette and fixes himself a sandwich. Then he runs the vacuum for a while over the brown carpet in the living room. The vacuum at least fills his ears. Is this all his fault? Maybe he doesn't make enough of an effort to communicate with Crystal. If he spent more time with her, would they talk more? His stomach feels funny. Jittery. He wonders if something was up with that tuna.

When Ambrosia wakes up he microwaves her bottle and holds her while she drinks it. He takes her outside to burp, walking along the gravel road. He can hear her little burp exhales rising like bubbles on a lily-padded pond. The honeysucked June air eases his own stomach. Little Bill plods to the main road, raising swarms of grasshoppers out of the tall grass in front of him. He stands by the mailbox, holding his dozing baby and watching a soybean farmer spray the field across the road. The farmer hunches over the wheel of his tractor, circling in the sunset. Insecticide hisses as it spurts out of the long stiff arm of the sprayer. Little Bill turns to look at his

trailer and the others like it and the little tracks leading to them spread out on the hill like a map--different colored trailers like different states and the roads are boundary rivers between them. He can't remember what kind of map that was. A political map? Topographic? Something--he learned it in school. He's always wondered how maps got made before they had planes and could get overviews of things. Sure, he knows about surveying--he's seen PENDOT guys along the road in orange hard hats messing with tripod things-- but how accurate is that and isn't it really really slow? They'd have to measure, draw a tiny piece and go out and measure again. You'd only be able to do it in the summer, too, because in the winter, snow would screw everything up. He's got this picture of a shape slowly growing on a foggy piece of paper. Wouldn't it be easy to misjudge? Expect a shape to be one thing, then have it turn out something else? He wonders what a map of Crystal's life would look like and realizes if he were making it he'd only be able to draw a very tiny section like the top of an iceberg. All the rest would be under water.

He returns to the trailer, the sleeping baby easy in his arms. He rocks her and sings under his breath. In the growing dark he watches her petaled eyelids flicker. He only settles her back in her crib after his arms fall asleep from holding her so long.

Crystal comes home around ten. Little Bill has dozed off in the recliner but he wakes up when she comes in. "Hey," he tells her sleepily. "Did you have a nice time?" His stomach churns again; he looks for clues that she's been messing with

the ex. She'll get mad if he asks her where she went. Crystal smiles. She swings her hips on the way to the recliner. "I'm gonna get a shower, but after that, do you wanna?"

Relieved, Little Bill grabs her around the backs of her legs as she leans over him. His fingers sink into her thighs just above her knees. She wouldn't want him if she'd already been with somebody tonight, right? She jumps back, staggering. "Dammit, don't wake the baby. You don't want her screaming all night, do you? Let me get a shower, I said." She glowers, disappearing into the hall.

While the shower's going, he realizes he's got bad breath. He's blowing onto the back of his hand and sniffing and it's nasty. That'll sure kill the mood. He'd brush but Crystal hates when he goes into the bathroom while she's in there, so he goes into the kitchenette and drinks a Coke. He sniffs his breath again; still sour. There's no gum in any of the cabinets and drawers where stuff like that usually is. Crystal might have some in her purse so he checks in the bedroom where she dumped her stuff.

He finds all the weed when he opens her purse. Three big bags of it. He didn't know Crystal smoked. He's shocked. She hasn't been doing this around Ambrosia, has she? There's a lot of weed here.

He lines the bags neatly on the bed and waits for her to get out of the shower. She doesn't see them. She drops her towel and starts rubbing and kneading her body at Little Bill. The scar from her cesarean looks like a snarl. "Stop," he tells her,

holding his hand up. "Cut it out," he says but she doesn't. She keeps it up, comes at him, rolling her hips and breathing heavy like a sick cow.

"What is this, Crystal?" he asks her, pointing, shaking his finger at her stash on the bed. Before Crystal pounces, there's a second when nobody moves. The springs on the bed sob; she snatches her bags and tries to cover them with her body and her body with them at the same time. "I don't want you doing that stuff," Little Bill tells her, sternly. "Not while you're living in my trailer."

"Who in fuck's name told you to go in my purse?" She rounds on him, naked, drenched, and savage. He stands his ground, serious and set until she starts dashing things from the dresser at his head. She'd crush him if she could. Reasoning will only get him hurt so he yells and hurls stuff back at her. Ends up she's going to deal. There are a bunch of high-school kids that catch the bus at the corner and they've agreed to buy from her as long as she keeps a steady supply. "It's good fucking money," she shrieks.

"I don't want my daughter raised on dope money," he tells her. "What about my job? What the hell do you think I do all day?"

"Your job won't support five people," she says, snapping up her towel and armoring herself with it again. "Whatever you think you are, you can't take care of the five of us."

All the noise has woken Ambrosia. You'd think someone was killing her the way she's howling.

"I have to get rid of all these rugs; I can't move the furniture anymore to vacuum the edges of them," says Mom. "I'm just too old."

"You're not old, Mrs. Holmes," Colleen pats Mom's shoulder. "You're not old at all."

"My arthritis is terrible. Since Robby Sr. died I've just been a mess."

"You look great though, Mrs. Holmes. I sure hope I look as good as you when I'm your age."

"The new apartment'll be a lot easier, Mom," says Robby Jr., shoving the sofa off the edge of the rug so he can roll it up. The dust makes him sneeze.

"Bless you," Mom says, touching her neck.

"You won't have all these rooms to clean and you'll be closer to everything. You can walk most places. I worry about you driving around all the time. I'm glad you decided to get rid of the car."

"Yeah, Mrs. Holmes." Colleen beams at Robby Jr.'s mother. "I've been worried about you too. With all the weather last winter? I've been terrified you'll slide off the road...You heard about that old man who drove off the road and got stuck in a snowdrift and was too weak to get his car door open? The snow covered his car and they didn't find him for two and a half weeks. He'd tried to eat the seat leather." Colleen picks up a shepardess statuette from the TV and turns it over in

her hands. "Plus it's so generous of you to offer the car to me. God knows I can use it."

"I know it, dear."

Robby Jr. says, "I worry about you driving around with all those Amish people out on the roads. They come across the river from Lancaster and act like they own the road. Did you see on the news how there was a huge wreck in Delta because one of their horses freaked out and ran through an intersection? The buggy got slammed on both sides. It was full of chickens."

"That's awful," Mom says. Her hands tremble.

"Something like that happened not too long ago on 74, too. One of those buggies tried to pass a school bus? The bus driver wasn't expecting it and speeded up at the last minute? Those Amish don't even know what laws they have to follow."

Colleen turns the statuette over and looks at its base. She smiles.

"And think of all the free time you'll have, Mom, when you're out of this house. All the cleaning you won't have to do."

"I never minded cleaning when your father was alive."

Robby Jr. takes the statuette from Colleen and puts it back on the TV. She scowls but he ignores her and starts rolling the rug into a long tube. Colleen pretends to help by adjusting the angle of the roll but she's really just getting in the way. She steps on his fingers a few times, possibly on purpose.

"I'm going to miss it here." Mom gazes out the window at the backyard garden. "What would Robby Sr. say about me selling this house?" She rubs the side of her neck. Every spring for as long as Robby Jr. can remember, Mom has been out with the first thaw digging and mulching beds for her tomatoes and squash plants. Robby Sr. used to angle his recliner so he could watch her out the window. "That mother of yours never rests," Robby Jr. remembers his father saying, adjusting his feet on the footrest, rubbing his belly through his shirt. The den still smells like the aftershave Robby Sr. wore and the recliner's seat shines where his buttocks docked so often.

Robby Jr.'s parents had bought the house shortly after they married. It was almost new then, having been built by a couple with no children who moved away to Baltimore after only living in the house for a year and a half. Robby Jr.'s parents were in their late thirties when they married and Robby Sr. had enough cash in his account to buy the house outright. Mom had one child, Robby Jr., when she was forty-one. The doctor said it was risky but Mom had waited her whole life to have a baby. Robby Jr. turned out fine.

To Robby Jr. the house symbolizes his parent's marriage and his own childhood. He lived there his whole life until his twentieth birthday when he and Colleen moved into a rented place of their own. He's always imagined that one day he'd move back in and he and Colleen could take over where his parents left off. But

this year, with her husband newly dead of a heart attack at Thanksgiving, Mom hasn't left the house. Her garden looks like it did when it was prepared for winter last year except weed heads are popping through the peanut shells from a turkey farm in Lancaster Mom uses as mulch. Untouched. Mom cries a lot. Her eyes never look quite dry around the edges these days. She complains of arthritis and constipation. The house is too big for her alone, she says. It makes her think too much.

Robby Jr. hadn't wanted her to move at first but the weather last winter really scared him. One storm, right after New Years, blocked most of the secondary roads in the county. The phone lines were down, so even with his Bronco, Robby Jr. couldn't get over to check on Mom for a week. When he finally managed the drive, she was warm and full of canned soup but that didn't ease his mind. He's heard a lot of stories about people who pass away from grief and loneliness only weeks after their spouses die.

When he saw the new place he knew it was right. It's a semi-retirement center behind Dairyland Square Shopping Center. The single-bedroom apartments are modern with wall-to-wall carpeting and emergency call buttons. Mom has a balcony large enough to sit in a lawn chair and look out over the tiny courtyard and parking lot. There's a garbage shoot so Mom won't have to lug her trash to the curb. It's small, but she can take all the important things that remind her of her marriage and set them up there. Then she'll be a lot safer, but it won't seem like she ever moved.

Her building is painted beige and is called the Heron. She's too old to mess with that garden anyway.

Even in the spring after the threat of winter was over, Robby Jr. and Colleen worried about Mom. "She ought to get out more," Colleen said. "She should join a bowling league or something. She should join a card group. Whatever old people do."

"She's grieving," Robby Jr. told Colleen. "Her life has changed since my dad died. She must feel like she can't go on. Have you noticed how senile she's getting?"

"She's getting really old. She's got to go on, though," Colleen said, tossing her hair. "People die all the time. Other people have to learn to live without them."

Robby doesn't know about the idea of mom creating a new life for herself. He figures when she's settled in her new apartment, she'll spend her time quietly grieving for his father and doting on Robby Jr. She's almost sixty-four after all.

"Here, bind it up with this." Mom hands Robby Jr. a piece of twine. Colleen squats down to stick her finger in the knot Robby Jr. makes. She sticks out her tongue at Robby Jr.

"Do you think we should take this one out to the Bronco now or wait until we have the others rolled up, too?"

"Are you sure you want us taking all your rugs?"

"Yes. I keep tripping over them. I came down the hall this morning and I

caught my foot on the one in the dining room--it's a nice rug but it'll be my death."

"I know just where it'll go in our house. We'll get a lot of use out of it, won't we, Robby Jr.?"

"Yeah."

"Well you kids look around here. I'm buying new furniture. Something smaller and daintier for that tiny apartment. I've never been fond of this suite-- Robby Sr. picked it out and I've always thought it would look better in a moose lodge than in my living room. I'll give you whatever you want and then I'm going to have a yard sale and sell the rest."

"Oh, Mom, don't sell anything." Robby Jr. can't stand the idea of other people messing with his family's stuff. Pretty much everything in the house reminds him of his father in one way or another. "This furniture would look great in your apartment. Why go to the trouble of buying all new?"

"Wow!" goes Colleen. "You'll give us anything we want?"

"Just make sure you tell me so I can put your name on it."

Robby Jr. feels uncomfortable. Mom shouldn't give her things to him and Colleen either. It won't be the same. Mom should keep everything to preserve Robby Sr.'s memory. Sure there's some stuff they could use--the sofa, a couple of the kitchen chairs, maybe the bedroom suite, but Colleen's face looks like she'd absorb every last stick of furniture in the place. Mom's already agreed to sign the car over as

soon as she gets settled. That's generous, Robby Jr. thinks, even though she won't really need it any more. But Colleen is hungry. Her eyes race around the room, her mouth hangs slightly open, her breaths come rapidly. Robby Jr. knows Colleen's got designs on more than just the car and the rugs and the bedroom furniture. He can see her squeezing Mom's entire house into their own.

"We don't need very much," he tells his mother, looking pointedly at Colleen. "Our place is full of furniture already. I'm sure you'll need most of these things in your apartment since it isn't furnished."

"But our couch has that big burn mark in it and our kitchen table is hardly big enough for the two of us and--" Colleen eyes up Mom's TV "--Our TV starts to get fuzzy when you have it on for more than about 45 minutes. It burned out the other day right in the middle of the Blondie trial."

"This TV may be a bit large for my new living room. My eyes are so bad now." Mom looks at it. Wistfully? Robby Sr. surprised her with it on their wedding anniversary two years ago. Robby Jr.'d had to come over and help his father lug it into the living room when Mom was out having her hair done. After it was moved and Dad's color was slowly coming back, they'd sat in front of it drinking beers and flicking the channels. It didn't much matter what they watched--everything looked better on this TV. It was 64 inches. Robby Jr.'d wanted a TV like that ever since but couldn't afford it. Sometimes he wished he could move back in with his folks

just for the TV.

“There’s room for your TV, Mom, don’t be silly. We don’t need it, Colleen. There’s room for everything in there. I’ll help you move it all in.”

“We do so need a new TV, Robby Jr. It hasn’t worked since your friends came over and that stupid Little Bill let his baby spill Coke all over the back of it. We really don’t need very much else. Just a good TV. Then I’d be happy.” Colleen’s got her fighting face on. She’s really pretty when she’s being nice, but Colleen squints her eyes up and squeezes her lips like a walnut when she wants something and she doesn’t seem to be getting it. She makes her face like a wild animal or a domestic one trained to fight. Robby Jr. wishes she’d quit but he knows how stubborn she is. Plus she’s blaming him. She never said anything about the TV before--she’d always just quietly gotten up and fiddled with the wires on the back of it. Never said it bothered her to do it or anything. She has a way of saving things up to use against him when she needs them. Then she pulls them out of nowhere and throws them at him like a comic book villain pops fireballs out of thin air. Half of the stuff she pitches at him is stuff he didn’t even know she was mad about. Or it’s stuff he knew she was mad about but he’d forgot. She’s got him in a tight spot. He knows she’ll make a scene if he doesn’t back her up. What would Mom think about that? Maybe if he gets her the TV, she’ll ease up on the rest of the stuff.

“I guess you’re right,” he mumbles and glances at Mom. She’s still looking at

the TV with a funny expression on her face. What's she thinking about? She and Robby Sr. probably watched a lot of shows on that TV before he had his heart attack.

"I'd thought maybe I'd keep it since your father gave it to me. But I've never watched much TV anyway. It was your father that did all the watching. You kids could use it a lot more than me, I'm sure."

"Yeah," says Colleen. "Robby Jr. and me do watch a lot of TV." She goes around behind the TV like she's going to unplug it.

"Wait. Why don't we think about it for a while. Besides with all these rugs we're not going to be able to fit it in the Bronco."

"We don't have to take all the rugs today," says Colleen. "We'll have to come by another time to get the rest of them. We'll just take the one we rolled today, and the TV. That should be a load. Besides, we need to come by before the yard sale and decide on the rest of the stuff we want."

"Let me get you a twist tie to gather up the cord," Mom says walking into the kitchen. She walks like her shoes hurt her.

SEVEN

It's like being inside a barbecue chicken grill at the carnival the day they all decide to head over to the Delta quarries to go swimming. At first it's just going to be Robby Jr. and Colleen and Little Bill and this guy Robby Jr. met while he was having the Bronco inspected--Tommy. Tommy's a big, dirty guy, not too smart, but he knows Fords. He was friendly and eventually asked what was going on this weekend so Robby Jr. invited him along. Tommy seems cool enough to get along with his friends.

They're getting a couple cases of beer and planning to ride together but when they meet at Robby Jr.'s house, Tommy brings along a girl. Colleen's face turns flushed and Robby Jr. notices her throat jumping like she's swallowing a lot. Robby Jr. figures it's because the other girl's cute. Colleen doesn't like to be around other cute girls. She likes to be the prettiest girl in any social situation.

Colleen says she doesn't want them all to cram in one vehicle so she and Robby Jr. decide to drive over by themselves and Little Bill and Tommy and Tommy's friend get into Little Bill's pick-up. The girl sits in the middle with her pink toenails propped on the dash.

Robby Jr. and Colleen were up fighting until three a.m. because Colleen stayed after work drinking with one of the dishwashers and came home wasted. She came into the bedroom and broke a lamp trying to take her pants off in the dark. Colleen

thinks it's OK to do that kind of thing. Robby Jr. thinks since they live together, she shouldn't go out with other guys--especially if she's going to be doing so much drinking. Even if it's only as friends like she always says.

They aren't doing much talking today. They can't listen to the radio because it's not working. Their hot, damp skin sticks like stamps to the upholstery and the silence gets weird. They don't even make the usual "Peewhew, how could you make a smell like that when I'm in the car with you" jokes when they pass the hog farm.

"How did you like Tommy?" Robby Jr. asks Colleen to break the silence as they pass the Collinsville Discount, headed south on 74. He has to yell it because they've got the windows down, driving fast.

"He looked fine," says Colleen curtly. Normally, she likes to discuss people at length after meeting them.

"His friend looked nice, too"

"She's too young." Colleen wriggles in her seat and tugs at her shorts. She always does that when she's got her swimsuit on under her clothes. She says it gives her wedgies. She's been bitchy all day. It must be the heat. Her hair clings to her lips.

"Really? I didn't notice. I thought she looked nice."

"She's about sixteen. He looked our age. Why the hell would he want to go out with a kid like that for."

Robby Jr. sticks his arm out the window and steers it through the wind. He wouldn't mind going out with a girl who looked like that, even if she's just a kid. Colleen's really getting to him today. What's her problem with Tommy? Why can't she just drop it? "She looked a lot older than sixteen." He glances sideways and sees Colleen purse her lips. "Don't make that face at me."

"I wasn't making any face at you."

"I saw you."

The twenty-minute drive seems longer. Robby Jr. tries to focus on the beauty of the day and ignore Colleen. He inhales deeply when passing a man on a mower. That smell has always reminded him of the Little League soccer teams he played on as a kid. He remembers coming home from practice, itchy with grass stains with that smell all over him. He never wanted to shower after that--didn't want to lose that smell. He holds his breath when they drive by a fellow burning brush. Once he heard about somebody breathing poison ivy smoke and getting it in their lungs. They had to be hospitalized. He glances over to see if Colleen remembers to hold her breath, but doesn't remind her.

Robby Jr. knows swimming at the quarries isn't legal. Signs all over the place tell people that and warn trespassers of prosecution. People hang their towels on them. There aren't enough cops in this part of Pennsylvania to catch people doing anything wrong unless the people have some very bad luck. The quarries, abandoned

for the past 30 years, have filled with water and scrap metal. They attest to the area's once thriving slate industry. Now that they've shut down, most of the Delta residents work at the Peach Bottom Atomic Power Plant.

Robby Jr.'s heard that before the State blocked the entrance to the maze of dirt roads running through the quarries, people used to go back there and steal slabs of slate and dump their garbage. High school kids partied and shot at deer and cans. Occasionally someone drove his car over one of the cliffs. The edges come up quickly in the dark. There's something empowering about parking in the highest, most treacherous spot.

Now, the only way to get back there is to walk. Robby Jr. parks along the road near the half-mile trail to the best quarry for swimming. The whole thing is contained by a boxy canyon. The walls rise on all sides for about one hundred and ten feet. Ceders rim the lip and when Robby Jr. looks up, only their silhouettes and the clouds behind them are visible. The near side of the narrow but deep gouge in the canyon floor has a gravel beach edging the water. The quarry stretches 500 yards and is blue green like the Caribbean.

Wits have decorated the walls of the cliff with spray paint. Everything from Pink Floyd to Jesus. A 50-foot ledge indicates the dive into the water is "E-Z". To dive from 80 feet, one must have "BALLS."

Walking in, Robby Jr. tries to reason with Colleen. "I'm sorry," he tells her. "I

don't think you should be mad at me, though. Why won't you talk to me?" Colleen doesn't answer. She walks in front of him and her towel hangs over her shoulder, swishing like the tail on a mean-tempered horse.

Little Bill and Tommy set the cooler up next to a square of logs arranged like benches on the beach. The girls sit gingerly with their feet pointing outward so they don't get campfire ashes on their shoes. They hold out their hands for beer. Since Colleen won't talk to him, Robby Jr. checks out Tommy's girl. Her name is Tonya and she's pretty hot. She seems like a great catch for someone like Tommy. Robby Jr. doesn't know him very well, but it doesn't seem like he should be able to get a girl like this one. She's got shiny brown hair and a sexy look about her. Colleen might be right about her age, but what the hell? She catches Robby Jr. staring at her and smiles.

The guys drink a few beers. They stand over the cooler and get acquainted. Little Bill keeps giving Robby Jr. some kind of hurt look--like he's jealous Tommy got invited along. First Colleen, now Little Bill--what's their problem today? Little Bill cheers up a little when they talk about the Orioles. Robby Jr. promises to get him a ticket the next time he goes to a game. Sometimes Little Bill wants to tag along too much. If Colleen weren't so vocal about disliking him, Little Bill'd probably try and move into their house with them. He's too much sometimes. They drop their empties on the gravel and stomp them flat. They sweat under the white sun.

As he gets a buzz going, Robby Jr. starts feeling bad for leaving Colleen out of the conversation. She's just sitting there on her log, sipping her beer and watching strangers. It's not Robby Jr.'s fault though; she could be talking to that other girl.

Still, when Tommy and Little Bill go across the beach to score cigarettes off some guys assembling a spud launcher, Robby Jr. sits down next to Colleen. "Boy, it's hot," he says in way of apology.

She won't let him put his arm around her. She says "So, Tonya, how old are you?"

Tonya looks confused. She jerks her hand to put down her beer but she doesn't. "Huh?"

"How old are you?"

"Sixteen." She drops her eyes and digs in the gravel with her shoe. "Almost."

Colleen smiles at Robby Jr. She puts her arm around *him*. All three of them jump when the spud launcher goes off.

"Those things scare me," Tonya says. "My dad says some guy he works with has a kid who shot one into his face by accident and it blinded him in one eye."

Colleen looks boastful. "I heard about a guy who was shooting one and it didn't go off, so he looked into the end of it and it exploded and blew half his face off. He lived and everything but he only has half a face."

The three of them squint in the direction of the spud shooter. "How do they

work?" asks Colleen.

"It's a sewer pipe that you jamb a baking potato into. You have to pack it really tight. Then you spray hair spray into the other end, seal it up and light it. It's like a gun." Robby Jr. pulls a pretend trigger. "It's cool."

"How'd you meet Tommy, Tonya?"

Tonya kicks some gravel at Tommy's Coleman cooler. "Around," she says.

Robby Jr. nudges Colleen harder than he needs to. Then he stands up.

"Whew, it's hot. Who's up for a swim?"

"I am," Tonya says, jumping up.

"I'm not," says Colleen at the same time.

"Oh." Tonya stoops to resume her seat.

"You go ahead," says Colleen glaring at Robby Jr.

"I wonder if Tommy--" Tonya looks down the beach.

"Just come in with me," Robby Jr. urges. He walks to the water's edge, knowing he's going to hear about this later. Colleen's going to tell him swimming with this girl's as bad as drinking with the dishwasher. Tonya follows and he doesn't know what to say to her. She's young but she makes him nervous all the same. She leans to pick up a small rock. Her hair falls over her face and she brushes it back when she straightens. Robby Jr. sees her rock flash once, white, then disappear when she throws it in the water.

Robby Jr. takes his shirt off and drops it on the beach. He kicks his shoes on top of it. There's a narrow submerged ledge about three feet deep which he steps onto. His feet glow pale through the water and look very small. Far off, the water still looks cerulean but immediately beyond the ledge he's standing on it's black.

Tonya dips a toe. "It's warm."

"It heats up in the sun. Are you coming in?"

"Are there fish in here?"

"Maybe. I've never seen any, though."

Tonya begins to get undressed. She does it slowly, languidly. Like she's performing. She crosses her arms and slides her T-shirt over her head. She lets it linger, bunched at her wrists before shaking it out and folding it. She turns her back and bends down to untie her shoes. She rolls her hips to drop her shorts. Her swimsuit is golden.

Robby Jr. looks away to see Colleen striding across the gravel. It gnashes under her feet. Tommy and Little Bill watch her from the cooler. They've both taken their shirts off. Little Bill's hide reminds Robby Jr. of a pale pink shell. Tommy strokes his own belly with a glittery beer can.

Robby Jr. lunges backwards into the water. He glides toward the far cliff. The water is bath-tub warm on the surface and for about a foot down. Then it becomes achingly cold, thicker. Robby Jr. tries to flatten his body on the quarry-skin. He's

always loved to swim. To float. He could float on his back for hours. With his ears under water the crowd on the beach sounds far off. Even the explosions of the spud launcher are muted by the water.

When he finally pulls himself onto a rock and looks back to the other shore, Tonya is standing on the ledge he vacated. She's dropping pieces of gravel into the darker water. Colleen has her hands on her hips watching Robby Jr.

He's angry at her for a lot of reasons. "Jump in. Swim over!" he yells to Tonya. She dives and swims toward him with a strong crawl--as if she's had lessons. Her stroke cuts the water and when she reaches him, he takes her arm and helps her out of the water. She's close enough that he can see the goose pimples on her arms and legs.

"I was scared something was going to grab me and pull me under," she tells him, tilting her chin and glancing at him out of the corners of her eyes.

"Oh, there's nothing in there."

"That doesn't stop me from worrying about it anyway. I like to do that--scare myself. It's exciting. I love the feeling of relief when I know I'm safe again. Sometimes I walk into the woods at night. By myself. That's the best. My imagination goes wild with all the terrible things that could happen to me."

Robby Jr. laughs. He watches the water that's dripped off her stain the rock dark. "I've never heard of anyone doing anything like that."

"I do it all the time. Even today. I should feel safe with all you people, but I freaked myself out with the swim across the quarry."

"Is that the only way you could do it?"

"Oh, no. I was thinking before, when I was drinking my beer, that it would be really scary to jump off the cliff into the water. That's what you're going to do, right?"

"I've never jumped in my life." Robby Jr. glances behind him at the craggy wall. "I don't think it's very safe. I read in the paper that three guys died here last summer."

"I heard about that. I think they make those stories up. They can't keep people out with their signs so they try to trick them into staying away. It'd work for my folks. Well, it works the opposite for me. As soon as I heard about it, I told my friend Cara, and she and I drove over here looking for the quarry. We never found it, though."

"Girls shouldn't come here alone. Look at all the weirdos here. You wouldn't want to run into a bunch of guys like me and Tommy and Little Bill if you were all alone, would you?" He lunges at her, grinning and pretends to grab her arm. She giggles and leans against him, briefly.

"I just told you I like getting scared."

"Ouch!" yells Colleen from across the water. She jumps around shaking her

forearm wildly. "Ow ow ow!" she yells, running a little way down the beach. Tommy and Little Bill go over to her.

"What's wrong?" Robby Jr. hollers. He has to repeat it three times before anyone answers.

"She got stung," shouts Little Bill. She must've been standing right on top of a yellowjacket nest.

"Is she allergic?" Tonya asks.

"No, but I should go over there."

"Well, I'll come with you."

They swim back to the beach. Colleen sits on one of the logs with her hand in the ice in the beer cooler. Little Bill fusses around her but she's ignoring him. "Are you OK?" Robby Jr. asks her.

"No," she tells him, glaring and holding out her stung hand to show three white lumps with red dots in the centers. "Yellowjackets are the worst kind of stings."

"Can I do anything?"

"I want to go home."

"Honey, we just got here." Robby Jr. sits down next to her. "Just have a beer and you'll feel better."

"No! You just want to stay here so you can get on that little girl," Colleen

hisses. "Well, I don't care. I want you to take me the hell home."

"Shh, shh. OK. We'll go. Just let me get my shirt and shoes. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

They gather up their things and tell everyone goodbye. It feels hotter now than when they arrived and Robby Jr.'s hair is almost dry. Tonya smiles at him as he's getting ready to walk away and he wants to hug her or something but Tommy comes over and he and Tonya start kissing. Robby Jr. tells Little Bill he'll see him at work. Down the beach, the spud launcher discharges and the report echoes up and down the canyon.

EIGHT

On hot days Marcy takes Julia to Muddy Creek to swim. The walk from the house to the stone bridge takes ten minutes. It's on the loop Marcy walks every dusk to keep her weight down. Sometimes she looks over her shoulder at the dust rising behind and imagines it's thick enough to hide things. The trees, leaves limp over the road, hang grey in all that dust.

The water under the bridge is about 8 feet deep; some of the local kids dammed the creek there with rocks and sticks so they could leap howling off the bridge ledge into the water. Marcy has stood before on the bridge railing looking down, toes curling into concrete, her reflection, ripple-broke, staring up at her and she has thought "this is what suicide is like, death staring me in the face." If only she were brave enough to do it. Hold her breath and throw her body. Instead she has forbidden Julia ever to stand on that railing and plunge those ten feet into inky water. Marcy's afraid she'll sneak here and do it anyway, when Marcy's distracted by something else. She imagines the frantic search, breaking the news to Julia's parents, and shudders. As she dismounted that day, tangled in relief and cowardice, she saw a copperhead sunning itself on a brush branch below her.

Marcy and Julia take their shoes off and pile them on the road shoulder at the head of the steep, muddy path. They pick their way down to the water, careful of sharp stones and broken bottles. Julia plunges right into the water; Marcy seats

herself on a fallen branch. She feels uneasy wading in the creek. She fears her feet will brush against minnows and craw-dads and slippery rocks, mud oozing between her toes where she can't see the bottom. Fish hooks. Creatures and objects she'd never have encountered in the city. Even if she's sweating, she'll sit on the beach digging her fingers in the gravel and watch Julia splash. It's these humid summer afternoons that Marcy catches herself staring, drawing lines through rocks and driftlogs, imagining the people who spray-painted the graffiti on the bridge, and talking inside her head.

Why this summer does she feel so discontented? What inside her is changing? Is it the ugly little girl she spends her days with? She carresses her new-muscle calf. The weight she has lost? Why is it when Buzz comes home that she wants to leave the house? Since when have crickets made her cry and every sunset twisted her throat and made her feel tiny and pressed upon?

Buzz and baseball bore her. She'll sit in the living room with him at night and every sound he makes grates. She's seeing things about him that she's accepted for twenty-four years and suddenly she despises him for them. She wouldn't let him kiss her yesterday because of the shock of hair growing between his eyebrows. In bed, looking at him in the light of her reading lamp, she saw that patch of hair growing like a vegetable garden and she wanted to hurt him.

There's no one she can talk to about this. All of Marcy's close friends are also

Buzz's. For so long they've shared everything: house, bed, friends, conversations, weight problems. Large, reticent Geraldine would scowl and misinterpret. Parents aren't supposed to involve their children in domestic disputes anyway, are they? It hasn't become a dispute yet either. The other day Marcy, after snapping at Buzz in the kitchen, sat down beside him at the table and admitted that she thought there was a problem. "I'm not sure I'm happy," she told him.

"What did I do?" he asked, surprised, angry she'd snapped at him.

"I don't know. Nothing. I don't know why I feel this way."

Buzz watched her politely for a minute. Then he got up and opened the refrigerator door. "Do we have anything in here to eat?"

Marcy spent the first part of the summer worrying about Geraldine. She envied that woman, Terry, with the cute, thin daughter who has more boys calling than she knows what to do with. Why couldn't Geraldine change? Why couldn't she be perfect like that other woman's daughter? Eventually she stopped going to the Think Thin meetings; they made her too anxious. She's done OK with keeping her weight down by herself. Now, though, Marcy wonders if the problem doesn't exist solely inside her. Geraldine's going to be who she's going to be. Marcy's the one who's really unhappy. She constantly feels like she wants to be somewhere else.

Sometimes Marcy pretends to be other women she knows. Recently she's been thinking often about Julia's mother. Sheila Backbrast smells like sweat and peaches.

When she handles things, she holds them at arm's length from herself. She cringes around the edges of things in a way that makes Marcy sure her husband beats her. Julia obeys her with minimum respect, always pausing before responding. Marcy pictures Sheila returning with Julia to that miserable house they rent and shucking her clothes for the shower, her body long and brown in the spray. She imagines that after the shower, the scent of overripe peaches remains, unscrubbable.

She feels Sheila's frustration as she cleans the paintless house's kitchen, gives Julia a school lesson at the swaying kitchen table her husband built while pursuing a career as an interpretive furniture designer. Her head bent in a ray of late afternoon sun, swirling motes with her breath, doesn't she want to escape, too?

"Watch me," Julia shouts to Marcy, splashing. "Count how many somersaults I can do!"

Marcy counts, remembering Geraldine at this same age. Chubby Geraldine playing with dolls, playing princess, playing bride. Marcy let her fingertips brush the ends of Geraldine's hair, picturing her daughter's far-off wedding.

Depression. She's been depressed so long she's not even sure any other state of emotion exists. She can't talk about it with Buzz, he's eons away. He's like a piece of driftwood on the other side of the globe.

Sometimes Marcy fantasizes about leaving him. Packing her clothes and running away from him and her normal life. Becoming a Sheila Backburst and

blending in with the migrant workers on one of the farms around here and being swept along. She imagines herself as a bit of bark on Muddy Creek. She'd float and float and eventually end up in the Susquehanna, then in the Chesapeake.

Marcy hears a muffler and looks up to see dust rising, boiling off the dirt road before she sees the truck. It's a tan extended-cab pick-up heading over the bridge, but then the driver turns his huge mirrored sunglasses toward Marcy on the bank and slows. Marcy's heart pumps fast as the engine cuts and dies. The bridge wall blocks her view of the truck and she holds her breath for a long moment willing the engine to start up again.

She sees the arc of the top of the bridge--white, sky topped--a blue sky she's never noticed before. Everything seems to stop, even the ripples on the water. Then a door slams and echoes. There are no houses in sight, none within yelling distance. Besides everyone works and is in Red Lion or York all day. Marcy and Julia left their shoes at the top of the embankment so they wouldn't get muddy by the water. If she had her shoes, Marcy could duck away into the woods, she guesses--grab Julia by the arm and disappear into the jungle-patterned darkness if the man threatens. But with the jagged summer undergrowth in full maturity her feet would be torn in seconds. She hisses for Julia to get out of the water. Julia ignores her, little bitch. The man appears on the bridge. He's about Geraldine's ago--maybe twenty-two or so--and pudgy but hard-looking at the same time. He aims his mirrored glasses down at

Marcy and Julia in the creek. He has a vacant look about him. Something weird. Unnerved, Marcy steels herself to wade into the creek after Julia and drag her out when the man says, "Hello." His puffy, vague face breaks into a smile and he leans on the wall--like he knows them--and gazes into the water under the bridge. "How's the water?" He takes his cigarette out of his mouth and waves at his reflection.

"It's nice," yells Julia. "I can jump off that bridge."

"Get out of that water, now," Marcy tells her. "It's time to go meet your mother."

"You wanna watch me?" Julia sucks a mouthful of creekwater and jets it out between her front teeth.

"Hey, ma'am, I ain't going to bother you. Don't leave on my account." The man scratches himself and shifts his weight. A roll of his fat presses into and up over the concrete bridge wall. "You can jump from all the way up here?"

"Sure I can!"

"We were leaving now anyway," Marcy says.

"But your little girl doesn't want to leave." He spits into the water and watches it hit the water with a pop, downstream from Julia.

"We're late anyway. Come here," she yells at Julia who moves toward her, kicking her feet and splashing.

"You need a ride home? I notice you ain't got a car and there aren't any

houses.”

“No!”

“Alright, alright. I don’t want to bother you, ma’am. I’ll be on my way.” The man backs away, seeming to sink below the bridge wall.

Marcy listens for the truck door and doesn’t hear it. She’s almost afraid to move. She’s on the alert, watching all sides as if this fat boy could sneak through the brush and pop around behind her. She could be trapped down here. If he came down the path from the road he’d block her escape. She’d never be able to outrun him in the woods barefoot, with Julia. She’ll have to go back up the path herself and hope he doesn’t bother her on her way back to the house. She throws Julia’s towel at her and grabs her arm. Julia starts whining and gets smacked. No sound but the gravel and glut of mud underfoot. Marcy pushes Julia ahead of her up the steep trail to the road. The water dripping off Julia makes the going slick and Marcy’s feet keep slipping out from under her. She ends up with a gravely skinned knee. Marcy pulls herself to the top by tree roots.

The man is sitting on his truck hood, shirt off, watching them. He doesn’t say anything even when Marcy stares at him in panting fear and hatred. She hates all men for this, especially Buzz. The strange man’s skin looks pink and sunburned and the mirrored glasses glitter. Marcy turns her back and pulls Julia briskly down the road. She doesn’t look back. Seconds later, she hears the engine start up.

NINE

Mom's yard-sale is a four-day affair--Thursday through Sunday. She has a prime location--people can pull right off Rt. 74 into her driveway. Since 74 carries all the traffic between Red Lion and Delta she does pretty well. To help out, Robby Jr. and Colleen make some signs with posterboard and florescent markers and hang them on telephone poles around Red Lion and Brogue. They lend her a table out of their basement so she can display her kitchenware. Colleen goes over on Saturday afternoon, slathering herself with suntan oil and lounging in a chair next to Mom to keep an eye on things.

Robby Jr. stops by Sunday evening to drive all the unsalables to the thrift shop in town. Twenty years' belongings have dwindled to a tiny pile beside the barn-shaped mailbox. It looks like the scavengers took what they wanted and left, though. Mom's drive is empty except for one battered green car. Robby Jr. doesn't park in the driveway; he pulls right onto the lawn next to the pile of junk. He's out of the cab and tossing the first armload into the back of his Bronco when he catches sight of Mom. She's in the empty garage with some old man. They're sitting in a couple of lawn chairs that should have been sold. Springdale Heights, her new apartment complex, has strict rules about all lawn furniture being identical. Mom knows she'll be fined for breaking the rule.

Annoyed, Robby Jr. makes as much noise as possible loading some rusty

garden tools. These should have been put in a box. They'll stain the carpeting in the back of his vehicle. Mom hardly looks up at the clangs; she's in conversation with the old man.

Robby Jr. leans on the Bronco, waiting for his mother to show him what else needs loading, but she and the old man talk on and on. Robby Jr. hates the way old people can gab forever and stifles the urge to lean on the horn. That'd light fire under their asses. Unless the old man is hard of hearing--it seems probable, the way he keeps leaning closer and closer to Robby Jr.'s mother. The old people smile at each other and if Robby Jr. didn't know better, he'd think they were flirting or something.

"Come on, Mom," he yells. "I don't have all day."

His mother heaves herself out of the lawn chair and stiffly wanders toward Robby Jr. and the truck. The old man follows, reaching for her elbow, then changing his mind and extending his hand at Robby Jr. He's a small old man with twiggy, barky-looking limbs, white eyebrows and a paunch under a tight orange t-shirt. "This is my son, Robert," Mom tells the old man. "Robby Jr., this is Mr. Hassal." Mr. Hassal's shakes Robby Jr.'s hand with such energy, his tummy jiggles.

Mother explains that Mr. Hassal (who goes to yard-sales as a hobby-- "I'd do it professional if they had professional spots for people like me. Ha ha. I told your mother, I said, this is the best yard sale I been to in weeks. Only one 'twas better was

over to Felton about two weeks ago.”) dropped by the sale Thursday to price Robby Jr.’s father’s hedge clippers which Mom sold for four dollars. Robby Sr. would have killed her for that if he were alive to do it; he had kept those clippers oiled and clipping-free for ten years. Mint. Mother and Mr. Hassal have some kind of a joke about Mr Hassal trying out the clippers that Robby Jr. doesn’t quite get but finds nauseating. But apparently after whatever incident that makes them giggle occurred, Mr. Hassal helped Mom arrange her sale items in a more appealing way to attract potential customers; how would he have seen the old blender he bought for \$1.50 if he hadn’t?

How did she let him get away with all this? What was she thinking? Then she let Mr. Hassal fix the dripping faucet in the kitchen sink. Granted Mom’d been after Robby Jr. for weeks about it; it needed to be fixed before she moved out and he’d never gotten around to doing it but--

“You let him in the house?” There’s something very wrong about all this.

“Someone needed to fix the sink.” Mr. Hassal’s hand has crept behind Mom like triangle creeper vine. Robby Jr.’s waiting for her to jump and slap it away and banish Mr. Hassal from the lawn but nothing happens. Mr. Hassal’s fingers appear on the other side of Mom’s waist wiggling like tongues. Mom leans into Mr. Hassal’s embrace.

“It was dripping about \$10 of water a month. I told your mother, I said ‘you’ll

be badly surprised when you got the water bill'."

"We have a well." Robby Jr. says flatly.

It turns out that Mr. Hassal stopped at the yard sale Friday and Saturday, too. He took Mom out to dinner at the Dairyland Family Restaurant Saturday night. He called *that* her payment for when he fixed the faucet.

"I could have charged her cash for it, but what I did was this: I told her, I said if she went out to eat with me she was all paid up. And your mother sure can eat for such a little girl." Mom beams.

What can Robby Jr. say? He's shocked. This guy could be a lunatic. What does his mother know about him? She has no sense. She's always been kind of a dingbat but she'd made out OK when Robby Sr.'d been around to take care of her. If Robby Jr.'d kept an eye on her, this never would've happened. What are people going to say now that she's going around town with this freak? Robby Jr. loathes Mr. Hassal. Robby Jr. looks at Mom who with folded hands smiles at Mr. Hassal. What could possibly have made her go out to dinner with him when she could have just as easily eaten with Robby Jr. and Colleen? They're always glad to have her. And what about poor Robby Sr.? He hasn't even cooled in his grave before she's got someone else taking over. If Robby Sr. were here, none of this would be happening. Women are so fucking weak. Robby Jr. turns away and picks up some boxes to load into the truck.

"Leave those. Those are Mr. Hassal's," Mom tells him. "The other pile is for the thrift shop."

With Mr. Hassal directing, Robby Jr. gets the truck loaded. He wonders if Mr. Hassal paid for those other boxes. What's inside? Family heirlooms? Stuff that he and Colleen said they wanted out of Mom's house? All he knows is all the stuff they said they were taking better be there tomorrow when they come to pick it up. He's ready to kick open the boxes and dig around inside them but he reminds himself Mom already gave them a lot of good stuff--the big TV, her car; really it is her decision what she wants to do with her things. Yeah, but Colleen's gonna flip if Mom gave away the shit she wants. Mom should've thought about that before she went and got cozy with this weirdo. He's ready to explode but he kisses Mom on the cheek and gets in his truck. He'd love to knock out a few of Mr. Hassal's teeth if he's got any left.

Colleen's watching the new TV when he gets home. She hears him banging around in the kitchen and yells out "Guess what! The Blondie story's going to be in the *National Enquirer*. I bet that's the first time anyone in Red Lion ever made the national news. And who is it but some dog."

Robby Jr. grunts in reply. He slams a cabinet door so hard the glasses rattle inside. "What's wrong?" Colleen asks him.

When he breaks the news about Mr. Hassal, Colleen says, "I think it's cute

your mom got a boyfriend. Maybe she'll cheer up now. She was so bummed living by herself like that."

"He's not a boyfriend. They just met Thursday--"

"Old people go fast."

"But what about my father? How can she forget about my father?"

"Honey, she hasn't forgotten him."

"So why's she--"

"You can't expect a person's life to end when their mate dies. She's entitled to live and be happy."

"How can she?"

"Oh, Honey. Come here." Colleen smells of fries and grease from work.

Nestled at the breast of Colleen's waitress uniform, he tells her the other part. The part about Mom giving Mr. Hassal the boxes of stuff. Colleen stiffens. Robby Jr. feels it. Her hands feel cold at his neck and a little like talons. "I don't know what was in them," he says. "The lids were taped shut."

"Well," Colleen says, carefully, "I'm sure she wouldn't give him any of the things we told her we wanted."

"I hope not."

"What do you mean? We walked all through that house and very clearly put our names on everything we wanted, the things we told her not to sell at that little

sale of hers.”

“I don’t know. Mom’s kind of dumb like that. She might have forgotten all about it.” Robby Jr. takes a deep breath. He hugs Colleen. “Come on, Honey, don’t worry about it. Did we really need all that stuff anyway? Our house would have looked identical to her old one. How weird would that be? Besides, she was already really generous with us. We have the car here and the TV already. She can’t give any of that to him.”

“I can’t believe you, Robby Jr.!” Colleen pushes him away so hard he rolls off the couch and scrapes his elbow on the carpet. “Your mother could be giving away your...our inheritance and you don’t give a shit!”

She told her parents she was spending the night at Cara's house. They bought it because she always spends the night there. She and Cara do stuff like watch movies and eat pizza and talk about boys.

Cara picks her up at her house and drops her off at the Sunoco where Tommy works. He comes out of the garage when he sees the car and carries Tonya's overnight bag into the glassed-in office. He wears stained coveralls and he needs to shave. He told her they were going to Little Bill's place for dinner and beer. It's annoying because Tonya spent two and a half hours getting ready. She tried out a new hairstyle she saw in one of her *YM* magazines. It would be nice if Tommy at least noticed. Not to mention he clean himself up for her for once. Tonya waves as Cara drives off, then follows Tommy.

He sets her bag on a chair in the office. "I'm not done yet. You gotta wait."

"OK," she says, pressing against him, twining her hands behind his neck. She's been thinking all afternoon about how it would be to make out in the service station's office. She wants Tommy to pick her up and set her on the counter amid piles of bills and receipts. She wants to be able to describe it all to Cara on the phone when she asks how the date went. But all Tommy does is kiss her like he doesn't really want to anyway, and walk out of the room. He confuses her. She never knows when he's going to be all over her or when he's going to blow her off.

She sits down beside her bag and notices he left a grease stain on the handle. She rubs at it and smears it deeper into the cloth. Her mom'll want to know where that came from. She feels like throwing the bag across the room but her foundation bottle might break and get all over her clothes. She picks her cuticles instead. Can't Tommy do anything right?

She hears him tapping on something in the garage; a hollow angry sound; a noise like Freddy Krueger would make to lure kids down to the boiler room in the *Nightmare on Elmstreet* movies. She's seen enough horror movies (always at Cara's house) to know better than to check out any scary sounds. It's silly, just a mind game to make her less bored while she waits for Tommy, but there were times when her family went out somewhere stupid and she stayed home by herself that she really did scare herself into thinking some weirdo was trying to kill her. Even with the doors locked, there was always the nagging fear that she'd missed one and someone was creeping up behind her. She's always afraid to watch TV or talk on the phone at these times; the noise distracts her. Once she sat on the floor of her bedroom in the dark with her back bracing the door and a carving knife beside her.

She hopes that weird older guy who works in the shop doesn't come in and try to talk to her again. Tommy told her he was harmless but he gives her the creeps anyway. Something's up with one of his eyes; it shakes around.

She feels funny all of a sudden, not sure she should be here. Not because she's

sneaking out to be with Tommy. Her parents would kill her, but how're they going to find out? No, it serves them right. They never let her do anything. Is it something about Tommy? He's different from the guys at school. He's older, twenty three. It makes Tonya feel good, desirable, grown up, to know he likes her. He seems taller and heavier and wider than the other boys she knows. Sometimes he's not very nice to her. He smells like metal.

Tonya can see a pretty good reflection of herself in the office window. She checks how she looks, thinking maybe Tommy didn't want to make out because she looked funny, but she looks great. She did her hair up in a French twist that her magazine told her looked mature and sophisticated. Is Tommy too dumb to appreciate that?

After Tommy finishes in the garage, he comes in to get her. He's peeled off his coverall and washed his face but he still looks dirty. She smiles at him anyway and gets into his truck. It's an extended-cab truck like all the farmers drive. The inside of the cab is coated with some sooty powder and Tonya has to put her feet on the dash because the floor is full of tools. The seat on the driver's side is mended with duct tape. Tommy puts on a pair of hideous sunglasses. When he looks at Tonya, she can see her reflection in them. She hopes they don't see anyone she knows while he's wearing them. Tommy plays Metallica on the tape deck loud, and they don't talk. By the time they get to Little Bill's, which is back a bunch of rough, winding roads,

Tonya's nauseous.

Little Bill lives in a broken-down trailer on a wooded lot with about five other broken-down trailers. There're a lot of rusted appliances lying around the rim of the lot creating the feel of a kind of fence: an overturned stove with the elements sprawling like antennas, tires, mattresses. An old man in a green car partially blocks the drive and Tommy has to shift the truck into 4-wheel drive to get around him. The old man just watches.

Tonya climbs out of the truck and takes some deep breaths. "Hi, Little Bill," she calls when he comes out on the porch to greet them. Hopefully he's got some aspirin.

A very pale girl with wild black hair and tight jeans comes out of the trailer after Little Bill. She's holding a baby on each hip. Little Bill has a third baby over his shoulder. The girl scowls at Tonya and whispers something to Little Bill that makes him flush.

Tonya rubs her hands on her shorts and walks toward the porch. The gravel crunches under her new sandals. "Hi, I'm Tonya," she says to the other girl. Why hasn't Tommy introduced her?

"Crystal," says Crystal. She keeps her face flat and saggy when she says it. She jiggles the babies roughly up and down. She might as well be making butter.

"What's for dinner?" Tommy yells.

They eat hamburgers on the porch. At the beginning of the summer, Tonya decided to become a vegetarian. She eats some potato chips off a styrofoam plate. She isn't real hungry anyway. She doesn't like the taste, really, but she drinks the beers Little Bill and Tommy hand her. She can't feel comfortable at dinner on the trailer porch overlooking the woods deep in purple shadows. Nobody talks to her and the mosquitoes buzz and hum around her ears and knee backs. Tonya holds one of the babies for a while until it spits up on her shorts. That's gross and she puts her back in the playpen. Neither Crystal nor Little Bill apologizes for the baby. The other two babies, in highchairs, mash burger and bun into the highchair trays with their fingers. Tonya wouldn't have thought Little Bill and Crystal were old enough to have three babies. Maybe they're older than they look. The only other time Tonya met Tommy's friends was the day they all went swimming in the quarry. Tommy hadn't paid a lot of attention to her then either. That other guy, Robby Jr., had been nice to her, though, so she'd had a good time.

Crystal ignores her most of all. Every once in a while Little Bill asks Tonya a question and every once in a while, Tommy puts his hand on her leg, but Crystal doesn't say anything. When she looks at her, it's mean, icy stares, the kind of stares Tonya's little brothers give her when she threatens to tell on them. What's that girl's problem? Tonya's nervous about spending the night in her trailer.

After three beers, Tonya tries to get in on the conversation. She doesn't feel

shy anymore. She feels cute and funny. Every once in a while she wanders inside to use the bathroom. The inside of the trailer is dark and musty and dirty. There's no way in hell Tonya'd ever live in a place like this. She's glad her parents have the money to send her to college. She's going to go to some private school in the city, far far away from here and she's never going to set foot in a trailer again. She's never going to look at another field or tractor or Amish buggy again. She'll never mow the lawn or shovel snow again.

She walks into the babies' room by accident. It's crammed with cribs and toys. Tonya doesn't see how Little Bill and Crystal get the babies into the far cribs. Do they throw them? She feels bad for those poor little kids. It's not fair they have to grow up like this. Their mother can't even use proper English.

Back outside, in the dark, the beer has run out. Tommy and Little Bill and Crystal are passing around a bottle of gin. They seem to have run out of things to talk about. Tonya finds her way to Tommy's side by the glow of his cigarette. When she sits down, he hands her the bottle. Across the way, the old man from the green car rocks on his porch and spits tobacco juice into a Folger's can. He's holding a fat, grey cat on his lap.

Later, Tonya lies sobering on the fold-out sofa-bed in Little Bill and Crystal's trailer with the sheet twisted around her ankles. When she woke up, it took her a while to figure out where she was. Now she's depressed and anxious. Tommy snores

beside her. The clock on the microwave blinks and somewhere a faucet's dripping.

Now, she just feels ill. The trailer's pitch black and spinning. Tonya's mouth is so dry her tongue sticks to the roof and sides. Why did she come here? Why did she sneak out of her safe house to spend the night with him? Why did she have so much to drink? Here she is in bed with a guy she doesn't even really know. A guy who she certainly doesn't love.

The first time she'd had sex with Tommy was two weeks ago when they were out driving around. He'd parked on a farm road by a cow field and they started making out. She could see the moon and some far-off houselights before the windows got steamed up. Tommy asked her how many guys she'd slept with before and she told him two. She didn't want to seem like a baby. The sex wasn't a big deal. It got awkward and cramped and she bruised her leg on one of the seat belts. She had trouble getting her bra back on in the steamy car. She'd heard that the first time hurts and it did, a little. Nothing to cry about. She didn't do that until she got home.

She thought maybe Tommy wouldn't call her after that. That's the way it always happens in the movies. But he'd called and she snuck out to see him again the next night. Her parents let her talk to him on the phone. She told them he's sixteen and hangs out with Joel. They don't know anything.

Tonight she wonders what she's doing with him. She'd never get to go to

Homecoming with him in the fall--her parents'd take one look at his coverall and die. He never takes her on dates, not even to the movies. She wanted him to take her to *ID-4* and he said it sounded stupid. That science fiction crap's for kids, he said. They don't have much to talk about. All he seems to know is stuff about cars and hunting. He never wants to hear about what went on with her family during the day. She told him once how her mom was getting on her case about something and he said "move out."

She should have known better than to come with him to Little Bill and Crystal's place. All they all did all night was play cards and drink. Tonya's head was bobbing like a cabbage on a stalk by 9 pm. Her legs were swollen with mosquito bites. She got a headache from the crying babies. Finally she said she'd had enough and Crystal grudgingly helped her open the sofa bed. The sheets she gave her to put on it didn't smell very clean. The whole place smells like dirty diapers and burned coffee. Tonya could have had a better time babysitting her little brothers or being grounded.

She didn't get to take a shower before bed. Her hair feels oily and matty. Her fingers smell like smoke. Tommy's worse than she is. He changed out of his coveralls after work but he didn't shower either; he didn't even wash his hands. She noticed the crescents of dark grit under his nails at the card table. Every time he'd deal and arrange his cards, he'd wiggle his stumped fingers and flash those blackened

nails. Watching them, Tonya grew disgusted. The least he could do is fix himself up a little for her.

All at once, she thinks of Joel. She's never been interested in him, but when he comes to see her, he's always very clean and coated with gallons of cologne. And that time he brought her the flowers? That was sweet in a weird little way. He'd certainly never make her spend the night in some smelly trailer.

Suddenly she hears yelling: arguing. Little Bill and Crystal are going at it back in their bedroom. Something crashes. "Bastard!"

A chorus of baby voices starts up. The bedroom door slams. The fighting voices get closer, in the hall. "I'm getting the hell out of here." There's a slapping sound. Tonya freezes on the sofa, watching as an angry shadow whirls through the room, stumbling into the foot of the fold-out. The figure rights itself and slams out the door. Tommy sleeps on.

They shouldn't be here. Why did she agree to come here with Tommy? She doesn't even really like him and now she might end up getting killed by his weird friends. Should she call up Cara and ask her to come pick her up? That's not going to help much--Tommy drove down so many back roads, she doesn't have the slightest idea where she is. They can't be here in the morning. Imagine how weird it would be.

A second person runs through the living room. Tonya can see Crystal's wild

hair as she thunders into the kitchenette. There's a thud, a curse and a smooch of skin on linoleum in the dark. She must've tripped over something in there. Tonya lies still, listening for a few moments. A car starts in the driveway and Crystal runs back into the bedroom, crying.

Tonya nudges Tommy. He rolls and throws his arm over her. "Wake up," she tells him. "You need to drive me home."

"Huh?"

"They've been killing each other. Little Bill just drove off. I don't think we should stay here."

"I'm asleep," Tommy tells her. His breath is terrible. She has to turn her head away from it to breathe.

"I'm serious, Tommy." Tonya sits on the edge of the bed. She gingerly gropes the floor for her clothes. She's starting to feel really upset.

Tommy sits up beside her. "Where are you going?" His voice is still slurry from beer.

"Home, I said."

"I'm not taking you. How're you going to get there?"

"I guess I'll walk." She finds her bra twisted around one of the fold-out's legs. She goes to put it on and Tommy slaps it out of her hand.

"Oww. Stop it!"

"No." He throws her bra across the room. She hears it land, the metal hook clacking something in the kitchen.

Tonya stands up. She's stepping away from the bed when he grabs her and yanks her back. She falls, the bed creaks alarmingly, the whole trailer rocks, and she gouges her leg on the hinge of the bed frame.

She's supposed to protect herself but she starts crying like a baby. Like one of her stupid little brothers. Tommy lets go of her. "Shut up," he tells her. She can't. She rolls over and buries her face in a pillow. Her nose fills up with snot and she can't breathe. She can feel the pillow getting sopped with snot and tears. After a while Tommy says, "Do you just want to go home?"

She doesn't say anything. She knows her leg's bleeding all over Crystal's sheets. She doesn't care. She probably needs stitches. Tommy stands up. Tonya hears him dressing.

"Put your clothes on. I'm taking you home."

ELEVEN

It rains on Mom's sixty-fourth birthday and Robby Jr. takes her out to a surprise lunch at the Dairyland Family Restaurant. He'd forgotten about her birthday. It totally slipped his mind. It's Saturday and he's coming back from True-Value where Colleen sent him for a toilet plunger and he stops by her new apartment to see if she'll give him a Coke. He likes dropping by the new place. It makes him happy to see Mom installed in such a modern apartment complex. The apartment has one bathroom, a living room, where she keeps her collections of china dolls and toys, and a tiny kitchen. "Why don't you get some plants, Mom? You could have a little garden on the balcony." Opening the fridge, Robby Jr. sees the cards she's got taped up. He plays it like he remembered it the whole time. "Happy Birthday, Mom. Get yourself ready. I'm taking you to lunch."

"What fun!" she says. "Meals with two men today. Mr. Hassal's cooking me dinner tonight. It'd really help out if you could drop me off at his house later on. I meant to call you earlier, but it slipped my mind."

"Uh, fine." Robby Jr.'s really going to try and be easy on this Mr. Hassal character. He doesn't like him but like Colleen says, Mom seems a lot better since she's been hanging around with him. Maybe she just needs to have a friend her own age instead of spending all her time with Robby Jr. and Colleen.

"Great," says Mom, and disappears into the bedroom to change. While she's

in there, Robby Jr. snoops around her kitchen. What's he looking for? Not sure exactly. Evidence that she's been entertaining Mr. Hassal? He doesn't find much. Even in the bathroom it's just old-lady stuff. Powders and pills. Only one toothbrush.

When Mom comes out, she's dressed in a short, snug, red dress out of which her freckled bosom burgeons. Her hair is blown high and wild and her perfume overpowers him. She carries a flowered overnight case which Robby Jr. eyes with suspicion. "What's that, Mom? Why're you so dressed up?" Mom merely smiles and tugs her panty hose. "Let's go!"

If it wasn't raining, he really wouldn't have to drive from her house to the restaurant. It's an easy enough walk--that's why Mom sold her car. She can pretty much walk anywhere she needs to go and if she needs a ride somewhere, Robby Jr. can always give her a lift. Actually, he's a little glad she's not going to be behind the wheel anymore. Honestly, she's too old to be driving.

"How're the people in your building?" he asks as they wait at a light.

"They're fine. Old. But they're all nice."

As they're led to a booth by the window Robby Jr. notices some old guys at the counter turning their heads to watch Mom. She's got on some pretty high heels, Robby Jr. notices. Her skirt is moderately short and static or something makes it ride up the backs of her thighs. She swings her hips like she's Marilyn Monroe. People

must think she's really wild. "Stop it, Mom," Robby Jr. hisses.

"Stop what?"

Robby Jr.'s so busy glaring he doesn't decide what to order. He's been in here a few times when Colleen's been working and he doesn't like the way the men look at her either. He's told her it bothers him and he'd rather she had some other kind of job--she could work at Giant or deliver newspapers or something--but she just laughs at him. A lot of times, Colleen doesn't seem to care what people think. She flirts with the customers so much they give her their phone numbers. Then she brings them home and waves them in Robby Jr.'s face. Like he's supposed to be proud of her or something. Now Mom's eating up the attention in the same way. What's up with women? Mom's too old to act this way.

The waitress comes and Mom suggests he get the number-two special with bacon. "That's what Mr. Hassal likes."

Tommy says "No." He orders the number four.

"That's tuna," Mom says, reading the menu. "You hate tuna."

"That's what I want." Robby Jr. really wants a cigarette.

"You've hated tuna since you were a little boy. I remember the time in first grade you came home crying from school because you bought your lunch and they served tuna and you wouldn't eat it. I can't believe you like it now."

"Just drop it, Mom, OK?"

Mom stares at him a second, then pulls a few greeting-card envelopes out of her purse. She spreads them on the table and shuffles them around. She slides them on the table like she's a fortune teller. Her arthritis doesn't seem to be bothering her today. Robby Jr. covertly checks her out from what he figures would be the viewpoint of some old fart her age. He watched her walk in here already and saw how she was showing off her legs. They aren't too bad either--strong calves, not many varicose veins. The red heels make them look long and exotic. Robby Jr. wonders what Mom's legs looked like forty years ago when she was first meeting Robby Sr.

Even the rainy-day light coming through the window doesn't do much to hide her wrinkles, but he can imagine her sitting in the same booth at night, dimly lit by florescents and headlights from the parking lot. She must've looked pretty hot to old Mr. Hassal. Especially the way she's popping out of that dress of hers. God, Colleen doesn't even look that good up top. Old people don't think about sex, do they?

"Are you too warm, Robert? You're flushed. It *is* hot in here." Mom fans herself with her deck of envelopes. "You should have Colleen tell the management to turn up the air." She stops and stares at an address. "You know I wish people would stop calling me Mrs. Robert Holmes."

"But that's your name!"

"I have a name of my own. People called me by your father's name the entire

time we were married. Now that he's dead I'd think they'd get over it."

"Mom!"

"Well, it's true, isn't it?"

"Mom, why are you doing this?"

"What?"

"Hanging around with Mr. Hassal."

"What does that have to do with anything."

"Ever since you met him you've been different. Wild or something."

"That's ridiculous."

"Fine." The food arrives. Robby Jr. plows his tuna around his plate with his pickle. He can see Mom ready to nag but she restrains herself.

"Robby Jr., you haven't eaten a thing."

"I'm not hungry."

Mom puts her hand overtop Robby Jr.'s on the tabletop. "Sweetheart, I'm not trying of hurt your feelings. I just enjoy Mr. Hassal's company."

"Fine." He won't meet her eyes.

"Come on Robby Jr., tell me what's wrong."

"What about Dad?"

"Well, your father would want me to be happy. He wouldn't want me to grieve terribly for the rest of my life. Besides I'm not replacing him. Mr Hassal is an

entirely different person. Don't you understand that?"

"But you didn't grieve very long at all--"

"I'm sixty-four years old. If I grieved too long, I'd be dead. Now let's not talk about this anymore. I'm happy. You should be happy for me. Besides, I think Mr. Hassal looks like Clint Eastwood. Tell me how Colleen's doing. Does she like the TV? Is she still so interested in that dog trial?"

"She's fine." Maybe Mom's right. He'd only been thinking about preserving the memory of his father. Maybe he should give Mr. Hassal another chance. They eat. Robby thinks his tuna tastes mushy like old-people food--even the little cake he has them bring out for dessert is soggy than he thinks it should be. Mom stares at the cake a moment like she doesn't know what it is.

After he pays the bill and they walk out to the lot, Mom directs him to Mr. Hassal's place. He hopes Mom doesn't mean to spend the night there but he doesn't ask. He's got a bad feeling about it. Why else would she have that bag? It's too soon for that isn't it? It occurs to him that this must be the way parents of teenagers feel when their children go out on un-chaperoned dates. Bizarre.

Mr. Hassal lives in the middle of nowhere. Robby Jr. uses about a quarter tank of gas on the winding roads. The food from lunch isn't sitting well in his stomach. He asks Mom about fifteen times if she's sure she knows where they're going and he's about to turn back anyway when she indicates a driveway leading to a

bunch of trailers set back from the road.

Mr. Hassal is sitting at the end of the drive in his car. Robby Jr. doesn't notice him at first--it looks like the car is just sitting there on the shoulder but then he sees Mr. Hassal in it. When Robby Jr. pulls around him and drives up near the trailers, Mr Hassal slowly backs in behind.

"What's he doing in there?"

Mom lipsticks in the rearview mirror. "He likes to watch people drive by." She looks at Robby Jr. craftily, smacking her lips. "I think he likes to watch the young girls."

"Isn't that weird? Don't you think that's freaking weird?"

"Robert! Watch your language!"

Mr. Hassal leans in at the Bronco's window. He kisses Mom on the lips.

"Hello, Robert. How are you?"

"Fine."

"Come inside and see Mr. Hassal's place," Mom says, pushing Robby Jr. toward the car door. "I want you two boys to get to know each other."

Robby Jr. hesitates and Mom gives him another shove, harder, and he opens his door. Mr. Hassal helps Mom down.

"Watch out you don't get your shoe caught in that there mud. The fellows over to the Brogue Store said they don't ever remember a summer a dry as this and I

have to agree. It's a good thing we got this rain."

Robby Jr. follows as Mom and the old man skirt the puddles. Mom totters on her heels and leans heavily upon the old man's arm. Close by in one of the other trailers, a baby cries.

Piles of junk clutter Mr Hassal's steps and porch. The porch is a heavy wooden thing, on stilts, with a tin roof that stretches the entire length of the trailer. Climbing the steps, Robby Jr. trips over a can of nails covered in rusty water. Mom giggles. "My graceful son," she tells Mr. Hassal.

Keeping his eye out for more nails, Robby Jr. notices a row of old coffee cans stretching along the entire trailer-edge of the porch. In some places the cans number two and three thick. Each brims with murky brown liquid, possibly tobacco juice.

The interior of the trailer is packed. The three of them crowd into the living room area by the door and Mom strokes the spine of the sofa familiarly. "Have a seat, Robby Jr." To sit, Robby Jr. must push aside a flock of throw pillows. He notices handwritten price tags on a few of them. The place has a musty odor that reminds him of mushrooms. Colleen would die if she saw this mess. How can anyone live in a place like this? Sure, Mr. Hassal might be poor, but he could at least clean up, take three quarters of this shit to the dump.

"Do you want a drink?" Mr. Hassal gestures toward the refrigerator. "How about a beer?"

"No thanks," says Robby Jr.

"I'll take a beer." Mom sits on the couch beside Robby Jr. "Get Mr. Hassal to tell you the possum story. Tell him the possum story, Mr. Hassal."

"Well," says Mr. Hassal when he brings Mom her beer in a grungy glass, "there's not much to tell. The possum comes up on the porch and eats the cat food."

"Lois!" giggles Mom into her beer.

"Lois is what I call the cat."

"I see," says Robby Jr.

"Mr. Hassal heard something out on the porch, clanging around. He thought it might be a burglar coming to break in--"

"I crupt up to the door real slow. I told your mother, I said, I was afraid someone was coming in my trailer. I had a chair all ready to slam into that burglar. I got my flashlight all ready to shine in his eyes and blind him--"

"And he shined it out there and all he saw is that possum. It stared at him with its beady red eyes and ran behind that lumber in the corner."

Mr. Hassal puts his hands on his thighs and smiles. "All he was doing was eating out of Lois's bowl. I was about to brain him with a chair and all he was doing was eating catfood."

Mom puts her glass on the coffee table. Robby Jr. can see the sticky tape mark where someone peeled a price tag off. "Tell how he comes back every night."

"And that's the funniest thing. He comes back every night. Lois won't come on the porch while he's up there. She just sits out in the yard and hisses."

"Well," Robby Jr. stands up. "It was nice seeing your place. I'm going to get home now. Can you get home OK, Mom?"

"Mr. Hassal's driving me."

Mr. Hassal walks with Robby Jr. to the door. He plucks at his elbow. "Your mother and I were talking and I told your mother, I said, I thought I'd bring you to my family reunion next weekend."

"Oh--" Robby Jr. looks at Mom. She's plucking lint off one of the pillows.

"And you have a young girlfriend, right? Well bring her along. We'll all go together."

Mr. Hassal smells like mothballs. Robby Jr. tries not to wince. As he steps onto the porch, he imagines he sees tiny, wet-clawed footprints leading to a pile of lumber in the corner.

TWELVE

Little Bill has a ticket to the Orioles game. Robby Jr. gave it to him at work and he's been excited all day. It's gonna be a night out for him and Robby Jr. Robby Jr.'s been hanging out alot with Tommy, and Little Bill's been feeling a little left out. Especially since Tommy and his chick came over the other night and it went badly because he and Crystal had that big fight. He was trying to form his own friendship with Tommy so Robby Jr. won't feel uncomfortable hanging out with the two of them together. It feels like the only time he sees Robby Jr. is lunch hour at work and the two of them are supposed to be best friends. Ever since Crystal came on the scene, Little Bill feels like he doesn't know what his old friend is about anymore.

The only problem about the evening will be telling Crystal about it. She expects him to watch the kids at night. How fair is that? After working at the plant all day, he deserves a night off once in a while. Crystal likes to say she took care of those babies for nine months apiece and now it's Little Bill's turn, but he's had about enough. Now he's stuck watching them while she's out dealing drugs. Tonight he'll put his foot down. There'll be a confrontation but he won't give in.

Crystal heaves herself off the sofa as he walks through the front door.
"Precious and Perfect have diarrhea. They need to be changed. I'm sick of messing with them."

"Are they sick?" The babies crawl over each other in their playpen. They look

OK.

“Do I look like a doctor? How the hell should I know?”

“Did you give them something weird to eat?” Little Bill plucks Ambrosia from the tangle of babies. “Hey Sweetie. You’re not sick, are you?”

“Oooooo,” gurgles Ambrosia as Little Bill wipes dried saliva off her face with the sleeve of his coverall.

Crystal puts her tough hands on her hips. “I just gave them what they always eat.”

“Did you check the playpen for roaches before you put them in it? The ones they chewed on the other day couldn’t have been good for them. Hey, why’d you put Ambrosia in the pen with them? You don’t want all of them sick, do you?”

“What the hell else was I supposed to do with her? Here, you deal with them. I’m getting ready to go out.” She shrugs her shoulders and disappears into the bedroom.

Little Bill probably should’ve told her about his plans before she went to get duded up but she’s so mean when she’s angry. She’s almost as strong as he is and not afraid to fight dirty. She’s scratched bloody lines over his face and neck before and bit a chunk out of the back of his arm when they were fighting. He can’t hit her back, not even to teach her a lesson, because she’s a woman. All he can do is try and pinion her arms to her sides. She’s like a nest of hornets, easier to avoid. She’s

gonna use the sick babies as the reason he can't go. She'll hit the roof if he tells her it's her turn to take care of them. Probably the best thing to do is just sneak out. She can catch up on TV or something. The previews for the Olympics should be on FOX. Maybe she'll have calmed down by the time he gets home. Little Bill wriggles out of his coverall and sits on the couch to wait.

Little Bill hasn't been to a baseball game since his dad took him when he was eleven. That was back before the Orioles moved from the old Memorial Stadium to Camden Yards by the Inner Harbor. He's heard that the new ball park is really nice. It looks that way on TV, clean and freshly painted. Also, since the field is small, a lot of home runs get hit out of it. There's a good chance Little Bill might catch one. If he does, he thinks he might give it to his dad as a make-up present. Maybe that'll help his parents get over their dislike of Crystal and the baby. Maybe his parents'd invite them over to dinner once in a while if that happened.

Robby Jr.'s a regular fan. He's invited Little Bill along before but he's never had enough guts to stand up to Crystal. But now that he's got to support two extra kids and put up with Crystal's dope dealing, he thinks he deserves a night off.

Robby Jr. honks the horn out in the driveway. It's going to be a great night. Crystal's in the bathroom with the door shut. "Who's there?" she yells when she hears the horn. Little Bill slips carefully outside and doesn't answer her. Robby Jr. has brought along Tommy and Little Bill feels a quiver of embarrassment as he climbs

into the back of Robby Jr.'s Bronco. Tommy doesn't mention the incident, so maybe he slept soundly through it. He and Tonya were gone by the time Little Bill got home the next morning.

He waves jauntily at the bathroom window, as they pull away. Crystal's not looking out and Tommy feels like he did at seventeen, hooking school.

"This is really freaky, but I was just down this way the other day. I didn't realize you lived out here, Little Bill," says Robby Jr., easing out of the drive. "My Mom's friends with that old man next door to you."

"Old Mr. Hassal? He's OK. Crystal doesn't like him. She says she saw him out on the porch one day licking the tops of an armload of salad dressing bottles." Little Bill laughs. "I don't mind him, though, except for his cat shits in our yard. I don't want that there when I take the babies out to play. You should've stopped in to see me."

"I never knew you lived all the way out here. You never invited me to your place."

"You should have come out with me the other day. This is pretty lonely," says Tommy. "You do any hunting? I bet you get a lot of deer out this way."

"No," says Little Bill. "I don't like the idea of killing things. Besides, I like beef a lot better than venison."

"Yeah, but remember the time in twelfth grade when we went out with the BB

gun and shot up those plaster deer along 74? The Deerslayers? Ha.” Robby Jr. grins at Little Bill in the rearview mirror. Little Bill smiles back.

Little Bill discovers a case of Bud covered up with a blanket in the backseat with him--for the forty-five-minute ride to Baltimore. Little Bill pictures Crystal standing on the trailer porch waving her fist and smiles as he cracks his first beer. The foam spurts over his hand.

Little Bill worried that Robby Jr. and Tommy'd exclude him from the conversation, but Tommy's actually pretty cool. He tells them all about hunting and he's real up on baseball stats. He's got a terrible case of poison ivy which he jokes about. He also knows a lot of funny jokes about women. The guys laugh at Tommy's jokes and his vigorous scratching and wave at chicks in other cars on the way down I-83. For a while Robby Jr. gets bitching about that old fart, Mr. Hassal, his mother's banging and that makes Little Bill uncomfortable. “Everything in his trailer had a yardsale sticker on it!” The old guy's excentric, but seems harmless. He's probably just really poor. Little Bill and Tommy exchange a glance and Little Bill knows he's feeling the same way. What do you say about that? Robby Jr. finally gets over it and joins Tommy and Little Bill making rude sex gestures out the windows and laughing when the chicks flip them off. It feels great to be one of the guys.

They sit in a parking garage until all the beer is gone. The game has already

started when they arrive at the stadium. Their seats are in the nosebleed section way out in left field but Little Bill's buzzing anyway so it doesn't matter to him.

Everything's bright and solid green and the taller buildings of downtown Baltimore poke over the lip of the stadium. The Orioles already lead and Little Bill gets caught up in the excitement of the crowd and wishes he had a sign to wave around. There's even a little kid sitting a few rows in front of them with a sign printed on the back of a piece of poster board labeled *Elliot's Science Experiment*. It's too far away for Little Bill to see what the experiment was about and he doesn't care anyway. He buys a beer and watches a few minutes before he asks Tommy, "Who's batting?"

"Orioles. Chris Hoiles, the catcher. If you can't tell, watch the big monitor in center field."

It's like TV at home. It tells the names of the players and what team they're on and everything. Little Bill's all set except it's hot as a bitch boxed in here with people on either side. The seats would be a tight fit for midgets. He almost wishes it would rain and everybody would go home. Do they play baseball in the rain?

There's no place for his knees to go except up on the seat in front of him but every time he props them up the woman sitting there gives him a rotten look and he has to take them down. Every seat is taken up, too. Mostly families with kids and Little Bill feels guilty for a second for leaving his own at home. But they're too young for this scene anyway.

He wonders if he and his friends should drink all this beer around the kids but his friends don't seem to notice. There's a plump girl about Little Bill's age sitting catty-cornered in front of him with an older guy. Her father? She's sipping a beer too, so Little Bill guesses it is OK. The girl has neat curly hair clipped back with pearl barrettes. She wears a sleeveless flowered outfit. The flesh on the backs of her arms jiggles engagingly whenever she lifts her cup. She looks respectable.

They each pay for their own beer but Little Bill's friends soon work out a great system for buying food. What they do is go down the row (Little Bill, Robby Jr., Tommy) and assign hits to each of them--home run, double, single. (They leave out triples because nobody ever hits any of those.) Anyway, whoever's hit gets hit first has to buy the peanuts or the nachos or whatever. If nobody's getting hits for a long time, it switches to strike, ball, foul. Little Bill's not always sure what hit gets hit, but his buddies tell him.

They're busy eating and watching the game for a while. Little Bill's not real up on the players so he starts to get bored. Then some chick's picture comes up on the monitor and they start talking about women. The chick has short shorts and a tiny top and huge boobs. She has her arms up in the air swaying to the ball-park music. She must know she's on camera.

"How come she ain't sitting by us?" yells Tommy, loud.

"You got a woman," Robby Jr. tells him. "What about Tonya?"

"Don't mean I couldn't handle some of that, too!" Tommy burps. "Listen to that."

"How are those new kids working out?" Robby Jr. asks Little Bill, turning away from Tommy like he's embarrassed. "Any more on the way?"

"God, I hope not. They're a lot of work."

"Think Crystal'd tell you if she had any other ones around?"

"I don't know. I don't think she's got any more." Little Bill gets ready to tell how ever since all the babies showed up Crystal hasn't been the same girl. Little Bill's felt distant. Sometimes he shudders when she touches him like he's been slopped in the face with a wet towel. He's not sure how to put this, but he really doesn't like her very much anymore. He's beginning to think that if he didn't have the responsibility of the kids, he'd like to date some other girls. While he's trying to say all this to Robby Jr., B.J. Sirhoff hits a home run and everyone jumps up to cheer.

"Hey! You got the peanuts" Tommy yells at Little Bill when they sit back down.

"Huh?"

"The third base guy hit a homer, Dumbass."

In the forth inning, Tommy gets out his cell phone.

"Who you calling, man?"

Tommy makes the "shh, this is important" gesture. They quiet respectfully since Tommy's a bigshot manager at the Sunoco on Rt. 74. He's always bawling out his men and firing people.

"Tommy's gonna give somebody hell," Robby Jr. whispers. "People must think he's really cool." But then Tommy asks in a meek voice to talk to Tonya. She's not home and he calls her mother Ma'am when he hangs up. Robby Jr. lays into him because he's whipped. He's got to call his woman when he's out with the guys and she ain't even around. And she's only fifteen. "She must think she's got you wrapped. I agree." Little Bill laughs. Fifteen seems like an awful young girl for one of them to be dating.

"Just shut up," is all Tommy says. His knuckles get all white from him clenching them.

When he and Little Bill're done laughing, Robby Jr. asks to borrow the cell phone to call Colleen. "I love you honey," he says at the end of a long detailed message on the machine. They're geared up to laugh at him when the blonde girl Little Bill noticed earlier turns around.

"You're terrible," she says. "You're making fun of that poor guy just because he called his girlfriend." The girl pouts her lips in mock disgust. Then she shakes her head and laughs. She has these eyes that stick wide open like she's surprised or scared of something. They're ringed the whole way around with white. It's a little

weird at first but you get used to it. She's pretty fucking hot in her own way. Her eyes and all her make-up remind Little Bill of the china dolls his grandmother collected. Little Bill's heard girls described as looking like dolls before but this is the first time he's ever seen one.

"He's whipped," Tommy tells the girl, pointing at Robby Jr. "He came down here with us and he can't even be away for that long."

"Yeah," says Little Bill, staring at the girl.

"He's just being considerate," the girl says. "He's just letting her know what he's up to so she won't worry."

"Yeah," says Robby Jr. "I don't want Colleen thinking I'm up to something bad."

"Aww, she knows what he's up to. He called her from the car on the way down here," Tommy scoffs. "I've known him for a month and all he ever talks about is Colleen this and Colleen that."

The girl turns on Tommy. "And you just got off the phone after whining to your own girlfriend and now you're making fun of your friend for doing the same thing."

"Yeah!" says Robby Jr., pointing at Tommy

This girl's incredible! She's taking on all his friends and making them look like idiots. Look at them pointing at each other, looking like they'd like to poke each

other's eyes out, like two of the three stooges. Little Bill's never seen such a smart girl. She's beautiful, too. In high school that was unheard of. The smart girls were always dogs.

"The only one of you that seems nice at all is the one on the end." She's noticed Little Bill staring and she flutters her turquoise lids like butterfly wings. "He's nice enough to keep his mouth shut."

Little Bill doesn't mean to ask her but it comes out. "Wanna go in to the bar for a drink?"

The girl gapes. Robby Jr. starts to say something but Tommy kicks him.

"Um, I don't--" the girl starts.

"Geraldine, when's the last time some young man asked you to do anything?"

Her father speaks for the first time from his seat next to her. "Your mother's worried about you and I don't want to support you until you die. Go with him."

Geraldine blushes but gets out of her seat. As Little Bill squeezes past his friends they whoop and whistle at him but he's grinning too wide to care.

"Hi," goes Little Bill as they mount the stadium steps. His shirt clings to his back in the muggy air. He hopes he smells OK.

"Hi," goes Geraldine over her shoulder.

"I'm Little Bill."

"I'm Geraldine."

"I know," says Little Bill, watching her hindquarters as she climbs the steps. He's always liked women with meat on their bones.

They sit on stools at a tall round table in the bar area. It's not clean. Little Bill mops at a sticky ring on the table with some napkins while Geraldine arranges her flowered jumper. Three monitors on the wall show the game. A waitress writes down their order without taking her eyes off the monitor. Little Bill wonders if he could do that. Probably not. In school, his teachers always wrote on his report cards that he had terrible handwriting. He decides that asking Geraldine if she could is too dumb. He can't think of anything good to say to her. He knows he can say things like "do you come to a lot of games", etc, but then she'd just say yes or no and he'd have to say something else. That this is like a game of tennis. It strikes him funny that he's playing a game of tennis at a baseball game.

"--game of tennis at a baseball game," he tells Geraldine.

"Huh?"

Little Bill realizes he was bad at tennis, too. This isn't going well. He watches Geraldine sip her mai tai. Is having a drink with her like cheating on Crystal? Should he feel guilty about it? Crystal won't tell him where she spends *her* evenings. Is this so bad?

At the game with this pretty girl, he feels different--no longer the family man

with so many babies. Geraldine is so classy. Crystal would never sip her drink. She'd order a big cheap beer and guzzle it down. She'd never wear a flowered jumper either unless it was skin tight and her boobs hung out of it. Geraldine's a big girl but she's got style.

She doesn't seem to be having a very good time with Little Bill. They don't seem to have anything to talk about and he's suddenly embarrassed to have thought he had a shot with her. He can tell she'd rather be outside watching the game next to her father. Little Bill's not good enough for a classy girl like Geraldine.

He looks around the bar. Mostly it's well dressed couples, laughing to each other and touching hands. Geraldine's hands and frosty pink fingernails curl around her glass. She's still mostly looking at the monitor.

"I have a girlfriend, Geraldine."

"Huh?" She looks at him, surprised.

"I'm sorry I brought you in here. Maybe we should go back outside."

Geraldine and her father leave in the middle of the sixth inning. They explain they want to beat the post-game traffic. Geraldine's father has work in the morning. Geraldine smiles and thanks Little Bill for the mai tai. Then she's gone. Little Bill's friends were polite enough to wait till now to ask how he got on with her. Little Bill tells them the bar was packed with people looking and he couldn't get much of a feel

there but she gave him her number.

Robby Jr. looks worried.

“How you gonna get that past Crystal, man?” Tommy wants to know.

“Don’t know if I’ll call her. She wasn’t all that great. She wasn’t much at all.”

Then he asks to borrow the cell phone. The phone in the trailer rings and rings.

Crystal must be taking the babies for a ride in their strollers. “It’s the bottom of the seventh inning and the Orioles are winning,” he tells the machine when it comes on.

“I love you, honey. Be home soon.”

His friends are already laughing when he hangs up. “Shut up,” he says. “Can’t you see I’m watching the game?”

THIRTEEN

The ride from Baltimore is long and Little Bill dozes in the back of Robby Jr.'s Bronco while Tommy and Robby Jr. plan a fishing trip they'll take in two weeks up to Muddy Run. Little Bill feels left out that Robby Jr.'s getting so tight with Tommy. It doesn't seem fair that he and Robby Jr. have been friends for so many years and now someone walks in and gets between them. Robby Jr.'s not sure he likes this Tommy guy as much as he thought he did at first.

Still, there's no way Crystal'd let Little Bill escape for a whole weekend so he tries not to think about the fishing instead of wishing he could go and ending up hating her. It's not really Crystal's fault anyway. The guys have girlfriends but not families. That's the kicker. Babies tie you down.

Little Bill likes babies but sometimes he wonders if they're worth giving up his social life for. Giving up nights like tonight. It's not a nice thing to think but Little Bill liked it better before Precious and Perfect moved in. He can't seem to stop giving Ambrosia deferential treatment over them. Maybe it's just because she's his blood child, but it seems to go deeper than that. She's just a better baby. He thinks of the babies as his Ambrosia and her twins. He can't help doing things like waiting to wipe the food off them at mealtime until Ambrosia's been completely fed and cleaned off and settled in her crib. Then he'll mop the twins off.

Little Bill's already making plans for Ambrosia's future. She'll be beautiful, of

course. Little Bill's not sure where she'll get the beauty traits. He considers himself OK looking, but honestly the only time Crystal ever looked pretty was that first night down by the river and it was dark and he was drunk. Still he's seen families in the mall lots of times consisting of beautiful children being towed around by trollish adults.

Every September the York Fair has contests for beautiful children. Little Bill wrote away for an entry form but hasn't told Crystal about it yet. Crystal doesn't believe in that stuff. She'll flip about the entry fee being a waste of money. She'll say Ambrosia is too ugly to compete in a beautiful baby contest. She'll ask him why he's so eager to get Ambrosia out in front of judges like a piece of livestock. Crystal has a cruel way of putting things. Maybe he'll wait until November when the York mall has its Beautiful Baby Photo contest. That would be easier to slip past Crystal this year. He's pleased to see that the Fair has a contest for each age group, all the way up to Miss York County; if Ambrosia gets cheated out of her opportunity to perform this year, there will be plenty more chances. Ambrosia can win prizes every year up until she gets married.

Which worries Little Bill. He knows men will want to take Ambrosia out on dates but he doesn't want her to end up with any jerks. And all men are after one thing. He's a guy. He should know. He'll kill anyone that treats her badly. Maybe he'll permit her to date as long as he goes along to chaperone.

He's dreaming about escorting his daughter to prom when the Bronco pulls into his driveway and he wakes up. He tells his buddies "bye" and stumbles groggily out the door. The trailer is dark, the front door unlocked. In Robby Jr.'s headlights as he pulls away he notices Crystal's car is missing. So is Crystal. The trailer is silent except for the crying of all three babies.

Little Bill turns on the lights. He's not worried that someone broke in because who'd kidnap Crystal and take the car but leave the babies? None of them are in the right cribs and they are not wearing pajamas. Precious and Perfect stand gripping the bars of the cribs like angry monkeys at the zoo. Ambrosia lies on her back, fists and face clenched as she howls. Little Bill swoops her up and clenches her to his thudding heart. His eyes blur with rage at Crystal.

When Crystal shambles in hours later, they fight until four a.m. That bitch has gone far enough. She's drunk and probably high as well; this is the last straw. He tries to kick her and her babies out but she locks herself in the bedroom and he doesn't break in because he doesn't want to pay for a new door. Little Bill ends up getting three hours of sleep on the couch before having to get up for work in the morning. He stops at the Brogue Store for a large coffee which he drinks on the way in, but he still can't keep his mind on his work. He wishes he could have called in sick this morning like Robby Jr. said he was going to, but his dad'd be suspicious if

neither of them showed up and he'd be liable to fire them.

Sharpening the teeth on circular saw blades is never very stimulating, but this morning he's cramped and grouchy and shocked that Crystal can be so negligent. Doesn't she know terrible things can happen because of baby negligence? He wonders how often they're left to fend for themselves while she goes off during the day while he's working. She refused to tell him where she'd been. Dealing? Cheating on him? He's wondered about that but she's always around when he gets home from work and she always wants sex. Sure she goes out every night but that's just with her friends, isn't it? But why couldn't she miss one night so he could go out with his friends? She could have played with the babies and watched the Olympics or something.

He's rolling all this around in his mind when he cuts his hand (the fleshy part of his palm connected to his thumb) badly on a newly sharpened blade. It takes a few seconds to bleed and he inspects the wound dumbly--he can see down to the bone. The skin is dead white in there, then it bleeds.

Little Bill can't take blood. He's wobbling back and forth ogling his hand when a co-worker comes up and makes him sit down with his head between his knees. When the ambulance arrives, Little Bill is only semi-conscious. His breath stutters and he's watching the blood seep out around the edges of the butterfly band-aid someone put on him. He allows himself to be strapped onto a stretcher; then he passes out.

Hospital room. He can't feel his hand at all and there's a swath of bandages where it should be. His hand has been amputated! He's afraid to look to make sure, but lies horrified, imagining how he'll manage without a hand; a stump. There was a kid in middle school who got his right hand mangled in a piece of farm machinery-- the belt that moves ears of corn off a wagon up into the silo. The doctors stitched it up but the kid got gangrene or some infection and had to have it amputated. He got extra time during tests because he hadn't learned to manipulate his hook very well. All the other kids made fun of him and called him Captain Hook. They'd circle at recess yelling "Tick Tock, Tick Tock!" And Captain Hook would chase them, but he was too slow to grab anybody. Once, though, Captain Hook caught some kid. He reached out as the kid dodged past and the hook sank right into the kid's face like he was a trout. The kid didn't realize he was snagged at first and kept on running and the hook ripped through his cheek. Little Bill saw it all because he'd been playing the Captain Hook game, too. He watched the kid squirming on the black-top like a fish waiting to be gutted. The blood, sparkling on the kid's face, sank into the blacktop. Little Bill had to sit down when they carried the kid, screaming, into the nurse's office. Recess ended early that day. All the kids sat at their desks and listened to the kid Captain Hook got screaming until after the ambulance sirens faded away. After that Captain Hook's parents came and took him away, too. He never came back to school after that.

Little Bill's wondering who will be the first one (Crystal?) to call him Captain Hook when the nurse pops her head around the partition.

"Well look who's finally awake! How do you feel, Little Bill?"

"Geraldine?"

"I thought you'd never wake up. Do you remember what happened?"

"Some of it. How long did the surgery take?"

"Well, three stitches--"

"No hook?" Geraldine gets a funny look on her face and Little Bill decides to shut up. "How long am I in for?"

"You were in shock. Then you just went to sleep. Seemed really tired. You can leave anytime you want. Nobody's here to pick you up yet, though."

"So why's my hand all wrapped up?"

"We didn't want you to bump it in your sleep."

The front desk telephoned the trailer and left a message for Crystal on the machine so Little Bill gets up and moves into the waiting room where he gets lost in the afternoon soaps. He's still groggy. He keeps forgetting what he's in here for and thinking he's waiting for Ambrosia to be born again. Then he'll look at the TV and imagine really bizarre things like Crystal acting in all the love scenes and Ambrosia the star of all the pampers commercials.

Later, Geraldine touches his arm and wakes him up. "My shift is over. Do you

need a ride home?"

"I guess so," he tells her. "I'm really sorry about last night."

"Why?" Geraldine asks him.

Geraldine drives a Ford Escort. It is a five-speed and a tight squeeze for the two of them. Geraldine's still dressed in her white nurse's uniform. It makes her look professional and he can catch glimpses of her bra in front because the blouse bulges up a little between the buttons. Little Bill is very aware of her hand resting on the stick between them as she explains she was sitting in the hospital's seats at the game the night before. "It's a small world," Little Bill says. They get along much better than they did last night. Geraldine seems really interested and amused by what Little Bill has to say. Something they gave him at the hospital must have made him a good talker. He tells her about work, "It's tricky operating the grinder machines. It's easy to slip. I'm lucky I didn't lose a hand."

"Aren't you scared to work there?"

"My hands are steady. This is the first time I've ever cut myself. My hands are really steady."

"I'd be afraid, I think. Working at the hospital, I see people come in all the time who hurt themselves on machines like that. Most of them are hurt a lot worse than you. Why do you work there?"

"It's my dad's business. I guess I'm supposed to take over some day." Little

Bill looks at her shyly. "I was afraid when I woke up that somebody'd amputated my hand when I was knocked out. I thought this bandage covered a stump. What really freaked me out was the idea of not having a hand."

"You're telling me. Think of all the things you'd have to quit doing. Both of us would have to quit our jobs if we lost our hands."

"Yeah. What'd I do then? I've spent a lot of time getting skilled with saw blades."

"I've been through nursing school."

"I thought you still went."

"I'm almost done with it. It'd all be a waste of time if I lost a hand. I never be able to hook up IV's or measure medicine."

"It'd be harder to do everything. How'd you brush your teeth? You'd have to hold the handle of the brush in your mouth and squeeze the paste onto it that way."

"How'd you get the lid off the paste in the first place?"

The conversation doesn't lag once and by the time they get to Little Bill's trailer court he realizes he doesn't ever want to get out of her car.

Geraldine pulls into the driveway behind Crystal's car. Through the screen door comes the sound of the TV. "Looks like your girlfriend's home."

"I guess I should go inside." Little Bill glances at Geraldine. He wants to grab her and kiss her. Touch her. He puts his good hand on her sleeve. "Thank you,

Geraldine.”

She smiles, lowering her eyes. “You’re welcome.”

Little Bill takes a deep breath. “Do you think I could get your number? I’d kind of like to see you again. Just as friends, I mean.”

Geraldine blushes and her foot revs the Escort’s motor. “OK,” she says.

There’s paper and a pencil in the glove box and she writes her number down for him.

Little Bill has a little trouble getting out of the car--he can’t get the wrapped hand through the handle on the door. By the time he thinks to do it with his good hand, Geraldine has already reached over and done it for him. “Bye,” she says and he climbs out. He watches her back onto the street. The screen door bangs behind him. “Who was that?” Crystal asks, gesturing after Geraldine’s car with her beer.

Little Bill brandishes his bandages. “Why didn’t you come to the hospital? Didn’t you get the message?”

Crystal steps aside as he comes in. “They said you were fine. Why should I waste my afternoon driving all the way up to Red Lion?”

“Weren’t you worried about me?”

“It was you own dumb fault. What’d you do, stick you hand in a machine? Who was that chick in the car?”

“A nurse from the hospital. Since you weren’t there to get me, I needed a ride home. Did you think of that? How was I supposed to get home?”

"Never heard of a hospital offering that service before. What else'd she do for you?"

"Just shut up."

"So I guess your check's gonna be real big this week since you missed a whole day of work."

"Don't be a bitch, Crystal!" This enrages Crystal and she slams the beer on the counter and turns on him. She blows up in his face, yelling at the top of her raspy lungs. Little Bill stumbles backward. He's suddenly terrified he'll lose control and hit her. God he wants to hit her. He'd love to hit her over and over again. "I told you to get out last night."

"I ain't going nowhere!"

He punches the wall. The pain in his injured hand nearly knocks him out. It quiets his rage. He grinds his teeth against the pain. "I'm leaving," he says.

"What?" shrieks Crystal, hurling the cushions from the couch.

He faces the storm of pillows, clenching the hurt hand at the wrist to staunch the pain. "You heard me. I don't want to be with you any more. I can't stand you or your stinking babies. And I'm taking my daughter."

FOURTEEN

On the way home from Red Lion Days, that bastard Mr. Hassal wrecks his car with Mom inside it. He's not hurt at all, and neither is the car. Mom's pretty torn up.

Mr. Hassal's call comes right after Robby Jr. and Colleen get home from her parents' barbecue. Colleen drank too many screwdrivers and has sun-poisoning so she's flat on the bathroom floor, moaning. Robby Jr. dragged her out of the Bronco and put her in there because he didn't know what else to do with her. He's glad she got this sick around her own people instead of his friends. It was embarrassing enough to roll her into the car in front of her family. She just doesn't seem to know when she's had enough. She smells like vomit and sun-tan oil.

Robby Jr's also had a few beers and comes close as hell to an accident himself driving up to Red Lion Memorial where they took Mom. Some guy in a UPS truck pulls out in front of him and Robby Jr.'s brakes lock up. The Bronco skids into a lazy spin and he squeezes his eyes shut. All he sees is the imprint of a red traffic light on the insides of his eyelids. Fortunately, he doesn't hit the guy; he ends up stalled in the intersection. Everything's OK, just a lot of horns and middle fingers. The four burgers he ate that day rise in his throat. He chews the bits of food before swallowing again.

Robby Jr. has a perfect record. He's never hit anything. Mom should've been

out with him and this never would've happened. That old fart should never've been driving. They oughta take away old people's licenses when they get Mr. Hassal's age. He's gotta be pushing seventy. Mom was reasonable when she agreed to give her car to Colleen.

What Mr. Hassal said when he called Robby Jr. and asked him to come pick them up was he and Mom were leaving the Red Lion fairgrounds after the fireworks that officially ended the week-long festival of games, music, food, and crafts. Mr. Hassal's long green car was parked in tight along the curb. He and Mom climbed into it and Mr. Hassal fired the engine, popped the car into drive, hit the gas hard and smashed the car in front. With Mom yelling and frightened, Mr. Hassal shifted into reverse and gunned the gas that way and the car slammed backwards into the mini-van behind them and Mom got hurt. She wasn't wearing her seat belt. It took a long time for an ambulance to pick her up because the entire ambulance crew was monitoring the fireworks and got blocked in by traffic. Even when they turned on their sirens and flashing lights, there was nowhere cars could go to get out of the way.

"The car didn't even get dented," Mr. Hassal tells Robby Jr. at the end of the collect call from the hospital. "I told your mother, I said, 'they don't make 'em like that anymore. That green car didn't even get dented.'"

Robby Jr. parks along the curb, charges to the main desk, and asks for Mom's room number. She's been discharged and Robby Jr. finds the waiting room where

they have her. She's sipping something through a straw out of a glass a nurse holds in front of her. Both Mom and the nurse sit on a vinyl bench along the wall. Mom looks small and worn out. She has on her gray skirt and some shirt Robby Jr. doesn't recognize. The shirt is bright pink and it says *Red Lion Memorial Hospital* on front. Under the words is a cartoon picture of an ambulance, slanty, as if it is moving quickly. A cloudy puff of exhaust trails behind.

Mom's hair lies flattened in some places and Robby Jr. can never remember her this pale. He's never seen her with her make-up all rubbed off before. Even the day Robby Sr. died and Mom was sitting on her bed crying, when Robby Jr. and Colleen finally got there, Mom had her make-up on. Mom's arm is in a sling and a bunch of bandages stick over her face. When she looks up at Robby Jr. she sobs.

The nurse makes motions to comfort Mom. She talks in a low voice and pats Mom's hair. "She needs to stay quiet," the nurse hisses at Robby Jr. "We don't want her to do a lot of talking on account of her mouth."

Mom's face looks bad. It's swollen and her right eye is puffy and blue like somebody punched her or she got hit by a baseball. Her lips are huge and raspberry-colored. Robby Jr. stands above her. His hands shake. "What's wrong? How bad is it?" he asks the nurse.

"She's on a lot of painkillers." The nurse offers Mom the straw again. "She's probably not remembering much right now. Her mouth is pretty messed up. She

lost some teeth. After she visits the dentist she'll be alright."

"Should I take her home or does she need to stay in here?"

"Oh she'll be OK at home. She has her pills for the pain. That nice man will take care of her. He's your father?"

"What? That old man? He's crazy." Robby Jr. smashes his fist into the palm of his hand. The nurse watches him warily, like she's afraid she'll be kicked. "He got her into this mess in the first place. He nearly killed her. He was driving the car."

"He seemed sweet to me," the nurse says. "He didn't hurt your mother deliberately. It was an accident." She dabs a drip of something from the corner of Mom's mouth.

Mom tenses. She mumbles something and tries to stand up but the nurse drags on her shoulder and gets her seated again. Mom leans and struggles toward the door. Robby Jr. looks and sees Mr. Hassal standing in the doorway with a bundle of yellow flowers. He's wearing a polo shirt patterned like the American flag.

Robby Jr. leaps to his feet. "Get away from her!" he shouts at Mr. Hassal.

"Calm down," the nurse says. "You can't be loud in here."

"Can't you see that man is nuts?" shouts Robby Jr. There isn't any other man in the room but he points his finger at Mr. Hassal anyway.

"I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"I told your mother, I said I was afraid this would happen. I was afraid you'd

hate me.” Mr. Hassal’s hands drop weakly. A few petals drop off the bouquet. “I’m sorry, Robert. I don’t know what to say. I just lost control of the vehicle. I told your mother I had it under control and then I don’t know what happened. I just lost it.” Mr. Hassal has crept into the room. With each word he inches closer to Mom’s couch.

“I don’t want you here,” Robby Jr. tells Mr. Hassal. “I think you should go away and not see her anymore.” This man is a menace and needs to be stopped.

Mr. Hassal rubs his taut belly nervously. “We were having a real nice time. We were. When we were sitting in our chairs watching the rockets explode I looked at your mother and I told her, I said, ‘this is the nicest time I can remember.’ And she smiled back at me and nodded her head.”

Robby Jr. shifts himself enough to impede Mr. Hassal’s creeping movement toward Mom. He glowers his meanest. “I don’t need this, Mr. Hassal. It’s all over.”

Mom makes a noise. She’s opened her mouth and Robby Jr. can see the big black gap where her teeth are missing. She’ll have to wear dentures after this.

“She oughta sue you,” Robby Jr. tells Mr. Hassal. “Look what you did to her teeth.”

Robby Jr. signs the paperwork for Mom’s insurance and helps her outside. Mr. Hassal follows at a distance. Robby Jr. ignores him. He belts Mom into the

passenger seat and pulls away. In the rear view mirror, Mr. Hassal stands on the curb.

Mom smells like iodine and sick people. She falls asleep immediately and her head bobs and knocks the window. That can't be good for her but Robby Jr. can't arrange it so her head doesn't hit, so he just drives quick to get it over as soon as possible. Before going home, he stops by her apartment to get some of her things.

At home, Robby Jr. sets Mom up on the couch. He pulls the comforter off his and Colleen's bed and tucks it around her. Colleen's in the bathroom, still passed out. The air in there is stale and beery enough to make Robby Jr. sick. He can't watch TV because Mom's bedded down on the couch, knocked out from her pain killers. He sits on the kitchen floor, staring at the wall. He's got a hangover. Outside he knows Mr. Hassal's green car is still parked at the end of the driveway like it's been since he got there.

At about 8 A.M., Mom's painkillers wear off. Robby Jr. wakes up blurry-eyed on the floor where he fell asleep. His cheek is stuck to the linoleum in a dried puddle of drool and burns when he detaches it. He wanders in to see what Mom's moaning about. He gets her one of her pills and a glass of water. He takes a handful of aspirin, makes a pot of coffee, and steps over Colleen to use the toilet. Colleen's lobster-red and her long hair looks matty like she might have puked in it. Her legs are twisted up in the bathmat.

Robby Jr. drinks his coffee and sits with Mom. Mom needs to use the bathroom, too, and Robby Jr.'s not sure what to do about Colleen. He doesn't know what Mom will think if she sees her in there. He's pretty embarrassed, so he picks up Colleen and puts her in the shower and closes the curtain. She dry heaves once and her disgusting hair brushes his arm. A few shampoo bottles fall off the shelf in the tub and land on Colleen's stomach. Robby Jr. leaves them there. Mom's too woozy to notice anything's up in the bathroom.

After she comes out he shuffles a deck of cards and they play several games of Rummy 500. Counting up his points makes Robby Jr.'s head hurt too much. After each hand, he writes down he lost 35 points. Mom doesn't notice.

Mom's voice slurs from the missing teeth. She won't play rummy anymore-- she's too distracted because she's refusing to take anymore of her pills until Robby Jr. lets her see Mr. Hassal. She and Robby Jr. can see his green car parked by the mailbox. They've been staring at it all morning.

Mom's bruised face whitens with pain. "It was my fault. Nobody made me get in that car with him. It wasn't his responsibility that I wear a seat belt. I should have put the seat belt on myself. I didn't, though, because I've only heard bad things about those lap belts. I heard about a woman once who was wearing a lap belt when her car wrecked and she pulled four vertebrae out of place in her back. She pinched some nerves. She couldn't feel or move her legs for ten minutes. I don't wear a lap

belt because I'm afraid of what will happen if there's an accident; your bottom stays put, the rest of you swings forward and *bam*."

She knocked out her front teeth on the key sticking out of the glove box.

"Why was there a key in the glove box?" Robby Jr. asks, cringing. His mouth tastes bitter thinking about it.

"So he can open it," Mom explains. "My head swung down and that key went right into my mouth through my teeth and broke off in there. I didn't see nothing but white for ten minutes." She grimaces and stops talking. Her jaw hangs open like a hammock.

"Please take one of your pills, Mom. They said to take one every four hours and it's been seven for you." Robby Jr. sits next to Mom on the couch he and Colleen got out of her old house, the couch Robby Sr. selected. Robby Jr. takes Mom's arm. She pulls back and when he doesn't let go, stands up, twisting out of his grasp. She grabs the couch for support, bumping the coffee table with her knees, and the deck of cards slithers to the floor.

"Oooooog," moans Colleen, coming topless out of the bathroom dragging the shower curtain. She stumbles into the wall and leans there, panting. "What happened to me?" Her sunburn burns so bright against her pale skin it looks like she's still wearing a shirt. Mom skids on the cards and crashes into the coffee table. In the driveway sunlight, Mr. Hassal's old car glitters like a tin pie plate.

FIFTEEN

Little Bill thinks there's something stirring about driving into the crisp-yellow squint-hot sunrise with a scalding styrofoam cup squeezed between his thighs and powdered sugar sifting over his lap. He knows the best sugar donuts and sixty-nine-cent cups of coffee along Rt. 74 from Delta to Red Lion come from the Brogue Store. The building used to be a house on the corner of 74 and Muddy Creek Forks Rd. across from the post-office. Now all the interior walls on the ground floor have been knocked out and the resulting space converted into a general store. Herb, the owner, lives upstairs. Every morning it's hopping.

Little Bill remembers how about five years ago, there were gas pumps out front, but they got shut down and bulldozed under by OSHA. Gas was cheaper at the Sunoco anyway and without the pumps, there's more room for parking. Whenever Little Bill visits the store, Farmers and hunters and fishermen stand before the plate-glass windows and on the porch and stare at trucks thundering through the 6 A.M. fog. They drink Herb's special coffee and spit into the trashcans and wait for Glynese to construct her delectable subs for lunch.

Besides coffee and lunch meat and subs, there's a Batman pinball machine that someone's always kicking, and aisles of marshmallows, and chips, and flystrips, and lighter fluid, and candy bars. From a shelf under the front counter, cigars, two-days-old *York Daily Records*, and *Brogue, USA* t-shirts can be bought.

Every year, Herb keeps the Buck Book for hunters to sign and holds a "Biggest Buck" contest during hunting season and a "Longest Trout" competition during fishing season. Little Bill's never bagged a buck or hooked a rainbow but every morning he stops at the Brogue store for a coffee. His parents don't drink it or own a coffee maker so he has to wait until the drive to work for his caffeine jolt. He's become addicted to his morning ritual, though eating donuts isn't a good idea because powdered sugar stands out like dandruff on his navy coverall and looks unprofessional at work. His dad is already fed up because Little Bill moved back home and brought Ambrosia.

He's also mad because Little Bill lacerated his hand last month and missed so much work and had to be paid workman's comp. Little Bill knows he can't stay with his folks too much longer. Mom doesn't seem to mind doing his laundry and tending to Ambrosia, but he can tell by the way his father has started leaving any room Little Bill enters, that he's irritated by the situation. To tell the truth, Little Bill misses the freedom he had when he had his own trailer. Now that he's back at home, he gets yelled at for any noise he makes and his mom always wants to know where he's going. It's like being a kid again.

Still, Little Bill's mornings are celebration, mostly because he's so happy to be away from Crystal. he might not appear to be getting the best deal out of things--he hasn't got a girlfriend; he had to move back in with his folks--but at least he doesn't

have to take an more of Crystal's shit. Sure, she calls his parents' house sometimes and doesn't say anything, only breathes heavy. And she got her new boyfriend to drive by Little Bill's parents' house and stuff firecrackers in the mail box, but other than that, everything's great.

Little Bill suddenly feels like his whole life's in front of him again now that he's broken up with her. Sometimes he pictures himself on a prancing cowboy horse, with ambrosia in a saddlebag at his side, poised on the edge of the prairies. He can go so far in ever direction. That must be why the drive in the morning's so important to him. The old Subaru's a stallion and 74 opens up in front of him like a wagon track.

It's so much better with his mother watching Ambrosia during the day than when Crystal took care of her. You never knew what was going to happen with Crystal. If you'd asked Little Bill before if he thought the baby's mother was the best one to take care of it, he'd have said "Sure." But after seeing Crystal in action he'd have taken it back. With his mother watching her during the day, Ambrosia's always clean and dressed and ready to see him when he gets home from work. His mother feeds her and puts pink ribbons in her hair.

Little Bill wonders what happened to Crystal's other kids but really that's none of his business. He hopes they're doing OK, but he doesn't think about them much. He never really bonded with them. He's almost forgotten about them. Crystal

probably does stuff like leave them in the tub with her shaving stuff while she goes to screw her new boyfriend. That's really the only thing that makes him mad.

Crystal's off getting laid and Little Bill's living in his folk's house and not getting any.

The thing to do now is to get a new place to live. The sooner the better. He'll get a paper while he's buying coffee and check the classified over lunch. Then he can have chicks over whenever he wants. He'd like to call up that Geraldine who he met at the baseball game and it'd be nice to have a place of his own to bring her back to sooner or later, although this time around he's going to take it slower than he took it with Crystal. This chick isn't going to see the inside of his pad for a long long time. These women have to learn to keep their distance.

This morning on the door at Brogue Store, there's a notice that the store will be closed for a couple days. What Little Bill hears when he goes inside is that Herb has to go in for jury duty this coming week. What he heard is the case he's gonna be on is the one about Blondie the Golden Retriever. "That goddamn dog ain't worth shutting the store down for a fucking week over. What I vote for is they shoot the fucker. Shoot it dead is what I say and those fuckers arguing over it, too."

Little Bill's heightened senses consume and categorize the smells of grease and bait and lunch meat at an overwhelming rate. Little Bill pours a big styrofoam cup of coffee, nabs one of the last two powder-covered-donuts--the one without the fly

crawling over it--and reaches for the last *York Daily Record* at the same time a some woman.

"I'm sorry," she tells him. "Go ahead."

"No. You were here first." This means he's going to have to make another stop at the Sunoco on the way into Red Lion, but Little Bill's a nice guy.

"Are you sure? Thank you." The woman takes the paper and smiles at him. There's something familiar about her eyes. She reads his name tag and looks puzzled. "William Wyatt? That sounds familiar. Have I met you?"

"I don't think so."

"No, I guess not." The woman opens her purse to pay for the paper. She puts it and her thermal Think Thin coffee mug on the counter. "You know, the only part I need is the classified adds. You can have the rest if you'd like."

"Actually, that's what I need, too. I'm looking for a place to live. You wouldn't know anybody with an apartment to rent, would you?"

"If I knew, I'd be there." The woman averts her eyes. She looks too well off to want to move into any apartment around here. Little Bill notices she's wearing a wedding ring. is she leaving her husband? "I'm sorry about the paper," the woman says. "I hope you have a good morning." She leaves the store; the heels of her shoes clatter the floor.

Little Bill pays for his donut and coffee. "I'm sorry about jury duty," he tells

Herb, half hoping to get the donut free for his concern. It's probably flyspecked anyway. No luck. He walks back out to the car, squinting into the sun as he starts the ignition and backs around. The coffee's almost too hot to hold between his thighs and powdered sugar's snowing all over the car despite the napkin he wraps the donut in, but that's the why he likes it. He thinks he oughta call that Geraldine tonight.

He pauses to let an Amish buggy pass in the opposite direction before pulling onto 74. The horse pulling the buggy is brown and skinny. he pulls gamely, though, and his feet move as fast as bicycle spokes.

SIXTEEN

The number on the neat blue rancher matches the one Little Bill wrote down, so he nervously pulls up to the curb and parks. The tiny trimmed lawn resembles the greens at a mini golf course and Little Bill can see dozens of plaster-animal eyes peering at his car from a pansy garden around a bird bath. A glaring white concrete path leads from the sidewalk to the front door. Everything is in place and intimidating.

Should he walk up and ring the doorbell alone, leaving Ambrosia in her car seat, or should he should unbuckle her and carry her to the door? He wishes Geraldine would just come out so he wouldn't have to go to the door at all. What if one of Geraldine's parents answers and expects Little Bill to make small talk? What if they see Ambrosia and flip out?

Ambrosia isn't looking her best since Little Bill didn't realize he had to bring her along until the last minute. He thought his mother was going to watch her this afternoon, but just as he was going out the door he found out she's got a chiropractor appointment and he has to take Ambrosia along with him. "Girls love babies," his mother had told him, but Little Bill felt dread gnawing his stomach lining. Crystal certainly hadn't liked babies; why should Geraldine be any different? Still, Mom won't miss her appointments for the world, even if this turns out to be the most important date of Little Bill's life, so he'd plucked napping Ambrosia out of her

playpen and stuck her in her car seat. She started screaming as soon as she woke up, so he gave her part of a Hershey bar so she'd shut up. Now the Hershey bar is all over her face and playsuit.

Little Bill can't remember if he's told Geraldine he has a baby or not. It's not like he forgot about Ambrosia or anything; he was just so busy thinking about how Geraldine's going to react he doesn't remember if he actually mentioned it. He wanted to leave Ambrosia out of the picture for a while and see how things went with Geraldine, get to know her a little before telling her. Does that sound dishonest? It's only because he's afraid Geraldine won't want to go out with him once she finds out about his baby.

Still, she must want to go out since she called him and said she "wouldn't mind seeing him again." It was pretty underhanded of him to ask her out for a drink at Camden Yards when he was living with Crystal the whole time. He shouldn't have done any of that. He admits it. She must be a forgiving girl.

Little Bill hopes Geraldine doesn't have one of those overprotective mothers you run into now and then. He doesn't even know her but bets she's going to make problems. She won't like her daughter going out with a guy with a baby. That was one good thing about dating Crystal--her parents were dead so they couldn't get on his case. That's the reason he wishes he could have left Ambrosia at home today. He doesn't want the mother to see her and say he's not taking care of her right. It's a

screw job on him she got all that chocolate down her front. He tries to wipe her off with the bottom of his t-shirt but only smears himself.

He's stalling. His hands jiggle and snatch and he glances at the house to see if anyone's peeping between the curtains. He never really dated Crystal. After that first night together she just moved all these boxes of stuff into his trailer. She didn't put it away for weeks because she kept threatening to move out again if Little Bill didn't do what she told him. Weaving through the piles felt like a maze and her boxes had a particular smell, like gerbils. Crystal was "never into that romance shit," but Little Bill's always wondered if it wouldn't have been nicer to go out to dinner and the movies a few times before moving in together. Maybe if they'd known each other better they would have decided not to do it at all. But Crystal needed a place to crash.

Little Bill wonders if he should have brought Geraldine some flowers. It's been so long since he's been on a date, he didn't even think of it on the ride over here. Now it's too late. She's probably already seen him out the window and is wondering what his problem is, thinking, "Why won't he get out the car?"

He imagines her mom telling her, "I wouldn't trust him. You ought to stay inside."

He gets out of the car. He can't leave Ambrosia in there: she might suffocate or hurt herself somehow. At least the chocolate made her happy and she gurgles as

he unstraps the car seat. Walking to the door he discovers if he holds Ambrosia in a certain position on his hip he can hide her chocolaty facade and cover the stain on his shirt at the same time. Geraldine greets him at the door. She's wearing another of her flower outfits and carrying a tiny shiny purse. "Hi" she says. "I'm ready. I'd invite you in but my mother is hassling me. She's been freaky ever since that girl in the papers disappeared. Let's just leave. OK?"

"Hi." Little Bill tells her. "You look beautiful."

"Thanks. Is that your baby?"

Little Bill shuffles his feet. "Yeah. Her name is Ambrosia."

"I wondered if you had any babies." Geraldine holds her hand out to Ambrosia like you would for a dog, like she's letting her sniff it. Little Bill can't tell what she's thinking at all.

He figures this is the time to let Geraldine know she has the chance not to go out with him if she doesn't want to. They said over the phone they'd decide where to go when he came to pick her up. After a deep breath, he says, "I had to bring her along. My mom was going to take her today but she couldn't. I don't know if there's anything for us to do today--anywhere we can go and take a baby."

"Oh she'll be OK. She seems nice. Why don't we go over to the Indian Steps Museum. I'll bet there's lots of stuff Ambrosia'd like there." Geraldine must like babies. Little Bill's relieved. He wishes he could give her a big hug.

They decide to buy some Brogue Store subs to eat as a picnic at Otter Creek. "I like Brogue Store subs the best because they put plenty of mayonaise on the bread before they put on the chicken salad," says Geraldine. "I went to Subway in Red Lion once, and they didn't put down any mayonaise at all. The woman looked at me like I was an idiot and actually told me there was mayo in the chicken salad already. Can you believe that?"

They also pick out a disposable camera because it seems like something people in movies are always doing. Little Bill acts out the scene between him and the woman who fought him for the paper at the donut counter. Herb stops measuring coffee into a filter long enough to look at Little Bill like he's nuts. Geraldine giggles and jiggles Ambrosia on her hip because Little Bill can't act and hold the baby at the same time.

Little Bill almost gets lost driving to the Indian Steps Museum. It's down a lot of back roads and there aren't any signs. He finds it at last where it sits on the western bank of the Susquehanna River just downstream from Otter Creek State Park. It is surrounded by summer cabins with screened-in porches peeping between trees and boat launches braced against the current. The wide front lawn, treeless, and dotted with duck and guinea-hen shit, slopes gradually to the water's edge, offering Little Bill and Geraldine a view of pleasure boaters and fishermen on the slow-moving water. Since the construction of the Conowingo Dam fifty years ago,

the steps the Susquehanna Indians carved into the limestone cliffs centuries ago in order to climb down to the water to fish have been flooded with 20 feet of water and are no longer visible. This part of the river above the dam is over a mile wide, polluted, bullet-colored, and is called Lake Aldred. Late at night when no powerboats buzz the water, trains headed for Harrisburg can still be heard faintly on the eastern banks.

As Little Bill remembers from Cub Scouts, the museum itself is a heavysset stone and stucco mansion framed with dark heavy timber. A deep rock porch, like a cave, wraps around three sides and can be reached by mossy steps made of single giant slabs of stone. The whole thing was built around the turn of the century by John Vandersloot, a rich man with a passion for Indians. He spent his spare time filling the empty rooms with artifacts and models in glass cases, then taking visitors and school children through the rooms.

The bottom two of four stories are studded with primitive patterns of arrowheads and plaques denoting their tribal origins. Few ground floor windows give the museum the dim musky feeling of a tomb. The vinyl-skinned woman running the giftshop that sells plastic tomahawks, postcards and \$.35 ice cream novelties looks older and less-preserved than most of the exhibits.

Little Bill and Geraldine get out of the car and walk toward the museum. Some ducks that have been snapping deer ticks out of the tall grass near the parking

lot flap and scuttle away in alarm. More ducks, far off at the river's edge, turn their heads and squawk.

The museum looks the same as Little Bill remembers it when he came here fourteen years ago. It sits back from the road, shaded by a lot of trees. There's a totem pole in the yard and Geraldine scoffs about someone sitting around and wasting all the time carving it. Little Bill's not so sure she should be doing that because totem poles are spiritual things, aren't they? He doesn't much know what he's talking about but he tells Ambrosia the history of the totem pole. He tells how the Indian would go into the woods and not eat for days until he had a vision of his special animal spirit. This was usually a bear, a deer, or a lion. Then he'd find a big tree and carve it into whatever animal he saw. If he didn't get it right the first time, he'd carve again. Some totem poles (like this one) have 10 or 15 different faces. A totem pole that was done right the first time wouldn't be as interesting because there'd only be one face to look at. Ambrosia's too young to understand but Geraldine looks impressed. She takes a picture of the totem pole and Little Bill and Ambrosia standing by it.

Geraldine read in the *York Dispatch* about the stuffed, two-headed calf in the museum. From his visit as a cub scout, Little Bill remembers it lurking between a wall and a staircase. Even though there were other people around he'd been afraid of it. He couldn't let on in front of his pack. It was just so bizarre and malformed.

The stuff job was botched and it didn't even look real. Little Bill wonders if he'll still feel frightened by it, but when they enter the building the stuffed calf is gone.

"What happened to the calf?" they ask the lady running the gift shop.

She pretends she doesn't know what they're talking about. All she says is "You kids be careful. Don't you let that baby knock anything over."

Past the alcove where the calf's supposed to be, there's a shadowy stone room with a round stone table in it which Geraldine says might belong to King Arthur. A sign tells them it's just the big meeting table of the old rich guy who built the house. Little Bill's disappointed at what the table turns out to really be and his head is already hurting from squinting to read the signs. He decides not to read anymore. His arm is getting tired from hefting around Ambrosia so he sets her on the cold edge of the table, bouncing her, letting her swing her feet. "Get that baby off the artifacts," the gift-shop hag hisses from a black doorway.

Little Bill's impressed that Geraldine's taking the time to read all the explanatory signs. She's really scholarly. Crystal would never have set foot in a place like this. "It smells like mothballs in here," Geraldine says.

"Yeah," says Little Bill.

"I hope mothballs don't bother poor Ambrosia. My cousin has a baby that breaks out in hives every year when they pull the winter clothes out of the attic. She's not a baby anymore but she still gets the hives." Geraldine leans over to stroke

Ambrosia's cheek. "You don't get hives, do you, baby?" Her fingertips brush Little Bill's chest and he starts sweating. He could just about kiss her, but to do it he'd have to crush Ambrosia between the two of them or set her down. He's still worried about that woman; she'd just love to kick them out of here over something like a kiss.

Little Bill and Geraldine climb the heavyset flight of steps to the second floor of the museum, which is not air-conditioned. The windows are all painted shut and the glass is cloudy on the outside. Some flies buzz at the glass, trying to escape the close rooms. More flies lie dried and dead on the windowsills

"They oughtta clean in here," says Geraldine, eying the flies.

Little Bill writes *Hi Geraldine* in the dust with his fingertip.

The second floor of the exhibit is dedicated to Indians of all kinds, not just the Susquahannas who lived in the area and chipped out the stone steps. Glass cases hold diarama and displays of arrowheads. All the arrowheads were found by the same man who built the museum. "How come he found so many?" Geraldine wants to know. "I help my mom in the garden every summer and I haven't found one yet. All I ever find is potato bugs."

"Were you looking?"

"I was looking for the bugs. Mom makes me pick them off the plants and drop them in a can of kerosine."

"But not arrowheads."

"No, but if there are so many lying around, you'd think I'd have found a couple by accident. I'll bet these are phonies. That old guy carved them himself."

"That kind of spoils it, Geraldine. Why are we looking at all this stuff now if it's fake?"

"We're not supposed to figure it out, we're supposed to believe in it--like Santa Clause."

Little Bill's never thought of it like this before. He'd always figured the artifacts were real because the cards said they were. And because when he was a little kid he could imagine it all so well. "Some of it's real," he says, pointing. "Look at those broken clay pots."

"They probably came from the Modern Landfill. This stuff's about as genuine as the plastic tomahawks in the gift case downstairs."

Tommy believed in the two-headed calf but now he wonders if it was here, if he'd see, upon close inspection, the stitch marks where the second head was affixed to the shoulder of the first stuffed calf. "Well, we can leave if you want to. It's so hot in here."

Later, Little Bill feels like a content cat as he pulls out of the Otter Creek picnic area. He points out the sign where the band Live had their pictures taken for their album cover. He says they have a song called "The Dam at Otter Creek," but he's not really sure about the words. Something about the water being deep enough

to dive. Or die. He's not keen on the idea of diving off the new bridge there. It's pretty high and the water beneath it runs dark and shallow. You'd probably die if you dived. It gives Little Bill the creeps.

Geraldine smiles and nods her head and Little Bill can tell she's really interested in what he has to say. He's just turning onto the main road when he realizes he pointed out the same sign as they were entering the picnic area. Geraldine must have forgotten about the first time. Or else she really likes him and doesn't care what he says as long as he talks to her.

Well, Little Bill's mother was right. Geraldine loves Ambrosia. She's fallen flat on her ass over her and insists on bouncing her on her lap on the front seat just like she did on the swing set while Little Bill was setting out the picnic. She wouldn't start her sub until Ambrosia'd eaten every bite of her rice-pudding-flavored baby food. Little Bill feels a little uneasy about Ambrosia not being in her seat. What if they get in an accident?

"I'm wearing my belt," Geraldine says. "I'll hold on to her real tight. She won't go nowhere."

Geraldine should know. After all, she's the one in college. It's really pretty nice having all three of them close together on the front seat. They've got all the windows open and the radio going so it's not so bad. At the beginning of the summer one of Crystal's babies dumped a bottle of milk or something in the back and it stunk

like something died back there for weeks. Now the only smell is Geraldine's perfume and Ambrosia's special scent. At least Little Bill hopes they can't smell his sweat.

Crystal always used to bitch if his B.O. got too bad. Now he has no clue.

Geraldine's too polite to tell him something like that.

He's surprised when Geraldine says "Let's drive by your old place."

"Why do you want to?" he glances at her stroking the top of Ambrosia's head.

"I just want to see it, that's all."

"She still lives there, you know."

They haven't discussed Crystal or Little Bill's old life. Except for Ambrosia.

It's not like he's tried to cover any of it, it just hasn't come up. It's weird Geraldine wants to go by, especially when she already already saw it. Still, Little Bill wouldn't mind seeing what Crystal's up to these days.

"I'll take you past it," he says. It's been such a great day he's glad he doesn't have to take Geraldine home yet. 74's a fast road, but if he takes her by the trailer he can stall. The drive to the trailer should be pretty--cornflowers and Queen Anne's lace bloom profusely o the roadsides this time of year. Also, if he gets off the main road, he's got a better chance of finding some little road to pull off and maybe make out a little. Geraldine's wearing a longish skirt but when she got in the car she hitched it up above the knees, probably just to cool off but Little Bill can't stop peeking at her legs. They look pink and smooth and nice. There's a road about a

mile past his old trailer that leads back into the woods, a logging road, and he might stop there. Is Geraldine the kind of girl who'd let you get anywhere with her in a car? Little Bill's not sure how he should know whether to try or not. Women are hard to figure out. Anyway the baby might get in the way. Sometimes he wishes he didn't have any kids.

"I remember this road," Geraldine goes. "When I drove you home from the hospital that day my lunch almost came up."

"Don't look out the side windows, only the front," Little Bill advises. "When I was a little kid, I used to get real car sick. Now I don't get car sick anymore."

"I had that big sub for lunch, though."

"I know where to drive on this road. I won't hit the potholes. You think it's bad now, you should see it in the winter when it's got ice all over it." The potholes happen when the PENDOT people lay cheap and poorly graded road beds, and neglect to seal what they pave. With improper drainage of the subgrade, rain gets into the voids in the asphalt and freezes in the winter. The asphalt contracts and the ice forces it to buckle and break, forming potholes. Every few years, workers patch the holes with tar, but the patches are good for two seasons at most. In this part of the county, the potholes are so profuse, Little Bill can barely drive ten feet without hitting one. They seem to have gotten worse since the last time he drove down Brogue School Road. Only last summer, PENDOT had a crew out here patching.

They worked for over two weeks and now you'd never know they'd ever been here.

"Why'd you ever move way out here?"

"I wanted to get away from Mom and Dad and couldn't afford a place in town. Rent's cheap."

"It's so lonely, though. I'm surprised I ever found my way back to 74. I'd worry that somebody might get hurt. Ambulance people'd never make it way out here."

"I'm looking for a new place now."

Little Bill slows down when they get close to his old trailer. His heart beats heavily; he's nervous Crystal'll see him. Several cars parked around nearly block the road and people mill on the lawn. "Look, a yard sale!" Geraldine holds Ambrosia up to see.

"Hey, that's my shit!" Little Bill slams on the brakes.

Geraldine's seat belt locks. She nearly lets go of Ambrosia. "Hey!"

"She's selling my shit!"

"Why is your stuff still with her?" Geraldine scowls. Little Bill doesn't like the way she's holding Ambrosia.

"I couldn't move everything I had to my mom's. I figured I'd collect it whenever I got a new place to live. It's not hers to sell."

Little Bill parks the car half off the road and gets out. Crystal sits in a lawn

chair with her feet on the cooler and a little metal cashbox on her lap. She's surrounded by shit Little Bill hasn't thought about in weeks. But when he sees it all spread out around Crystal he remembers all of it. Somebody's blue pick-up is parked in his old spot.

Little Bill strides across the yard toward her. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Hi," she says mildly when she sees him standing there. She's wearing a floppy straw hat that allows specks of sun to fall on her skin. The specks flicker like fireflies when she moves her head. She settles the cashbox more securely in her grasp.

"What's all this?" Little Bill gestures around the yard.

"What's it look like?" She rattles the box. "I thought I could use a little more dough when I move to Paradise with Rex."

"What are you talking about?"

"You didn't think I'd stay in this shithole forever, did you?" She smirks.

"Well, my new boyfriend has an two-bedroom apartment in Paradise. He's also got a lot of money and a seven-foot truck. Precious and Perfect and I are moving to Lancaster County next week."

A woman embracing a bowling ball holds two quarters out to Crystal.

"That's all I marked it for?" Crystal leans half out of her chair, eyeing the tag.

The woman hugs the ball tighter. "That's mine!" says Little Bill, reaching for it. It's the bowling ball he used the year he and Robby Jr. played in the Red Lion

bowling league. They hadn't won, but they hadn't done too badly, either.

"Oh, just take it," Crystal tells the woman. "Have a great day."

The woman gives Little Bill a dirty look and moves away. He drops his arms to his sides, watching as the ball with his name carved into it, is deposited into the back seat of a dusty Ford Festiva.

There's no way Crystal's going to let him have his stuff back. He never should have walked out on her and left it if he wanted to hang onto it. He didn't pay any of the bills this month and Crystal needed the money. She spent all week writing pricetags on stickers and attaching the stickers to the sale items. Then she made signs advertising her sale and put them at every intersection between the trailer and 74. She used hot pink tagboard to catch driver's eyes. Luckily, the sale has been a success. In fact since eight o'clock this morning, she's made 75 dollars. People have really been buying things because her prices are so low. "Nobody seems to want the clothes, but I sold that entire shelf of football videos that was cluttering up the living room."

Little Bill's too pissed to say anything. He scuffs his feet in the overgrown grass and stares at his old trailer, his very first home away from his parents, with somebody else's jacked-up truck parked near the porch. How can Crystal just go on? She hasn't even asked him how Ambrosia's getting along. She's moving to Paradise next week and if Geraldine hadn't wanted to drive by the trailer, Little Bill never

would have known. He watches the twins, wearing only soggy pampers, playing in the mud underneath a tree. They're crying and eating rocks. That cat that belongs to old Mr. Hassal twines and weaves between the two of them.

"Who's that in the car?" Crystal asks, propping herself up to stare at Geraldine. Little Bill wants to kick the chair out from under her and watch her squirm in the weeds like a locust, but he doesn't. He doesn't tell her who's in the car either. "You're a bitch, Crystal. I hope I never see you again in my life." Little Bill turns to leave.

"Oh you'll come back," Crystal says. "You'll beg for me to take you back. I'm sure about that."

SEVENTEEN

As soon as Julia's mother drops her off, Marcy sits her down in front of the TV with a bag of cookies and a Coke. That's about the only thing that'll keep Julia out of her hair while she packs. Marcy ran out and bought the cookies special last night.

She's packing because she found a place she can move into right away. It's an apartment above a furniture store in Red Lion. It's small, dark, the paint's peeling, there're probably roaches. It's not much but it's cheap and right now, that's important. Marcy needs to find a job immediately. Watching children during the day isn't going to do the trick.

Marcy had trouble sleeping last night. Her plan is to do her packing while Buzz is at work and she's watching Julia. Then after Julia goes home, she'll simply drive off to her new life. She's afraid to face Buzz right away so she has written him a note. Later, after he's had time to calm down about things, she'll talk to him and tell him how she feels.

How does she feel? All summer she's been trying to sort it out. Why isn't she happy in her marriage? She can't sit down and point out a single thing wrong with Buzz. He hasn't changed since she married him. It has to be with her. The only way she's going to fix things is to be alone for a while. Maybe she simply hasn't done enough with her life. Look at Geraldine. She's not even twenty-two yet but she has a career. Does Marcy feel jealous of her own daughter? All Marcy's ever done is

watch children. She's never gone out and achieved anything until this summer when she lost the weight. That inspired her, showed her she's got the potential to be something. She's tired of being a mother. She's tired of being a wife.

Moving out of her safe house and comfortable marriage is one of the scariest things Marcy's ever faced. When the idea first presented itself to her, she dismissed it. It nagged her like a hangnail until she finally gave it real consideration. It just isn't fair to Buzz--he deserves her honesty and her kindness. Not knowing what is going on in her head wasn't helping him get either one. She's totally aware that she's been out of control; she nags him about the TV he watches, the way he tucks in his shirts, and the way he eats his dinner.

She felt so helpless, so dependent, that day she ran into the weird guy down at the bridge. Walking down the road with Julia in tow, she nearly fell down in terror when he started his truck and drifted slowly along behind her. Marcy dragged Julia off the road as far as possible without going into the woods but he refused to pass her, only matched her speed about five yards behind. If she had been by herself, she would have braved all the deer ticks and Lyme's disease in the world and plunged into the woods and tried to lose him, but she was afraid the rapid movement by herself would incite him to chase her--like running from a predatory animal will spur it to charge and attack. With the head start she'd get, by herself, she might have been able to outrun or lose him, but Julia could never have outrun a grown man.

The walk was both humiliating and terrifying. He trailed them the whole way to Marcy's house. At her lawn, she broke into a sprint, wrenching Julia into a wailing frenzy, bounded up the steps to the front door, and wrestled with the key. Even while Julia bit and clawed her hand, she could almost feel him easing up behind her, taking those mirrored glasses off.

Once locked inside the house, she looked out and watched him drive off. He had the audacity to wave and blip his horn at her.

Marcy didn't tell Buzz about the incident. She felt too ashamed. She realized, in his own way, Buzz controls her the same way the man in the truck did. He goes out and earns their livelihood while she stays home. He maintains total monetary power.

At lunchtime, Marcy walks to the mail box. She's felt like a rabbit every time she's ventured outside since that day. There's never been anyone lurking around but that creepy feeling won't leave her. No matter how much Julia whines, they haven't returned to the bridge.

Maybe the young guy was perfectly harmless. He did not, after all, attempt physical contact with either Marcy or Julia. He did not verbally abuse them; he just acted strange. Did Marcy simply overreact to a simple overture of friendship? Why did he follow her home if he wasn't up to anything? She has the feeling that as soon as her guard's down, he'll return. Well, she won't have to worry about that once

she's in her new place.

She opens the mail box and three wasps fly out. Every summer they build nests under the domed roof of the box. Their combed nest dangles over junk mail, and bills, and catalogues. Marcy has to slide her hand in slowly and carefully to avoid startling them into stinging. The mail hasn't come yet. Marcy peers into the empty box, making a mental note to file a change of address form at the post office. She pulls the paper out of its plastic tube and stands listening by the road. Something about the heavy-leaved trees creating a tunnel through which the road winds makes it possible to hear cars coming a long way off. Everything's silent now.

Julia requests grilled cheese and mayonnaise for lunch. Marcy fries it for her, pleased that she's no longer tempted to lick the left-over mayonnaise off the knife. She's wearing a six now and has never felt this good in her life. What is it about being slender that makes her have this new perspective on life?

Her bags are packed and stowed in her car. She took the old set of luggage--the bags she and Buzz took with them to Niagara Falls on their honeymoon. The note hangs taped to the refrigerator door. Julia's mother should arrive around 4:30, and after that she's out the door.

Marcy sits down at the table to drink a glass of water. She's restless. Her heart seems to be beating faster than usual. She opens the paper, absently. The second-page story states that the woman from Think Thin, with whom Marcy walked

earlier in the summer, Terry's daughter, has been missing for three weeks.

The picture the paper runs shows a dark-haired girl mugging for a school photographer. She's very pretty, but she must have blinked when the picture was snapped because her eyes are closed.

Marcy's stomach feels full of lead. She leans back in her chair and hugs herself. This is the girl she spent so much time comparing her own daughter to. She can't help but have the superstitious fear she had something to do with it.

Apparently the girl, Tonya, fifteen, disappeared in the middle of the night. Her mother missed her the next day when she didn't get up in time to watch Jerry Springer. They thought she might have gone for a walk but when she was still missing at dinner, they knew something was up. The police were called, relatives were called (perhaps she'd run away?), the church formed a group to search the woods and fields close to her home. No trace was found. The papers were only today allowed to print the story.

Marcy should call Terry and tell her how sorry she feels. She should be there for Terry to talk to if she needs to. She looks up the number in the phone book, then sits staring with her finger marking.

Julia marches into the kitchen, a story book in her hand. She slaps it on Marcy's thigh. "Read."

"OK," Marcy tells her, taking the book into the living room. Terry was never

really a friend of hers. What would Marcy possibly say to her if she called? How could she make things better--especially after three weeks? The weight in her stomach grows painful and Marcy realizes it's hunger. "Wait a second," she tells Julia, going back into the kitchen. She gets a packet of sliced cheese and stands before the refrigerator door, stuffing slice after slice into her mouth. She eats until she feels thick and yellow with cheese. The cellophane wrappers lie around her feet like fallen leaves. Then she starts eating Buzz's ice-cream, but first she rips up the note.

She should.

Today'll be another day, she steps back and puts her hands on her hips. He's just a leechy old guy. He wants to go all the way, but he doesn't have my kids. Free food, free beer? Colleen turns Robby Jr. the buttons the top two buttons of his shirt. He might be soon? She rubs the tips of her fingers together and grins. She's got one look that says she wins or else.

Colleen might think Mr. Hasal's going to leave them money when he dies, but she hasn't seen where he lives. If Colleen had been along that day, if he'd dropped her off there, she might cut out this crap about being nice to him. Mr. Hasal doesn't have any money. Robby Jr. can't bring himself to say that. He's afraid to tell Colleen because he's too embarrassed for Mica. The very next morning, waiting to get there, Robby Jr. scuffs his foot. He doesn't want to go to school, he's already had a

EIGHTEEN

"This guy tried to kill Mom!" Robby Jr. spreads his arms to block Colleen from getting out the front door of their house. He shifts his weight like a giant rolling stone each time she tries to dodge past him.

"Robby Jr., it was an accident. He's an old man."

"He shouldn't be driving."

"Stop it, Robby Jr. Let me out. You promised you'd go to this reunion weeks ago." She brushes his side, wheedling. "Anyway, your mom doesn't blame him."

"She should."

"Come on. Today'll be fun." Colleen steps back and puts her hands on her hips. "He's just a lonely old guy. He wants us to go along because he doesn't have any kids. Free food. Free beer." Colleen hugs Robby Jr. She buttons the top two buttons of his shirt. "Be nice. He might die soon." She rubs the tips of her fingers together and grins. She's got on a look that says she wins or else.

Colleen might think Mr. Hassal's going to leave them money when he dies but she hasn't seen where he lives. If Colleen had been along that day Robby Jr. dropped Mom off there, she might cut out this crap about being nice to him. Mr. Hassal doesn't have any money. Robby Jr. can't bring himself to describe the place to Colleen because he's too embarrassed for Mom. She's crazy for wanting to go there.

Robby Jr. scuffs his foot. He doesn't want to spend the afternoon rubbing up

with Mr. Hassal's kind. That old bat should know he's not good enough for Mom. Robby Jr. doesn't especially want his mother dating anyone, but Mr. Hassal's the worst thing possible. He'd never have gotten ahold of her again if Robby Jr. hadn't had both hurt Mom and sick Colleen to tend to the morning after the accident. It was just too much for him to handle; Mom kind of escaped out to Mr. Hassal's car while Robby Jr. was getting some clothes on Colleen.

Mom oughta have had him arrested when he wrecked that car. Instead she keeps telling about how happy she is with him. And now even Colleen's trying to get in good. You'd think the old fart was Santa Claus or something. Robby Jr. pictures him prancing around with a big, tattered sack handing out dirty cans of nails with price tags on them. He pulls a snarling opossum out of the sack by its tail. Even that has a price tag, stuck like a bullseye, right between the things eyes.

Robby Jr. undoes the top button of his shirt. "It's too fucking hot to wear a hot shirt like this."

Colleen shoves past him into the garage. "We'll roll the windows down. It'll be fine once we get moving."

They drive over to Mom's apartment building where they are to meet Mr. Hassal and ride to the reunion in his car. Mr. Hassal hasn't arrived yet so they climb the steps to Mom's apartment. "The TV works great," Colleen tells Mom. "We really love it."

"Where'd all this come from?" Robby Jr. gestures around the room at Mom's knick-knacks. She's always had a lot of them but they seem to have multiplied since the last time he visited. Every surface in her tiny living room teems with china cherubs and animals which wink their painted eyes and smile benevolently up at Robby Jr.

"These are my collections. Come on, Colleen, come see my Aunt Jemimas." Mom takes Colleen's arm and pulls her into the kitchen. Robby Jr. hears them jabbering away in there. He sits on Mom's new couch until they come back to the living room. Mom wants to show him her new teeth. She's swishing them in a glass.

"Hey, this is nice." Colleen straightens a framed painting of some mallards in a pond.

Mom points at the picture with the glass. Her teeth click against the side and water splashes. Mom'd spill herself if she could. She's been brimming with excitement and good cheer since she met Mr. Hassal, Robby Jr. thinks bitterly. She never acts that way when just Robby Jr.'s around. And he's her son.

"That's Mr. Hassal's. He made that. Here, there are more in the dining room. Let me show you." Mom's cheeks cave in without her teeth. She talks with a slur and Robby Jr. can't look at her mouth when she's talking--he'll see that empty black spot. She sounds like she'd got a mouth full of Cream of Wheat. After the accident and the key busted out those front teeth, Mom had them all pulled out. "They were

yellow and full of cavities anyway,” Mom’d said. “I was thinking about getting plates years ago but Robby Sr. was against it. When I told Mr. Hassal about it, he said I’d look beautiful.”

“Mr. Hassal’s real good,” Colleen says. The paintings are all of ducks and deer, most with hunters aiming sparking guns out of the weeds in the background. Robby Jr. finds the paintings disturbing--paintings of animals only moments before they bite it. In the time it takes Robby Jr. to study each painting the animal would flop about and slowly bleed to death. The ducks would float limply on the water until somebody waded out and hauled them in. Colleen nudges Robby Jr. “Isn’t he real good, Robby Jr.? We should ask him to make one for us.” Robby Jr.’d like to puke.

Mr. Hassal blows the horn for them when he shows up in his big green car. “Why can’t he come to the door?” Robby Jr. wants to know.

“He gets so out of breath climbing all these stairs,” says Mom. “I don’t like him to have to climb all the way up here so I tell him to beep and I go down there. I’m afraid he’ll have a heart attack like your father.”

Mom inserts her teeth. She sucks water from between them and arranges them with a finger. The teeth inflate her face like an inner tube. She smiles into a mirror to inspect them. “You look like Miss America,” Colleen tells her. Robby Jr. wishes she’d just shut up.

Mr. Hassal's wearing a wilted marigold in the lapel of his jacket and he beeps at Colleen four times as they're walking across the lot toward the car.

"Who is this lovely young thing?"

"I'm Colleen. You must be Mr. Hassal. It's nice to meet you."

"You're Robert's little girl? Shame, Robert, I never knew you had it in you. When you said you were bringing a ladyfriend I certainly didn't expect this. Did your mother leave you come out with us."

Colleen blushes, "I'm old enough, Mr. Hassal."

Robby Jr. feels about five clambering into the backseat with Colleen, who Mr. Hassal keeps winking at in the rear-view mirror. Mom won't let them put the windows down--her hair might get messed. It's hotter than hell in the back and Robby Jr. is sweating before Mr. Hassal even starts the car. He has an uneasy feeling about putting his life in Mr. Hassal's hands. He feels like he's a kitten in a sack that somebody's about to drown in a pond. "Put your seat belt on," he tells Colleen.

Colleen doesn't look like she's sweating, but she doesn't look happy. Mom's perfume is peculiar-smelling and overpowering in the enclosed space. Robby Jr. realizes that Mom's smelled like that all summer, like she and Mr. Hassal have some bizarre chemical pheromonal make-up and when they come in contact this scented by-product is produced. Whatever it is makes Robby Jr. queasy. He closes his eyes and leans his head into the corner and endures. At least the ride to Delta isn't too

long. Colleen touches his thigh and he shakes her off. She doesn't need to be so friendly. Mr. Hassal has some big-band-old-folks music going on the tape player. He's got it jacked up high enough to grit Robby Jr.'s teeth

Mr. Hassal's olive green car breasts the road like an ocean liner. There's something regal about it--like riding in a procession of royal elephants--even though this must be the ugliest car Robby Jr.'s ever seen. Mr. Hassal's stature is straight, his eyes forward and authoritative, his hands playing dryly over the wheel. Robby Jr. hates him for it all and kicks the back of Mom's seat.

"What?" she asks

Mr. Hassal decelerates, turns, and pilots over driveway gravel. Immensely relieved, Robby Jr. cautiously checks out the house but instead of seeing Mr. Hassal's family he sees rows of tagged items spread on tables reflecting in the bright sun.

"Oh, I love yard sales!" Colleen squeals. Somebody ought to slap that girl.

Robby Jr. refuses to get out of the car even though he's liable to smother back there. He won't speak to Mom or Colleen or Mr. Hassal either. "Come on, Robby Jr. People don't even leave their dogs in the car when it's this hot. Get out and stand by the car at least."

He hides his face in his arm. He can feel his cheeks sticking wetly in the crook of his elbow when he rocks his head back and forth. He counts the beads of sweat inching down his elbow to drop on the seat. Good God, they're taking forever. The

one time Robby Jr. looks up his eyes are blurry from pressing in the elbow. When they adjust he sees Mr. Hassal with an armful of junk apparently bartering with the bored-looking housewife in charge.

Finally the car door opens. "Look what I found!" Colleen balances a wooden statuette of a Mexican on a donkey on Robby Jr.'s thigh. "It was only fifty cents."

"Junk," Robby Jr. growls, slapping it off his leg.

"Bastard," Colleen hisses, cradling her treasure.

"Don't forget to wear your seat belt," Robby Jr. advises before submerging in his elbow again. "He'll probably drive faster now that we're late."

Mom and Mr. Hassal peer into the back seat. "We couldn't fit everything into the trunk. You two don't mind if we squeeze some of it back here with you, do you?" Robby glowers at a box of Avon bottles, fourteen encyclopedia volumes, and some flowerpots.

"Your mother sure is a bargain hunter," Mr. Hassal cackles. "I told your mother, I said, you could find a bargain anywhere, even if it was hidden in somebody's dark barn."

Robby Jr. sneers.

Mom beams her new teeth at Mr. Hassal.

Robby Jr. is surprised how normal Mr. Hassal's niece's place is. The house is a

white rancher sitting on a groomed lawn. The party takes place out back by an above-ground pool where a couple kids are drowning each other. Some guy's flipping burgers behind a grill. He raises his spatula when they come around the house. The yard smells like meat. About ten people stand around the pool talking. After Mr. Hassal introduces them all, taking the opportunity to put one arm around Mom's waist and the other around Colleen, the people go right back to talking among themselves. Robby Jr. can't help being impressed. Mr. Hassal's fat niece is the only friendly one. She brings them all beer, then asks how Mr. Hassal and Mom met, so Robby Jr. has to listen to that story again. He concentrates on the niece and notices the relatives are blowing her off, too. Even the burger-flipping fellow speaks curtly, slashing his spatula when she comes too close. He must be her husband.

Mom's got her teeth out and snaps them at Mr. Hassal's niece's porky fingers. She giggles and Mom pats her elbow. Robby Jr. looks at Colleen instead. She looks so beautiful today he almost can't blame Mr. Hassal for hanging on her.

"Can we talk, Colleen?"

She looks at him with her brows raised. "You've been a total asshole."

"I'm sorry," he whispers.

"If it wasn't for your mom and Mr. Hassal, I'd go home right now."

"Shhh. Let me make it up to you."

"Oh alright." She follows him to a set of lawn chairs removed from the crowd.

"Look at those two love-birding off together," goes Mr. Hassal, loud. He beats the picnic table and cackles. "Sneaking off to be alone!"

Colleen pats Robby Jr. on the arm. "Shhhh." When Robby Jr. glares at her she says "Poor Mr. Hassal. His own family won't even talk to him. Have you noticed they won't even look over at us? Let alone come hang out."

"Do you blame them?"

"I feel terrible for him. That story about his cat and that possum made me so sad."

"Why should that make you sad?"

"He just doesn't have anybody."

"Well, I don't think he's even noticed his relatives don't like him, Mom hasn't. She's so hung up on him, I don't understand it." Robby Jr. spits, then grinds it into the grass with his shoe.

"I think he notices," Colleen says. "Anybody would notice."

"He's so obnoxious. The way he keeps touching you--"

"Come on, Robby, he's just an old guy."

"He's still a guy."

"I think he's sweet. I'm glad he found your mom. The two of them are good for each other. He definitely doesn't have any kids or they'd be here."

"She could do better."

“Oh, I’ll bet he’s got a lot of dough stashed away somewhere.”

“I didn’t mean it that way. He’s just jerky. She could do better.”

“Well, so could I, but--” Colleen puts her hand on top of Robby Jr.’s and squeezes. “Come on, let’s get some more beer.”

When the burgers are done so they sit at a picnic table with the rest of the family and eat. Mr. Hassal keeps telling stories that everyone ignores. Most of them are about yard sales and men who hang out in the Brogue Store. Robby Jr. cringes every time he starts up a new one. Why won’t he get the hint? The only one hanging on his words is Mom. After dessert, Mr. Hassal gets up and wanders over to the edge of the woods backing the yard. Robby Jr., Mom and Colleen watch him because nobody is talking to them and they have run out of things to say to each other.

Robby Jr. is washing down his chocolate cake with a new beer but he chokes when he notices Mr Hassal taking a leak against a tree. Colleen sees it, too. In response to Robby Jr’s choke, she whispers, “Oh my God. His eyesight must be bad, He doesn’t realize we can see him.”

“Shh. Maybe nobody will notice.”

“Look! Mr. Hassal’s peeing!” Mom squeals.

The entire family follows her pointing finger. Silence. Robby Jr. notices a few early leaves drifting down from a locust tree. Mr. Hassal’s niece stands up, her arms

dangling uselessly at her sides. She looks like a deer caught in headlights. Colleen clenches Robby Jr.'s hand. Her nails rowel his skin. Suddenly Mr. Hassal throws his hands up in the air and whirls around. "Ha ha! Fooled you all. You all though I was peeing down in the weeds!" He shakes his arms in triumph. "I wasn't peeing, I was only fooling!"

Colleen and Robby Jr. look at each other. Should they be relieved? Mom is the only one laughing. All of Mr. Hassal's relatives watch the old man caper across the lawn without saying anything. Their stares are treacherous. One of the men coughs rudely. Mom's laughing so hard beer comes out her nose and leaves a dark spot on the tablecloth. Robby Jr. watches it spread. It's hard at first--like forcing his feet into somebody else's shoes--but Robby Jr. makes himself laugh. First he laughs directly at the man who coughed, then he abandons himself and throws back his head in loud snorts. His laughter rolls over the yard and trickles into the woods. It grows until it's louder than the Peach Bottom Power Plant emergency siren. Colleen looks at him like he's nuts but soon she begins giggling, too.

Back at Mom's apartment, Robby Jr. and Colleen climb stiffly out of Mr. Hassal's car. Colleen staggers from too many beers as Robby Jr. steers her to their car. He gets her situated in the passenger's seat, then looks up at the sky. It's a beautiful night--he can see all kinds of stars. He stretches and tells Colleen, "I'll be a minute."

He goes over to where Mr. Hassal is trying to drag the box of encyclopedias out of the car. He watches for a few seconds the old man grunting and heaving at the stuck box. Robby Jr. can already smell the mildew coming off the old books. Why the hell do these old people want all this old stuff? Mom just got rid of years' worth of shit. Now she's stuffing the new apartment. What is she afraid of? The kitchen light's on and he can see her moving around in there. Her shadow appears at the window. Looking out. Waiting. He imagines her shifting her dentures around with her finger. He looks up at the stars for a second, then unbuttons the top two buttons of his shirt. He puts a hand on Mr. Hassal's elbow. "Let me get that for you, Mr. Hassal. You just open the doors for me."

NINETEEN

"There must be a reunion or a wedding reception or something going on at the pavilion," Little Bill tells Geraldine. "Look at all these people milling around." He drives slowly through the parking lot dangerous with screaming kids dodging through the alleys of cars.

"It looks full," Geraldine points out. "Do you think we're allowed to park along the road we drove on to get up here?"

"Other people did it so I guess it's okay." Little Bill has to back out and drive a little way down the hill before he can find a spot to park along the shoulder. "I should have let you out at the top so you didn't have to walk up again. I'm sorry."

"That's alright. I don't mind." Geraldine doesn't complain about having to climb up the hill again. That's how she is. Little Bill's been dating her for a month now and she sure is a wonderful girl.

That's why Little Bill's in love with her. That's why he's brought her here--Rocks State Park, the King and Queen's seats--to ask her to marry him. To propose. The words sound sweet against his teeth. He hasn't let go of them yet. He wants Geraldine to get the surprise of her life when he drops to his knees and asks her.

"Don't forget your jacket," he tells her, shrugging into his own. "It might be windy out on the lookout."

"A lot of people come up here, don't they?" asks Geraldine, looking around at

all the cars.

“It’s a nice spot. Really pretty. You’ll love it.” Little Bill winds his arm around Geraldine’s shoulder. “Usually there aren’t many people around.” Her side coalesces with his side; she relaxes in a way Crystal never would when Little Bill put his arm around her. Hugging Crystal was like hugging a sack full of gravel, not soft and marshmallowy like Geraldine. Alone, Little Bill’d be ill at ease walking past the crowded pavilion; all these people seem to know each other and he’d feel like he was intruding. But holding onto Geraldine makes him reckless. He talks loud and kneads her shoulder.

“Ow!” says Geraldine, but she smiles when she says it.

The King and Queen’s seat is the most romantic spot Little Bill can think of. It’s in Maryland, just south of the Mason Dixon Line and the drive there is pretty. Geraldine likes to look at cows and they passed several large dairy farms. The pavilion sits at the top of a tall, steep hill and the boulders the park was named for are at the end of a short path from the parking lot. They form a bald tower of granite overlooking the valley cut by Deer Creek. By some trick of nature, one who sits on the rocks and gazes around can see no sign of civilization. No farms, or houses, or even the road threading its way along the edge of the creek.

Little Bill wanted to ask Geraldine to marry him in an unusual way to prove he’s a special guy. He considered having it announced over the intercom at the mall

the way they announce lost children, but he doesn't know where to go to have things like that done. It would be awesome if he could have it flashed up on the scoreboard at Camden Yards like he's seen people do--"From Little Bill to Geraldine: Will you marry me?" In black and orange fifty feet high. 45,000 people would witness it and want to buy him and Geraldine beer. It would celebrate his and Geraldine's very first meeting when they had their awkward drink at the sportsbar. But even though the Orioles are still playing, he's heard the post-season tickets are next to impossible to get ahold of. Even if he camps out in the mall waiting for the ticketplace to open up he didn't have a great chance at getting them. Especially since the O's won the series with Cleveland. They've got a shot at being in the World Series for the first time in thirteen years.

Little Bill's heard of other unique ways people proposed--some guy from high school proposed to his girlfriend by renting a billboard along 74 and painting *will you marry me* on it. Recently, on the news, they talked about the guy on the jury in the Blondie trial who proposed to a fellow jury member just as they were preparing to announce the verdict. Who would have thought something good would come out of that mess? (The feuding dog owners were each awarded partial custody.)

Little Bill settled on the King and Queen's seats when he remembered the first date he took Geraldine on to Indian Steps and Otter Creek. Up until he got in that fight with Crystal over his stuff she was selling at her yard sale, it was a beautiful day.

It even turned better after they left the trailer because though Geraldine was angry at Little Bill for making a scene, she forgave him somewhere along 74 and asked him to stop at the Brogue Store to so she could get a Coke. When he stopped the car, she leaned over and kissed him. That was it. Then she handed Ambrosia over to him and got out of the car and bought a Coke out of the machine.

She really enjoyed being outside, she told him, and the King and Queen's seat was another of those majestic outdoor places he'd gone to with the Boy Scouts when he was a kid. He wants his proposal to be something the two of them remember for a long time.

She will marry him, won't she? They are perfect together. She tells him she loves him. She'll definitely say "yes".

He's got the ring in the special zipper pocket on the inside of his jacket. It's beautiful. He should have it paid off in six months if he makes all the payments.

"You're quiet," Geraldine says. "What are you thinking about?"

"A secret. A good one."

The people at the pavilion all look like hippies. The band plays bluegrass music from a sort of stage constructed by pushing several picnic tables together and building a platform out of plywood. Some of the people are seated at other tables eating and watching the band. Others are out under the trees dancing with each other and drinking out of yellow plastic cups. More people have come out of the

pavilion and ignore the band to watch the dancers.

"I wonder what it's like to be a hippy," Geraldine whispers. A lot of times she surprises Little Bill with the things she's thinking about. That's another thing about her that's so wonderful. Crystal never thought about anything but getting Little Bill's money away from him and drinking beer. A lot of times he wonders what he ever saw in that girl. Geraldine is one of those really creative people you don't meet very often. Little Bill doesn't know anybody else like her.

"Let's go dance, Geraldine." Little Bill doesn't know what makes him say that. He normally doesn't like to dance and he's not a real fan of bluegrass. It must be because he's so excited about proposing. He wants to see that ring on Geraldine's finger.

"We don't know anybody here."

"There are so many people here, nobody will say anything; if anyone asks us, we can just say somebody else invited us."

"Little Bill, I don't know. I don't feel comfortable..."

Little Bill reaches out and takes one of Geraldine's curls in his fingers. He pulls her gently by it. "How about we dance over here."

Geraldine acts exasperated. "We're practically in the woods. I better not get any deer ticks on me." She sighs real loud and probably rolls her eyes but Little Bill can't see her do it because she puts her arms up around his neck and dances with

him.

The last time Little Bill danced with a girl was at a high-school dance. He danced with Robby Jr's girlfriend, Colleen. She wasn't dating Robby Jr. yet and Little Bill had a big crush on her. Little Bill wasn't all that popular and it took ten dollars to convince her to give him a chance. The community center boiled with hormones and bodies and he'd sweated through his shirt by the time he got Colleen in his arms. Pressing against her body with music pulsing through him felt pretty good but Little Bill'd thought something else would happen. All she kept doing was this thing where she'd stiffen her arms so he couldn't get as close as he wanted. It's funny how things turn out. After the song ended, Colleen dropped her arms off his shoulders and walked away.

Four days later, Little Bill saw Colleen and Robby Jr. kissing in the school parking lot next to Robby Jr's truck. It took a while but Little Bill finally started having crushes on other girls and since then he and Robby Jr've been best friends like always. Actually, Colleen's pretty enough if you like that blonde, skinny look, but Geraldine's sure got some curves. Colleen can be a bitch, too, and that's something Geraldine never is.

Geraldine's going wild with the dancing thing. She doesn't act like she's worried about people coming over and telling them they can't dance to the band because they weren't invited. No, she's kicking and swinging her feet around and

singing along with the band. Little Bill has to stop and put his jacket on a bench. It's hard to keep up with Geraldine. "Where'd you learn to do this?" he pants.

"I took a class at school. Last year." She spins.

"Wow."

"I got an 'A'"

"You're really good."

"Thanks. Can you dip me?" Little Bill tries to dip her. "Ow!" goes Geraldine. "My back. I don't want to dance anymore. Let's go to the overlook."

"Alright," says Little Bill, wondering if he should have given her the ring while they were dancing. That was pretty romantic. It's too late now, though. They walk down the gravel path.

He doesn't have a place to offer Geraldine right now, but he talked to his dad who agreed to give him a loan to get them into another trailer. Little Bill's parents're so pleased he's not with Crystal anymore they've agreed to help get him and Geraldine started. Geraldine only has one more semester of nurse's training, so pretty soon she'll have a job, too. Little Bill's mom offered to continue watching Ambrosia during the days because day care is so expensive. That's where Ambrosia is today. Geraldine and Ambrosia get along great so neither one of them should have a problem with a more permanent relationship.

"I thought there'd be benches here--some throne to take pictures in. Why do

they call it the King and Queen's seat if there's nothing to sit on?"

"You sit on the rocks. I guess because you can see so much."

Geraldine arranges herself on a ledge and shields her eyes from the sunset.

"You're right. It's pretty."

Little Bill sits beside her and takes her hand. They sit quietly for a long time.

"Brrrr," says Geraldine. She pulls her windbreaker over her head, mussing her hair. She looks out over the valley brinked with trees just starting to turn colors.

"Thanks for bringing me here." She watches a hawk riding an updraft through the sunset and in profile her chin tilts up, proudly, like something royal. Little Bill reaches behind him and feels for his jacket with the ring in the pocket. It must be the right time.