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CREATING VIRGINIA

Patterson Webster

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

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ABSTRACT

Creating Virginia

Patterson Webster

Creating Virginia is a novel which explores questions of family relationships and memory, and the connections which bind the present to the past. The title character, Virginia Dare Paige, is soon to turn fifty. Her children are grown and life with her husband has become a stale routine. Feeling alone, she begins to question her life as a wife and a mother.

She travels from her home in Quebec to Virginia, the place where she grew up. She and her sister Barbra spend a week touring the state with their parents, a trip which Martha and Victor Dare have planned as a sort of summary of their lives - not only the facts of it but the emotional details, the particulars which make them who they are. Although Ginny may go unwillingly, the voyage takes her through history into her past; metaphorically she travels deeper into herself.

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I would like to thank Dr. William Feindel of the Montreal Neurological Hospital for his information on neurological disorders and hospital procedures.

Blue Dwarfs

Tree burial, you tell me, that's
the way. Not up in but under.
Rootlets & insects, you say as we careen
along the highway with the news on
through a wind thickening with hayfever.
Last time it was fire.

It's a problem, what to do
with yourself after you're dead.
Then there's before.

from *True Stories*, by Margaret Atwood

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PART ONE

Near my cottage there's a sign advertising *pain*. It is shaped like the shield on a family crest and made from smoky grey barnboard, over-painted in shades of gold and yellow and toasty brown with the image of what it purveys: bread, the staff of life. It's a wonderful example of art imitating life. In the center, resting on sheaves of wheat, there's a cottage loaf fresh from the oven, plump and perfectly round; wavers of paint rise so convincingly you can almost smell the home-baked goodness. A bread knife lies ready to hand and sunshine hitting the shellacked surface makes the blade glint like metal. I narrow my eyes and pull over to the side of the road. How have I missed this before? The sign isn't new - the grass around the base is undisturbed and the lettering is worn on the north where it catches the wind. There is a house behind, nothing special, an ordinary brick bungalow like you see in suburbs all across North America - an architectural abomination, John would call it, with awkwardly placed bedrooms and a picture window which opens onto the highway rather than the view behind. But although I've driven this road more times than I can count, I've never noticed the house before, or the sign either.

I can't understand why. Below the cottage loaf stretch two baguettes, achingly thin. At the peak, where the plumed helmet sits on a real family crest, there's a chef's hat. It's perched at a jaunty angle - or what is meant to be jaunty. I lower the window and give a snort of satisfaction. The sign painter can't carry it off. The hat sags with disappointment, not alarmingly, but enough nonetheless to disturb the sign's message of old-fashioned comfort. And it's not only the hat. From my angle the butter-bright letters of

pain appear rancid, as if the sign painter felt as sour then as I feel now. The sign itself, hanging on chains like a body hangs from a gibbet, seems more a warning than an invitation to buy.

Beyond the house, Lake Massawippi is sparkling in the sunshine, a picture postcard brought to life. In the distance Black Point slopes down to the water, the dark mass of trees perfectly balancing the bright. Bodies sprawl on the grass in the park: a pair of lovers, a young boy with a dog, an old woman in a floppy hat who has set up her easel beside the bandstand.

It wasn't like this the first time I saw it. North Hatley was cold then. The lake was frozen solid and the morning after I arrived John suggested we go out on it for a walk.

"Trust me," he said. "The ice is a foot thick."

I insisted it couldn't be safe; but what did a young southern girl like me know about snow and ice? Holding his hand I stepped out gingerly. Soon I was careening along, the wind pushing from behind. We started down the lake and, just before Black Point, stopped to watch a fisherman. John folded his arms and questioned the man. What kind of fish was he after? Did he come here often?

The man blinked at the brightness behind us. There was a pause, then he cleared his throat and began in English.

"No, en français," John said. The bony knob at the end of his jaw which I loved so much slipped back and forth easily under his skin.

The man muttered something between clenched lips which made John start. Then he squeezed my waist.

"He says he usually catches perch but today he's out of luck," he translated. "He says maybe now his luck will change."

I smiled. He was so confident then, so full of himself, that it never occurred to me that he might be lying or pretending to understand something he didn't. He was perfect. That night I wrote in my diary that he had taught me to walk on water; and while I often used the line afterwards as a joke, I meant it all the same.

Or I did then. I roll up the window. At least the sign is honest - love is a pain and happily ever after is only in fairy tales. I check the mirror and pull onto the road. If I mention the sign to John he'll pretend to listen but he'll be thinking about something else - a problem at the office, the meeting tomorrow he's so keen on, some glitch in a design. His eyes will glaze over or wander back to the blueprints he is studying. How can I make this project more perfect than the last? Is there anything in the plans which serves no purpose? He'll be courteous, as he always is, with that quiet courtesy which keeps you at a distance. He'll look at me over the top of his glasses and the corners of his mouth will rise infinitesimally.

This is the problem: when you've been married as long as we have, you know what will happen next. And it's always the same old thing.

"How interesting, Ginny," he'll say. "I must take a look the next time I pass." Then he'll pick up his pencil and leave me standing.

I'm sick of it. I'm sick of it all.

Some things I never doubted. Growing up in Richmond, Virginia, I knew that Jesus loved me: for the Bible told me so. I knew that my parents loved me: for Mother, exasperated, said so daily, every time I let her down. I knew that she would never favor my sister Barbra over me, or me over my sister, but treat us equally, despite the fact that Barbra was sulks and sharp elbows while I was dimples and a smile. I knew that if I obeyed her wise

counsel and my father's command I would find my rightful place in the world, as she had found hers, as a good wife and a good mother. And what more should I want?

Give us a child until he's seven, the Jesuits say, and he's ours for life. My parents had me until I married. What chance did I have when the letter arrived last month?

As soon as I saw it I knew it was from her - Mother's handwriting with its rounded loops, so smugly tidy and self-contained, is a dead give-away, not to mention the ink she uses, Skipp's Peacock Blue, a brazen color which is, in my opinion, quite wrong for her, completely out of keeping with her painfully conventional approach to life. I put the letter on the bottom of the pile and opened the bills first, then skimmed the grocery store ads which normally I ignore - not saving the best for last, merely postponing the inevitable.

Mother's letters are always the same: detailed accounts of her increasingly uninteresting life written to make me feel guilty for things I have nothing to do with. Tucked in with her news are the small questions, thin and painful as paper cuts. Are you still attempting to lose weight? (by which she means, try as you like, you'll never become what I think you should be). Is Danielle making a better adjustment to her classmates this year? (That is, has she managed to find someone as ill-mannered as she, with ideas even half as odd?) Are you still beating your wife is a question for amateurs. My mother is a pro.

But this letter was not what I expected. Even if she composed it as carefully, the tone was less astringent; and behind the artificial phrases, hiding in the spaces between her thoughts and her words, was an almost pathetic desire to recreate the past.

May 17, 1992

Dear Barbara and Virginia,

Shortly before he died my father took your Aunt Catherine and me on a trip to acquaint us with our family history. We visited the graves of his parents and grandparents, and those of my mother's ancestors. We visited numerous relatives throughout Virginia and North Carolina, some of whom I scarcely knew at the time. It was a sort of pilgrimage to pay homage to those who had come before us, and it provided an occasion to establish links with the present generations. Time has proved the wisdom of his actions and I wish to carry on the tradition.

She called the trip a Heritage Tour. On the second page of her letter the words were centered and neatly underlined twice, like the title of a fourth grade book report: The Martha Lothrop Dare Heritage Tour. I laughed with despair. Making herself a title and underlining the words was automatic - she was a schoolteacher before she was married and old habits die hard - but I knew she intended no irony. Nor would she have found humor in the notion that she was treating her life like a trip through some moldy historic house. My mother mistrusts such cleverness, in large measure because she has none herself, and puts her trust instead in more deeply-rooted virtues - honesty, thrift and fidelity to home and family. She is suspicious of anyone who questions their value. Like Barbra. Mother still includes the extra 'a' in her name when she writes and when she speaks, although my sister renamed herself almost forty years ago, long before Barbra Streisand appeared on the scene. But Mother can't abide such independence of spirit.

Reading her letter, I heard the past thunder out its commandment: honor thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long upon the earth - and keep the name I gave you. I could see her bent over her desk, composing and revising until she got the tone exactly right. She pinches her lips in concentration, squares up the words with the wooden ruler and sniffs in a familiar way: something is wrong. She aligns the ink stand with the green leather box where she keeps stationery and postage stamps, then nods her head. There, that's better. The letters flow from her pen. At the end of each sentence she pulls her head back to admire their roundness - how easy they are to read! No possibility here of mistakes, no need to squint. The skin on her hand is loose and powdery to the touch.

Then it is me sitting at the desk, admiring a book report I've prepared on *A Child's Garden of Verses* for my Girl Scout Reading Badge. I've rewritten the beginning five or six times: she insists the apostrophe is necessary. I feel her looking over my shoulder.

"You forgot to underline the title, Virginia."

I pick up the pen and begin to draw the lines freehand.

"No, not like that." She hands me the ruler. "There's only one way to do things: the right way. Can't you learn?"

I pinch my lips together and read her letter again. Nothing has changed - the only way is still her way.

In addition to visiting the grave sites whose location we know, I hope to find another, the last resting place of your great-great-great grandfather, Ananias Dare. I want to establish whether we are related through him to Thomas Dare, one of the very early settlers at Jamestown - he came in the second wave of colonists, in 1609, in case you've forgotten - as family lore has always said we are. I scarcely need remind you girls that finding this proof

will place you among a very exclusive group, the descendants of the first families of Virginia. Nor do I need to repeat that this is an honor not to be taken lightly.

If I can establish the relationship between Ananias and Thomas Dare, I'll be happy. However, I hope to do even more. Recently I've discovered a possible link with Virginia Dare, the first English child born in North America, after whom you, Virginia, were named. As you know, names run in families, and Virginia's father was named Ananias. Certainly this repetition may be a coincidence, but the name is sufficiently unusual to make me hope. It would be gratifying to prove that the family did not disappear without a trace, as historians have always believed, but left relatives behind to carry on the name. I would be very proud to discover a connection so prestigious, a connection that no one else has made, particularly when I am only a Dare by marriage.

I groaned when I read it. The trip had Mother written all over it. And now it's only three days away. I think I shouldn't go with John acting like he is, but the letter doesn't give me an out. And do I really want one? The trip is tightly scheduled: a day in Richmond, a trip to the farm where Daddy grew up (with some surprise I read that my cousin Carter is living there now), visits to more relatives than I knew I had. Every day is cut into chunks of time. A visit to Liberty Hall, the school where Mother taught before she and Daddy were married, is on Day Three between 11:10 and 11:20. (*I don't see the point but your mother insists*, Daddy has written in the margin. *And you know how stubborn she is when she gets an idea in her mind.*) The itinerary lists daily and cumulative mileage, the addresses where we will stay every night and the

names of nearby restaurants with the approximate cost of each in brackets. There is even a list of what we should pack.

These are only suggestions, Mother wrote. We can adjust any or all of it to suit you girls; but as your father says, it's easier to start from a clear-cut plan.

This isn't a plan, it's an order. A command performance, Barbra calls it. I think of spending a week in her company and my back begins to rise. It will be awful to watch her swan around, doing her pathetic star-of-the-stage-and-screen act as if she were still a rising ingenue. But is it worse than being bored to death? My God, the other night was predictable: the creak of the bedsprings the moment the sports news ended, the pat on my shoulder, avuncular, with as much passion as a stale loaf of bread. Come on, it will help you sleep, he said, as if that was what making love was about.

I can't let it go on, I'll be fifty before long and just the same as Barbra, not even a has-been but a never was. A painful burning starts in my stomach and rises in a flash, up my body, through my neck and into my face. Sometimes I think he hates me. Sometimes I think I hate him. I press the back of my hands against my cheeks to ease the pain and turn down the road that leads to the cottage, thinking of Mother's letter again.

I have no favorites when it comes to children, she said. I never have and I never will.

But when I picked up the paper and looked at the ink, I had to laugh. No doubt about it, I have the original. She sent Barbra a photocopy.

In 1961, the summer before I turned eighteen, my father bought me a camera. I graduated from high school that year and although the camera wasn't a graduation present - my parents didn't believe in giving children

gifts for doing what they were supposed to do - I called it that since all my friends had presents to brag about. Mother and Daddy didn't present it to me ceremoniously. There was no box with expensive wrapping paper, no ribbon or card, just Daddy's off-hand remark one night after dinner as Mother was bringing in the dessert. He cleared his throat to draw our attention, then turned his eyes up in the air at nothing, a giveaway I recognized even then as the preliminary to an important announcement - or rather to one he considered important, even if no one else did.

"If you can find time on the weekend, I thought we might buy you a camera. If you want one."

"Don't expect anything too fancy, Ginny." Mother banged the serving spoon against the side of the cut glass bowl as if she were angry. Which perhaps she was - it was a hot night and outside in the garden the ornamental cherry tree was a cloud of cotton candy, overwhelmingly sweet. I took a deep breath and smiled.

"I can't think of anything I'd like more, Daddy. How did you know? Did Barbra tell you?"

He beamed. "Some things I can figure out for myself. Although she may have dropped a hint or two."

Across the table Barbra was haloed in pink cherry blossoms like a Raphael madonna. The late afternoon sunlight streaming in shadowed her face but I didn't need to see it. She knew I was telling a story. I didn't want a camera. I wanted the blue cashmere sweater set we'd seen at Montaldo's, and I had counted on her to bring Mother around, since it was far too expensive a sweater to buy without a fight. Wasn't she my big sister? It was her job to look after me and teach me how to get along in the world. So why had she let me down?

Sunlight bounced up against dust motes trapped in the sticky air. The linen tablecloth which Rhea had starched and ironed earlier in the day lay limp. I patted the corner of my mouth with my napkin the way Mother did.

"May I be excused now? I still have some homework to do. And thank you, Daddy. I can't wait until Saturday."

Upstairs I sat at my desk and pushed down my anger. A camera was good, I told myself. No one else would have one. I saw my friends clustering around, the girls with smiling faces, the boys with brush cuts and button-down collars and trousers an inch too short.

Only despite the clarity of my memory, it wasn't like that. A few days after Mother's letter arrived, when I was waiting for John to return from another one of his meetings, I came across the Time-Life series on gardening - Volume Seven, Ornamental Trees and Shrubs - and discovered that the tree was not in bloom. It couldn't have been: in Virginia cherry trees blossom early in March, not in June.

At the cottage I carry boxes of groceries into the kitchen. The shelves are clean but out of order - Mrs. Beveridge does a wonderful job when she opens up for the summer but she insists on arranging things the way she thinks they should be and not the way I tell her. John is lounging on the porch, the bird book open, his attention split between the newspaper and some cliff swallows swooping across the lawn. Is it the door slamming which brings him inside or is the news too monotonous even for him?

"I got the canoe out of storage," he says. "Want to go for a paddle?" I shove a can of soup to the back of the cupboard. He starts out the door. "I'll meet you by the boathouse."

"Thanks for the help," I mutter.

He lopes towards the lake like a young boy, whistling off key. The binoculars are around his neck and he is wearing the sweater I gave him a few Christmases ago. He really should throw it away - it has worn thin at the elbows and a ring of small holes around the bottom point to a moth who was busy over the winter - but he'll keep it, I'm certain: he's faithful to what's familiar and complains bitterly at even the tiniest change in routine.

Was he always like this? The sourness burns again like yellow bile. Outside the kitchen window the stream rushes past, still swollen from spring rains. The rocks we dumped on the banks a few years ago to prevent erosion are almost submerged, but somewhere in the woods on the other bank a bird is singing, insistently cheerful. I shut the door and follow.

Sometimes in late spring, the memory of winter makes the lake appear like ice. It seems then as if throwing a stone will crack the water and disclose the blackness underneath. Not today. John guides the canoe onto the beach beyond Black Point and starts up the slope. At the granite outcropping above, a pine tree twists up and out, leaning over the water at an impossible angle.

"Isn't it remarkable? Every year I'm afraid it'll be gone." He raps his knuckles against the trunk to confirm its soundness and stares out across the water. The hard knob at the back of his jaw which gives his face the square look relaxes. "I can't think of any place I'd rather be," he says. "Or anyone I'd rather be here with."

I turn sharply. Surely he doesn't mean it? Dark glasses hide his eyes but the two vertical creases which rise from the bridge of his nose when he worries at a problem aren't visible. His head is straight, tipped neither to one side nor to the other - which is, although he doesn't recognize it, a sure sign that he is uncertain and considering his options. So is he telling the truth? His skin is pink from the unaccustomed sun and it has a sheen like an

expensive car, a Bentley say, or a Rolls-Royce, waxed and buffed to perfection. (Barbra swears that he is water repellent, he is so polished. She and John have never seen eye to eye. But then what woman is able to describe her sister's husband without at least a spoonful of malice? Especially when she lacks one herself.)

I turn away. On the lake below waves lap back and forth in a motion far too gentle to explain the deep hollow they've worn at the base of the rock. In July the speedboats and drinkers will spoil the calm - they may even spoil it tomorrow or Sunday if the weather keeps warming up - but for now, all is still. Midway around the bay smoke rises from a cottage hidden in the trees. It is easy to imagine that the smoke is coming from an Indian encampment and that any moment now silent figures will slip from between the trees and stand accusingly before us. Or before John, the white man who has robbed them of all that is rightfully theirs.

"You look like a Bartlett print standing there," I say. "You know, the one with the man on the rock with the lake in the background. Lord of all you survey."

He doesn't answer.

"Did I tell you about that article I read on Bartlett? The guy who wrote it was comparing him to European and American landscape painters from the same period. He preferred the Hudson Valley school. Called it 'charmingly romantic' if I remember rightly. Which is a condescending sort of praise, I agree, but praise nevertheless. He found our Canadian hero bland and boring. A fair conclusion in my opinion."

I wait for him to object, to remind me that moderation and regularity are virtues not to be scorned, that straight lines cleanly engraved may be predictable but that they inspire confidence nonetheless. He's holding the

binoculars to his face and his eyes are blanks of glass. With his legs solidly planted, he is as immovable as a Pharaoh carved in stone. I shift my weight from one foot to the other. Underfoot the pine needles, damp and slippery, release the acrid smell of winter.

"I have to get back," I say.

"There's no hurry."

"I've got things to do."

"And I haven't?" He drops the binoculars and a shadow of feeling crosses his face. Is it anger? Disgust? For a moment I let myself hope, but he says nothing, only turns and starts back towards the beach.

He pushes the bow of the canoe into the water and waits for me to join him. On the way back we pass a man hiking through the woods, then a boy on the beach skipping stones. I wave at the boy and he shouts something in French which I can't quite understand. Low on the water there's a flash of blue - a kingfisher. John says nothing. Has he seen it?

The wind picks up around the point and I paddle harder, wondering all of a sudden how I appear to him. Is he watching the muscles in my arms move beneath my skin, the way I watch the knob at the end of his jaw? I push the hair out of my face and half-turn to see, but his face is closed. It is clear he is thinking of something else, anything else, never me.

The village is in front of us now and the view down the lake is beautiful. Usually I rejoice when I see it: the sun on the water, the familiar buildings, the shape of the hills beyond. But now it makes me sad. For what, I don't know; but I could cry if I let myself and that's makes me angry. It's ridiculous to feel this way. I jab the paddle into the water and pull as hard as I can. Behind me John compensates. I paddle harder but it does me no good. He steers us, home to where we started.

On Saturday morning we headed to K-Mart to buy my camera. We'd find the perfect one there, Daddy assured me. I nodded, stood and listened while he and the salesman debated the merits of several makes before they settled on the one I should have, a middle of the line Kodak which came with its own flash attachment and brown leather carrying case, features the salesman didn't think to mention until he realized how closely Daddy was eyeing a cheaper model.

"The Kodak's a good starter camera," he said. "Just about right for a smart young lady." Daddy had told him I'd graduated from high school on the honor roll and was starting college in the fall at Randolph-Macon Woman's College, an institution known for its high academic standards.

"Is it right for the trip she's dragging me on?" Daddy asked.

"Right for any trip, I'd say." The man waited for Daddy to tell him the route we were to follow, west from Richmond to the Blue Ridge Mountains, to Christiansburg to visit grandparents, south to a family reunion that Mother wanted to attend.

"Your family or hers?" the man asked.

"You married?" The man nodded. "Then you know, I don't need to tell you."

The man laughed and I joined in, neither cross at Daddy's heavy-handed humor nor embarrassed by the personal details he spread about. In the south telling the most perfect stranger about yourself wasn't unusual - *isn't* unusual I'd say, although I'm no authority, I haven't been to Richmond for three years, and as every good Christian knows, three days are enough for the world to change. Certainly, though, this sort of genial cordiality was the case when I was young. Acting as if everyone in the world was a friend was a habit John

found difficult to appreciate, which may be why, when Mother first met him, she was dubious. Look how close mouthed he is, she said. What is he hiding? The K-Mart salesman, though, welcomed Daddy's candor. He wanted to know who we were. He *needed* to know.

"Now this German model... For all that it's foreign, it's even better than the Kodak." He pulled a camera out from under the counter and handed it over, patting my hand to reassure me. "You can't go wrong with a beauty like this."

"It's nice," I said, and looked through the lens and examined it the way Daddy had.

"See how it fits her hand, sir? Like a glove."

Daddy drew in a breath and held it for a minute, his cheeks puffed out. He turned over the price tag, stared appraisingly in my direction, then blew the air out in a single puff.

"What! a po' boy like me? Nope, we'll take the Kodak. She's not worth the extra."

Something in his voice made the salesman stop selling. He spoke to me directly.

"The Kodak will be fine," he said. "It's easy to adjust. And remember: for a beginner there are only two things to consider. Time and light. Get those right and the rest will take care of itself."

I believed him. And so my first roll was a disaster, every picture out of focus. The one of Daddy in front of the loaded car before we set out on vacation, with Mother and Barbra standing on either side, blurred their features almost beyond recognition, but left the ridged nails on Daddy's hand and the tread on the left front tire as sharp and clear as an alarm bell. I blamed the camera.

"It's not the camera, Ginny, it's you," Daddy said. "Hold the thing still and don't jerk down when you press the shutter."

"It's a poor workman who blames his tools." Mother sniffed and twisted her mouth to the side.

It seemed easy enough when Daddy explained. I was to squint through the opening and rotate the ring until the split images came together into one. When the second roll was as bad as the first, Daddy decided I was turning the wrong dial. I knew I wasn't - the milled edge of the focus ring was unmistakably rough. But still, the third roll was a blur, and the fourth and the fifth.

I began to hate the camera. Every roll was a test and every blurred photograph the proof of some basic flaw in my character. Barbra said obviously I'd crossed my eyes too much when I was little. Mother told her not to be silly. All the same she wondered aloud if my failure to see things clearly was due to the astigmatism I had suffered from birth. She couldn't understand how I had inherited such a thing: everyone else in the family saw straight.

The morning Mother's letter arrived I went searching for the camera and finally found it in a box in the attic along with a lot of other junk from Richmond: the lace gloves I'd worn to the senior prom, a dried tube of lipstick, an illustrated program book from the movie "Spartacus." The flash attachment was there, too, a metal contraption which opened up like a vegetable steamer, and three boxes of flash bulbs, a dozen bulbs per box. I took one out, licked the end the way I remembered, pushed and twisted it in. Downstairs I found a battery; looking through the view finder, I fine-tuned the focus, pressed the button. There was a flash, a popping sound. Good, the bulbs still worked. I polished the flash until it shone, cleaned the lens of dust. Then I read Mother's

letter for the third time, sat down at the kitchen table and prepared to call my sister. As always when I'm tense, I longed for a cigarette, for the calm of the first puff, that sense that everything you need is inside you and under your control. Barbra wouldn't be easy to convince. I jotted some key phrases on the back of Mother's envelope.

All for naught: she wasn't home. I pretended to cough and harumph like Daddy does when he is forced to say something he doesn't want to say.

"Help, Sis! The past is catching up with us." Then I straightened my voice. "Seriously, Barbra. Give me a call."

When she did, she was adamant. "I'm not going. I have a show to prepare. Which Mother knows perfectly well - I was telling her about it only a day or two ago."

"You and Mother becoming chummy all of a sudden, are you?" There was silence, then a whining siren which rose and fell in the distance. An ambulance?

"Give me a sec, Ginny." The phone clanked down, then a window slammed and abruptly the noise was gone.

I waited until I heard her pick up the phone. Then I began to sing.

Carry me back to ole Virginie,

That's where the cotton and the corn and 'taters grow.

"Please, Ginny. Don't remind me."

That's where the birds warble sweet in the springtime.

That's where this ole darkie's heart am..."

"Stop!"

I let the silence grow along with the heat - the squalid little Greenwich Village walk-up where she lives must be unbearably hot with the windows closed. Finally there was a sigh of resignation.

"Christ, Ginny. What's all the climbing around in graveyards supposed to accomplish? I'm not interested in family history."

"You think I am?"

"To hear you, this trip is the chance of a lifetime."

I glanced back at my notes. "Look, Barbra, I'm not looking forward to it any more than you are, but we don't have a choice. Mother's counting on us. So, as far as I can see, we might as well resign ourselves."

"Why? Tell me that. Why should I waste my time doing something I don't want to do?"

"Because Mother asked you to. Because you owe it to her. Because if you don't, she'll never stop telling you how rotten you are. Take your pick - it comes to the same thing in the end." I leaned back in my chair. "She's our Mother, Barbra. If she wants us to go, we go. It's that simple." I paused to let the words sink in, then fired my best shot. "She wants to take this trip so she can die in peace."

There was a sudden grunt. "Christ! She never gives up, does she?"

I exhaled, easy now with victory. "It won't be so bad. It might even be fun. Like old times."

"You've got a perverted sense of humor if you think riding around the countryside will be fun. In the back seat of that car, listening to the two of them bicker? And Daddy stinking us out with his pipe? Do you think he's even heard of second-hand smoke?"

"We'll see Carter."

"Okay, that's not so bad, it'll be nice to see the farm again. But how am I going to stand a week? Daddy is such a control freak. Have you looked at the itinerary?"

"He's planning ahead."

"Shit, Ginny! I hate the thought of doing what he tells me to do. But you know what it will be like if I don't. All that pouting and stomping around."

I coughed and harumphed. "Expect the unexpected, girls. It never hurts to be early. A good schedule allows time for accidents."

"You can't laugh him off, Ginny. Mother, either. You know as well as I do. Not a single thing on that schedule is going to change unless she decides it should."

I sighed heavily. "So you're going to ruin the *Martha Lothrop Dare Heritage Tour*?" I underlined and italicized the words to make her laugh. Which she did. And after another few minutes it was decided. We'd go and make the best of it.

When John and I wake up on Saturday the cottage is quiet. Danielle is already dressed and gone for the day, and I can tell that this disappoints him although he hates to let on. He frowns into the shaving mirror. Why don't I get a new one that still has all the silver on the back?

"Why don't you?" I say, and he shrugs and says the house is my job, not his. He rinses the blade and moves over a step. In his mind Danielle is still his little girl. So what if he watches birds for hours at a time? If he wants to see Danielle, she should be waiting. She's almost twenty, I remind him. She has her own life and her own friends; she doesn't need us anymore. Doesn't need you, is what I mean, but I don't say this - hurting a person deliberately is not usually my style.

Nor is evading the truth. God is in the details, they say. But I think the details don't matter, only the general shape. That and the color, the way light hitting water turns it black one moment and silver the next. Of course, you can't fool yourself about what you see. You can't pretend it's something special when it's not. Lots of people have dreams that never come true. Lots start off intending to do one thing and end up doing another. And who's to say that painting a picture is better than raising a child?

"I've got to be off," John says. He pats his face dry and presses a cold cheek against my own.

"Do you want some breakfast?"

"No time. I've got to be in Montreal by eleven." He checks his watch. "I should be back by six-thirty, maybe seven, but they are working on the bridge, so you never know. Will you be all right?" I nod and tighten my lips. "We could have dinner if you want. There's a bottle of Margaux I've been saving."

"Don't worry, John, I'm fine. I want to do some reading - a friend lent me a book from a course he took." He raises an eyebrow. "Just some art history stuff. You wouldn't be interested."

"No, maybe not." He presses his cheek against mine again. His skin is colder now despite the warmth of the day, and so tightly stretched over the bones that it seems more a mask than a face. The corners of his mouth stretch up in a smile and I hold my breath, anticipating a crack, a tearing sound. I hear the car door, the engine, the wheels on gravel like the crunch of snow. When he drives out the drive, I wave like the dutiful wife I am.

But once the sound of the car is gone I wander over to the stream, my dressing gown trailing through the grass behind me. The water is lower now - the rock which was submerged yesterday is almost dry. I hold my gown with

two hands and step onto it, with a feeling of elation about to burst. I'm glad he's gone. I'm glad the house is empty, the bed unmade, the dishes unwashed. It's a beautiful day and I can do whatever I want. I put my weight on one side of the rock, then the other, and it wobbles back and forth, back and forth. I bend my knees. My dressing gown falls into the water and water soaks the hem.

What on earth are you doing, John would say. Are you crazy?

No, not crazy, I shout. Fed up. Angry with you. With your ideas that never change, with what you've made me become, with a life so cautious it hurts. Deliberately, knowing full well what to expect, I bend lower and the water rises, to my ankles, my knees, my thighs.

This is the first thing I remember. It is dark. I am lying flat on my stomach looking down through a metalwork grate. The floor is hard and splintery and threatens to scratch a hole in my nightgown if I wiggle.

The man in the uniform is standing in a sharp light which slants in from the window. He is tall and straight. A slight smile creases his face and the beam highlights his cheekbones with the dramatic intensity of a Caravaggio. There are letters on his uniform but I cannot read them anymore than I can read the marks on the package he is holding.

Excited people cluster around. They are not their normal daytime selves but exotic creatures decorated by the scrollwork on the grate. My aunt wears an ivy leaf around her head. My grandfather holds a bunch of grapes. My mother is wearing a flowered print wrap. She is hanging onto the man's arm, hanging onto his every word - for although no one moves, muffled noises rise up in the heavy light. From above, the neat parting in her hair cuts through mouse brown straight to the white scalp. She steps back from the man; the

silver comb pinning her hair in place glints and a beam shoots up towards where I lie.

For years I thought the man was my father but it seems not. The day after I talk to Barbra I call Mother to assure her that yes, her letter arrived safely; and yes, I am coming; and yes, Barbra is too. Then I describe the scene I remember. It's Harold, she says. It's the night he came back from the war. Uncle Harold? Of course, who else? I replay the scene in my mind. Was it mother's sister Catherine who clung to the man's arm? No, Catherine wasn't there, Mother says - Harold came back suddenly, no one was expecting him. Or maybe she was there, it's hard to remember now, it's all so long ago. But the grate in the house is the way I described. She grew up in that house, it's a pity we can't see it on the trip but it is gone now. The package? Maybe it was the Nazi dagger. Yes, of course I remember it. It was on the coffee table in the living room all the time I was growing up. I wasn't meant to touch it, wasn't meant to take it out of the scabbard - although I did, of course, when no one was around. Mother laughs.

"What other little childhood secrets do you have tucked away?" she asks.

A hundred memories flood my mind, a hundred stories good and bad. A younger Mother towers above me.

"Did you finish your scrambled eggs, Ginny?"

I press my lips together, unwilling to lie directly - that way lies trouble - but equally unwilling to eat the eggs she has prepared, which are crusty on the outside and watery underneath. When she leaves the room I hide them on the floor behind the refrigerator. (Later in the morning, Rhea will sweep them into the trash.) But for safety's sake I keep a remnant on my plate, tucked under half a piece of dry toast.

"What's this?" Mother picks up the crust and scowls. "Virginia Dare! How can you..." My lip quivers. "We'll have none of that, young lady. Now get a move on and finish those eggs. I'm going to stand here until you do. And I don't have all day."

I ate. If inside I smiled, Mother didn't know. Or at least I think she didn't.

I spend the morning reading by the stream like I told John I would, thinking hardly at all of the boy whose book it is. By lunchtime I'm tired of reading, restless and ready to move. I begin to drive. I take back roads, going nowhere in particular, simply enjoying the freedom to satisfy my whims. On a road heading towards the American border, I pass a crumbling stone wall and an arched gateway with a name spelled out in metal letters: Ives Cemetery. The grass inside looks cool and invitingly green. I check my rear view mirror. Nothing in sight. Why not?

Beyond the wall, wild flowers poke through the grass. I stoop to read a gravestone with an oddly shaped head, two humps like a rounded M. It's a double grave. The left side is a young girl, Susannah Merriman, who died in 1811, age 18; the right side is her brother Hector, age 15. They died only a few days apart, from a disease which swept the area, I'd guess. I read the stone again. Susannah, daughter of Amasa and Alice Merriman. I run my hand over the stone. Feathery ferns that barely scratch the surface droop like peacock tails from a Grecian urn. A neoclassic design. Isn't 1811 a bit early for that? I'd expect something simpler and more straightforward. Although the verse is straightforward enough.

How quick and sudden fly the shafts of death
To do their deadly aim
Reader this may be writ of you
On the dark slate beneath your name.

There's no messing around here - the moral is right up front, in good, solid Protestant style. A man named Amasa: I see him so easily, a thunder and lightning sort with flinty eyes and a square jaw and never a doubt in the world. I see Alice, too: a sensible sort on the surface but wild underneath. Or wanting to be. So what if she is crying? The good lord giveth, the good lord taketh, and that's the way it is. So get on with your life and stop the snivelling. It's odd - she and I share a name, although no one calls me Alice, no one ever has. I laugh, remembering suddenly my first day of kindergarten. Alice Dare, the teacher called. There was silence. Alice? Alice Virginia? Are you here? Missy nudged me. That's you, Ginny, she said. And of course it was. I look to the grave next in line. It's a brother. Nathaniel Merriman, son of Amasa and Alice, drowned 1822, age 19. The same feathers droop from the same urn. The same verse points the same stony moral. Still Amasa will not bend.

The sky is the healthy blue of a normal summer day but the trees edging the wall, bent and twisted, give the place a surreal air. Who could do the scene justice? Dali? I try to see it through his eyes - melting-clock stones, a desert of grass. No, this should be my place to paint. People looking should recognize it immediately - of course, it's a Paige, there is no mistaking her style, she captures the essence of a place like no one else. This stupid Martha Stewart act: the best dressed children, the best wrapped presents, the best loved wife. Why did I do it? John didn't force me, I chose it myself.

I walk a step along the line of graves, fearful of what I'll see. But the next stone is different, thank God, not the thin gray slate of the children's graves but a shiny white granite. There's no verse here and no peacock feathers, only bare-boned facts: Amasa Merriman. Died June 6, 1843, age 76. The stone is thick. The family must have prospered even without the children, and, as Daddy says, nothing shows prosperity as clearly as a solid chunk of granite. Amasa's name is cut deeply, in the shape of a horseshoe. A lucky man with three children lost - is that supposed to be funny?

Or did the luck belong to Alice? I walk along the line of graves. Where is she? George Merriman, a son - thank God, at least one child survived. Cordelia Merriman, George's wife. Samuel Merriman, George's son. Benjamin and Matthew and Henry, George's grandsons. Polly, Rachel, Jane; Lemuel, Freeman, Thomas. Their wives and children. Where is Alice?

I retrace my steps. Between Amasa's gravestone and the stones of the children is an empty space exactly the size for one grave more. I study the ground. It is smooth. The grass is undisturbed. There is no sign that a grave was ever here. Absence. How could I paint this? Under an elm near the back fence a tombstone points a finger to heaven. In hope or in expectation? Suddenly I am too tired to choose.

The cottage smells tired and fusty when I return. It's well past seven but John isn't back. I check the machine for a message.

"Something has come up, Ginny, and it looks like I won't be back until late. I guess we'll have to save that bottle of wine for tomorrow."

His voice is tinny. Never explain and never say you're sorry - isn't that the way the saying goes? In the bathroom I position myself in front of the sink so that the patch on the mirror hits my mouth, blanking out the words I

want to scream. From the tub, yellow daisies stare up at me, their dark centers unblinking. I hear a younger John calling me, his voice full of life.

"Hey, Ginny. What do you think of these?" He is pointing to the booth in front of him, where rows of daisy decals in psychedelic colors alternate with Expo '67 logos and stylized maple leaves. They are made of scratchy sandpaper which glitters in the sunshine. "Let's buy some," he says. "A dozen or so. More accidents take place in the home than anywhere else, you know. Especially in the bathroom." He tips his head toward Michael who is asleep on his back in a position impossible for anyone but a baby. "We don't want to take chances with this little guy. Or with this one." He pats my tummy and I laugh. Only old people slip in the bath, I say; but that evening, when we return to the cottage, John sticks the daisies on. Twenty-five years.

I've almost finished when Danielle breezes in.

"What are you doing?" she asks.

"What does it look like?"

"You can't get rid of the daisies."

I sit back on my heels, razor in hand. She's been smoking - I can smell it on her breath - but if I ask, she'll only deny it. And why should I force her to lie?

"They aren't safe," I say.

She reaches over my shoulder, picks at a frayed edge. "Yeah, maybe you're right. But it's a shame, I'll miss them."

"You'll get over it."

A minute later I hear a door, voices outside, silence. I turn the taps on full and watch the scraps swirl down the drain. In the living room I browse through the bookshelf, hoping for something to catch my eye, to take my mind

off the anger I'm feeling. And there is the gardening book which proved my memory wrong.

I bought the Time-Life series in the early seventies, a year or two before Danielle was born, which was long after I stopped planning to be an artist. What's the point, I said to John. I'll never be good enough. And besides I have the children to look after.

"And me," he said. "Don't forget me."

"As if I could," I answered promptly.

How could I have thought that was true? I slam the book shut and stomp around the room, glaring at objects which are far too familiar - the ashtray Michael painted for my fortieth birthday - my God, almost ten years ago now - the horseshoe John and I found in the woods the year we were married, the old Seven-Up bottle with the elongated neck, which everyone hates but which no one can bear to throw away. This morning's *Gazette* is still on the kitchen table and I open it and start to read. Some kook is making the case against apostrophes, explaining why they must be outlawed in Quebec. His argument is specious. It makes no sense, however many times I read it. Notwithstanding, the strength of his conviction makes me stop. Because on first glance, an apostrophe appears insignificant. Yet consider the difference: A wise dog knows its master. A wise dog knows it's master. And if a mark on the page can change so much, what is the force of an idea?

I intended to be unfaithful. I planned it out, step by step, designed the evening's seduction as carefully as John designed the house we live in. The day Mother's letter arrived - it's weird that that's when it was. Let's meet at that café on St. Denis, I said, and he agreed, although I knew he was wondering why. He was only a boy, not innocent - who is these days? - but soft, with skin

I wanted to touch. I looked at him over the rim of my cup and breathed in the smell of Gaulois. Do you want to go to my place, he asked, and I blinked. This was it. We stopped at a dépanneur and I bought the best bottle of wine they had - which wasn't very good, of course, but which worked as I hoped it would. He was shocked, poor thing. Are you sure? I put my hand on his thigh. You think you're the first?

Could I have done it? You're going to tell me you've never had an orgasm, aren't you? he said, and I laughed. No, I'm not going to say that, I remember every one. Oh, yeah? He looked like he wanted to hear. We were in the bedroom when his girlfriend walked in, not knocking, like she owned the place. Shit, I forgot to lock the door, he said. And that was it.

There's a niggling little worry in my mind, that tells me I made a fool of myself. I almost don't care. What's crazy is how good it feels to know that I can still do it. I'm desirable. I can arouse someone, make him want me. And not just a man but a boy. Because men, I think, must be easy - all you need is to look and they're knocking on the door, impossible to get rid of. The lonely ones, at least. But a boy is something else. I laugh when I remember how startled he was. He had me all wrong. I wasn't stodgy but rash, ready to venture out on a limb, to go farther than I've ever been.

In the fall of 1961, I entered Randolph-Macon Woman's College in Lynchburg, Virginia. Four years later I graduated.

Then suddenly, two years ago, it was twenty-five years. Time to celebrate, the letter said. Where are you now? My classmates and I were invited to write a page about ourselves to answer the question. Our answers would be compiled in a book and everyone who contributed would receive a copy.

I had no intention of going to the reunion - the day I left I swore I'd never go back, that part of my life was over - but I was damned if I would be left out of the book. So I sat at my desk in Montreal and sketched an outline of my life - names, dates, honors, accomplishments - labeling the parts of my life like jars of preserves put up for winter, ready to use when needed. I constructed my life as a house, a comfortable white-frame cottage built in the early forties, with three additions in the sixties and seventies, Michael, Ian and Danielle. In my finest Martha Stewart style I painted the picture in words: a sparkling stream, ivy entwining a solid oak, verdant gardens with peacocks strolling. (Would anyone from the art history department recognize the symbols of fidelity and marital harmony I so cleverly included?)

But as I discover each year when I wash out the jars to use them again, old labels refuse to peel off cleanly. Even papered over, they leave sticky traces, a reminder which makes even the cleverest uncomfortable.

So I ripped up my fancy metaphor and followed instructions. I wrote my life, by hand, on one ordinary eight and a half by eleven piece of white typing paper. Unfortunately I wrote it in burgundy ink which didn't photocopy well. When the editor typed it, my life took up surprisingly little space.

Another classmate wrote something even shorter.

For the last twenty-five years
I have tried to be
a good mother to my children Margaret and Tom
and a good wife
to my husband Milton.

I was shocked when I read this. How could she be so blunt? But her entry, more than any other, has stayed in my mind. I think of it as I scrub off the daisies. Was she proud of herself, saying it wasn't such a bad thing, to be a wife and a mother? Because everyone tells you it is the most important job in the world, but they don't mean it, not really. And she only says she tried, she doesn't say she succeeded.

What difference would it make if she had? Alice Merriman was a wife and a mother, and look where it got her. She disappeared without a trace. She ended up nowhere, an empty spot on the ground, an undisturbed piece of grass. That's not going to happen to me.

In the *Time-Life Book of Gardening*, Vol. 7, along with the blooming period of cherry trees I discovered a postcard I bought years ago at the National Gallery in Ottawa. It's a work of art by Joyce Wieland called "Reason Over Passion," a quilt, about the size of a baby's bed, stitched in all the colors of the rainbow. In the center are the words: Reason over Passion. The letters are soft, puffy, inviting. They send a message oddly out of keeping with the homely art of quilting, which is the point, I suppose.

Waiting for John to return, I study the letters, mentally rearranging them to see if there is something more to what the artist is saying, some hidden message which only those who persist can decipher. Am I right to feel so bitter? Alice's grave may have disappeared, but that doesn't mean that she did, or that I will. What of her life? Was she honored and praised? Did she put reason over passion? Or did she let the two go hand in hand?

I listen to the ripple of the stream outside the bedroom window and consider the question anew. The coincidence of names means nothing, or no more than the empty plot of ground. Yet something keeps bringing her back

to my mind. She must have lived in a cottage like this. It would have been smaller, of course, and without the conveniences of modern life - rough homespun instead of smooth percale - but these differences are trivial compared with all that seems to link us. She was American-born, I'm certain of that - almost all the early settlers were. She would have made the first trek north, as I did, in winter, when the roads were frozen, the lakes and rivers easy to cross. She would have come gladly, I think, leaving behind her a country that was almost brand new, the place she was born, family and friends, convinced that her life with Amasa was fair recompense. He said that it would be and she had no reason to doubt. Hadn't he always been right up to now?

Reason over passion. I study the words. Once John returns I will ask about his day in town in the cheeriest kind of way, and he will tell me about the parts he wants me to know, tell me about them *ad nauseam*, until I'm bored to tears with the detail: clients who can't make up their minds, who have no taste, who choose excess over moderation. And later, when I'm lying in the dark beside him, I'll open my eyes. Nothing to see, nothing to smell - only a vague dissatisfaction, nothing to put my finger on, just the certainty that there must be some other way.

Did Alice find it? I imagine her at the table listening to Amasa talk about his day in town. Her belly is round again and the house is small. Tomorrow he will start to build an addition, to provide a better place for the baby that will come. In the morning when he begins, she will stand by the stream and listen. A breeze blows her hair into her face and when she pushes it back, one strand catches on a callus. Her hands are brown from planting her garden: asters and lilies and a hedge of wild roses transplanted from the

field near the woods. She balances on a wobbly rock and looks at herself in the water. Ripples. There are a dozen Alices.

She shakes her head, amazed at her carelessness. Bending, she has let the hem of her skirt slip into the water. Water makes her skirt heavy. Squeezing it out, she stares at her hands, at the dirt which marks the folds of flesh. Once when she was young, a fortune teller counted the creases in her hand. Each is a child, the woman said, and you have many; but each is short. Only now does the meaning come clear. Alice wonders. Is it better to know or to live with the guilt? Better to lie or to keep the truth to yourself? She remembers the man, his hands running over her body, the joy the feeling brought. And now to bear a child, not knowing whose it is! She gathers her courage and steps onto the bank, near the tangled roots of the willow we will plant the year Michael is born.

Outside the moon is hidden behind clouds but reflections still illuminate the shape of the trees against the sky, dark and straight. Not a child - thank God that's not a worry - not even the pleasure of the act, only the satisfaction that the power is still there. Being able to attract is what I've always cared about. John knows that, he must. I feel the ugly yellow knot inside me loosen a bit. Midnight. It's not your fault, I'll tell him, it's mine. Don't be bitter. Don't blame yourself. No one can be god all the time. It wasn't fair for me to expect it.

I leave the light on and its parchment shade throws a glow on the far wall like the glow of an open fire. Outside the stream flows past, the willows droop. Alice may share my name. She may be part of me, my twin, the one who dares to do what I only dream about. But this separates us, one from another. There is no garden at my cottage. It was always too much trouble to plant.

Sunday is another glorious day, clear and clean and bright. John is cheery when he wakes up and, when I ask, says that the project looks like a go. No, they didn't sign, the people wanted some changes, which was why he was so late, he had to go back to the office to make them while the ideas were clear in his mind. I didn't mind, did I? I shake my head. No, it was fine. I went for a drive and read my book and when Danielle came home, we talked for a while. I pour him another coffee and we return to the *Sunday Gazette*. A John-Paul Lemieux retrospective opens next week in Quebec City. The procession of nuns and the familiar happy wedding scene show Lemieux's trademark, the absence of perspective; there is also a later work, a long thin canvas showing a solitary man dwarfed by an open sky. I stare at the single figure, bravely alone. Here I am, overweight and almost fifty. I've spent my life doing what I'm supposed to do and now I'm getting old and life is passing and I think - shit, if I don't make the break now, when am I going to? It's a pattern as familiar as the procession of faithful believers, so banal it's pathetic, or would be if it happened to somebody else. But it isn't somebody else, it's me. I fold the paper shut.

"So what about that bottle of wine?" I say.

"What?"

"That wine you promised me yesterday. Are we going to open it now?"

"A bit early, don't you think?" His eyes crinkle at the corners to show he understands that I'm joking. He is sitting in a patch of sunlight and in profile the knob at the end of his jaw stands out squarely. When he swallows it slides in and out beneath his skin, a motion which makes me think of the pouch on the throat of an iguana, the way it expands and contracts in the sun's warmth, eerily silent, as if unattached to the animal itself. He turns back to face me.

"Let's have a picnic," he says. "Celebrate before you leave. We can toast the wonderful week you're going to have." He lifts his mug, and I nod and laugh dryly. Briefly we discuss whether to go into town tonight or to wait for the morning. What's the hurry? And how many days like this are there in a summer? Better not to waste it in the city.

I drive into the village to buy lunch. Nothing fancy, John says. Just some pâté and cheese, some fruit, maybe a baguette or two.

"A loaf of bread, a jug of wine and thou?" He pats my arm and returns to the paper.

And now he refills my wine glass. "That's the end of the bottle," he says. He tips back in his chair and closes his eyes, to store up the moment, the gentle slip of the water over the rocks, the warmth of the early summer sun, the smell of lilac and apple blossom, powerfully sweet. I rest my hand on top of his. In a minute his fingers will circle my wrist and smooth their way up my arm. Then we'll go inside. My eyes close in anticipation.

I wait. The top of my hand grows cool. Did he miss the signal? I rub my index finger back and forth, gently but unmistakably. Still the familiar response doesn't come.

"Are you tired?" I lean across the table and trace a nail up his arm and back, following the vein of blue to the tender spot at the base of his thumb. His eyes open, then close. Nothing. "Is something wrong, John?"

He opens his eyes again, glazes a smile in my direction, stretches his legs more comfortably. Beads of sweat glisten on his forehead.

"Are you listening?"

"Mm-m-m."

His lips don't even move. I drop my hand and focus on the crumpled napkin which is lying on the table, a green which pales to white where the

sun is shining and darkens to black in the shade. How soft it looks against the rough wood of the table, how smooth and tight-grained. I feel my face begin to flush.

"Are you all right, John?"

"Mm-m-m."

"John. I asked you, are you all right?"

"Tired." He speaks the single word with his eyes shut.

"Do you want to go inside, then?" I put my hand on his arm again, intending to pull him to his feet, but he shrugs his head to the side and sighs. And I sit back with my face on fire. It's the sigh he makes when he describes a client with particularly vulgar taste, a combination of disgust and self-pity. There's no contentment in it, no pleasure in the moment or in the company he is keeping it with. Instead there is disappointment at what he is forced to tolerate. Dislike for one ill-bred enough to provoke even this small show of emotion. Dismay for himself, for the lack of discernment his choice displays. Suddenly I want to poke holes in his elegant face, tear his poreless skin from his fine-mannered bones, rip his decorum to shreds. I want him to burn, if not with desire then with anger, to shout obscenities, to disgrace himself. I push my chair back from the table.

"Are you finished?" I grab a fork and scrape the rinds of cheese around on his plate as noisily as I can, knowing how he hates the sound. From across the stream comes the tapping of a woodpecker. I tap my finger in time, daring him not to move. The bitter taste returns to my mouth.

"John, there's something I have to tell you. You know that friend I mentioned? The one who lent me the art book I was reading the other day?"

His head tips forward onto his chest. I know from his breathing that he isn't asleep but he gives no other sign.

"He's not what you'd call a friend. Not exactly."

My throat goes dry. I let the words hang in the air to give him time to respond. I count the corduroy ridges on my skirt. Last chance, John. I close my eyes and count them again. What do I have to do, knock him over the head?

I lean across the table and rest my hand on the arm of his chair, not touching his arm, but coming so close that I'm certain he must feel, as I do, the heat which radiates from my body. I move my hand a trifle, not nearer to him, but not farther away. And still he sits there, frozen, a block of ice too cold to melt. So I sit back. I fold my hands in my lap and take a deep breath.

"Well, yes, thinking about it, I suppose he is my friend. But mostly he's my lover."

And that does it. His head jerks up.

"Your what?"

"You heard. My lover."

He stares at me blankly, as if the words are impossible to comprehend.

"And a fine one, too. Today's our anniversary. One month. Don't you find that interesting? We've been sleeping together since the day Mother's letter came. That means something Freudian, I'm sure, but I don't know what. Do you?"

He clenches his jaw and shudders for control. And I feel calm, as certain of myself as I've ever been, pumped full of air like Wieland's puffy letters, strong and powerful enough to move the world.

"He's quite a bit younger and a lot more interesting. More creative, too, in an off-beat sort of way." The knob at the base of his ear is jerking around in a satisfyingly erratic way. I smile as sweetly as I can. "I'm sorry to tell you

this, John, but I know you value honesty. And last night while I was waiting for you to come home, I decided I owed you the truth."

"The truth?" He's sputtering now and his face is red. "You wouldn't know the truth if you saw it, Ginny. Not even if it walked up and hit you in the eye."

"I'm sorry, John. But I have to say, I'm surprised. I didn't think you would mind." He pushes back his chair and strides towards the car. From the stiff-legged way he is walking I can tell that he's holding his anger down with difficulty. But he's doing it. My face burns. What can I do to make him explode? I stack the plates onto the tray, not making a sound. "It's your own fault, John. No one can make you lose your temper; you lose it yourself - isn't that what you used to tell me when I got mad?"

He turns and faces me directly and for a moment I think I've done it. His hands hang loose by his side and in the gap between his left arm and the ground beyond him, there's a haze of green. He stares at me as if I'm an abomination, one of his buildings which he had thought a masterpiece which suddenly displays a fundamental flaw. And I laugh. I don't mean to. As soon as I hear the sound I want to call it back. But I can't. So instead I laugh again. And now his face changes.

"Do you ever think about anyone but yourself, Virginia?"

I shake my head and turn towards the picnic table. I fill my voice with all the sarcasm I can muster. "No, never," I say. I wait for his answer; and by the time I realize it isn't coming, he's gone.

It's past midnight before he returns. When I hear the wheels crunch over the gravel drive, the back door open and shut, I shift around in the bed to let him know I'm awake and ready to talk; but he doesn't come in.

"John?" The word is so small I'm not sure it's spoken. But I am sure it's

heard. He pauses, barely a tick, then continues down the hall towards the bathroom. A few minutes later the couch sighs with his weight. I lie in a posture of penitence, with my hands by my side, my ankles crossed, my eyes shut. Let him sleep where he wants - at least I got a rise. A wonderful sense of satisfaction expands and fills the room until there's space for nothing more.

PART TWO

MONDAY

Before we were married John rolled his shirts in a ball and shoved them in any which way. "You can't pack like that," I said.

"Why not?"

"Because it's not how you do it. Here, let me show you." I buttoned, folded, wrapped, and he looked so grateful it never occurred to me that I'd made packing his suitcase my job for life.

I pack the way Mother taught me, with the shoes in shoe bags on the bottom and blouses and skirts folded with tissue to keep them wrinkling: the past stays with us, whether we want it or not.

"How much longer?" John frowns up from the easy chair in the bedroom. Like yesterday never happened.

"There's plenty of time." I pull the drawstring on the shoebag and place it at the back of the case. Through the window, the early morning sunlight leaves shadows on his face. His lips press together in a single line.

"Do you have to take so long?"

"Maybe I should call Mother and tell her I can't come. I'll say I've got a bug or something. She'll understand."

"Don't be silly."

"Look, are you sure? I mean, about yesterday, maybe we should..."

"I told you - it was late, I didn't want to wake you up." He is flipping through one of the books I left on the table. "How can you read this junk, Ginny? 'What is at stake in marking off or erasing the differences between images and words? What are the systems of power and canons of value - that is, the ideologies - that inform the answers to...?' Is this what you study? It's a bloody waste of time."

I pull another piece of tissue off the pile and fold it around another blouse, watch him from the corner of my eye, not hiding the pleasure I feel. He has something to think about now. The sun flashing against his face makes him blink and for a moment he looks like an overstuffed child in a old black and white photograph, pampered and petulant, vulnerable. I meet my eyes in the mirror. No vulnerability there. A perfectly normal middle-aged woman soon to turn fifty, reasonably attractive, a smile that crinkles her blue-green eyes (with a smile like that you can go anywhere, her father had said), a heart-shaped face with a chin that's too sharp, curly hair that should be going grey, that would be, if she let it. How would I paint her? In the green dress and lace collar she is wearing? Maybe I'd broaden her face. But I'd leave her skin pale and her dark hair in the chignon, curls coming out, to emphasize a slight disheveled air, the hint that something more is there than what appears at first.

My medallion catches the sun and I draw in a noisy breath. All at once I have become the self-portrait that I love, a painting from the sixteenth century by Artemisia Gentileschi. She is wearing the same sort of dress in the painting that I am wearing now, a variegated green, with the same sort of shiny medallion. She looks confident, too, despite her thickening arms and waist. She is holding a palette and a brush. Her face is intent. Hidden in shadows is what I see in front of me, her mirror image, the self-portrait she is creating.

"Something wrong?" John asks.

"No, it's fine." I pull my eyes back to work. Today is Daddy's birthday. I rummage in my shoulder bag for the tapes I picked up in the village. Next to the old Kodak. I pull it out, attach the flash and, facing the mirror, photograph myself. *Portrait of a Lady*, I'll call it. No, *Portrait of the Artist*.

Before John can object, I take another. He looks up at the popping sound but already I'm tucking the camera back in the shoulder bag and fastening the strap, ready to go.

"Do you want the itinerary?" I ask. "I'm sure Daddy will have a spare."

"No, it's all right, I have a copy." His nod tilts towards his briefcase.

Driving into Montreal he doesn't say a word. Once or twice I feel a twinge - not remorse, something milder, almost like regret. He expects me to say that I'm sorry, to grovel and cry and beg for forgiveness, to blame myself the way I usually do. But I won't.

"Cat got your tongue?" I ask. "You're awfully silent."

He shrugs. "What is there to say?"

We listen to the news. More trouble in Russia. Will Yeltsin survive? Rumors are he has suspended freedom of the press. We pass Bromont, Granby, St-Jean-sur-Richelieu. And now I don't talk - it seems important all at once to listen.

"Call me if there's any change," John says. We pull up in front of the U.S. Air sign. Did I hear him right? I wave and push my way through the crowd.

The man at immigration takes my passport. "It says here you were born in Baltimore, Maryland." He looks at me suspiciously. "What's the matter, we're not good enough for you?" He is a beefy man with freckles; golden red hair sprouts around his knuckles. One hand holds my passport, the other hovers mid-air over the various stamp pads. "What is the purpose of your trip to the United States? Business or pleasure?" He is coldly official now.

Neither, I want to say. "I'm going to visit my mother."

"Business then." He snorts and stamps. I pass through.

I don't remember much about becoming a Canadian citizen except the date, June, 1969, twenty-three years ago. John and I had been married for three years. (Our marriage had taken, Barbra said, like it was an inoculation against a contagious disease - which, in some ways, I suppose it was.) I expected to live the rest of my life in Canada. So I became a Canadian citizen. Or rather, a British subject. The phrase sounds quaint now but the notions of obedience and fealty it conjures sounded normal then, even reassuring. It was, after all, a fair description of reality: in 1969 the mail was still Royal, weights still Imperial and the maple leaf flag only a few years old. Not that everything was stodge. Trudeau was in his first term as Prime Minister, unfolding the universe as it was meant to be. Sideburns were sprouting on Bay Street - even John was wearing them a year or two later. Everything was possible. Or so we believed: for the October crisis was unimaginable and the referendum light-years away.

My swearing-in ceremony as a Canadian citizen took place in a federal office building somewhere in Montreal, in a nondescript room full of immigrants clutching other immigrants for reassurance - whole families of grandfathers, mothers, grandchildren, uncles and cousins. The judge who presided told us how lucky we were and we swore an oath of allegiance to the Queen, after which we hugged and smiled.

I cried. I couldn't help it - the easy sentimentality of the judge's words stirred me like a cheap romance novel. I was alone and had no one to hug: the ceremony was in the middle of the afternoon and it didn't make sense for John to come; increasingly, he had more work than he could handle. And it wasn't a big deal for me, I said, not like it was for the Pakistanis and Chinese and West Indians who filled the room. They were leaving their past behind, I was simply acquiring the right to vote.

The interview beforehand remains clearer than the ceremony itself. Like every other candidate for Canadian citizenship I had received a booklet crammed with facts about how the government operates and the names of the provincial capitals and population of the major cities, all the things which native Canadians never learn. The evening before I had spent an hour or two memorizing these statistics the way you memorize stopping distances before a driving exam. Sitting in that nondescript room, as the hopefuls disappeared one by one behind the screen at the front, I berated myself for not studying harder. What if I failed?

The examining judge glanced down at my application, up at me, then nodded as cordially as if we were old friends. For several minutes we discussed the virtues of a man I'd never met - the Senator who had supplied my reference was a friend of John's father and happy to do a favor for a fellow Liberal. We discussed the book I was reading - a science fiction novel about how man adapts to life on other planets - and I laughed at his jokes.

He asked me not one single question about Canada. Nonetheless it was no surprise when he stamped my papers and shook my hand.

"I wish I saw more like you," he said.

Afterwards, I drove home, paid the babysitter and washed the lettuce for supper.

A few years later, on an overnight flight from Los Angeles to Tokyo, I spent hours trying to convince a man I'd never met that Lieutenant William Calley should be condemned to death for the killings at My Lai in Vietnam. I couldn't understand why he disagreed.

"Of course you can't," he said. "You're not an American."

It was easier not to explain.

But in one sense he was right. I'm not loud or brash the way so many Americans are. I don't feel obliged to drape myself with cameras when I travel or wear plaid polyester or broadcast the details of my private life to all and sundry. Okay, so Canadians aren't the brightest stars in the firmament, or the first to be chosen for the team, but we are that way by choice. We like being second best. We like being courteous, rational souls, never soiling our hands with gritty emotions but examining problems at arm's length. We like being balanced, detached, above it all. Superior.

Marriage changes who you are. When I look in the mirror, I know this is true. Over twenty-six years, the American in me has dried up. The Dare part, the loud, brassy, marching-band, flag-waving, winner-take-all part which makes John cringe. And I'm starting to think that's a shame.

They call my flight. A stewardess tears my boarding pass without a glance, too busy talking to the uniform behind her to pay attention to me. Two men in suits push past and a baby in the back begins to cry. I grit my teeth and settle in by the window, crossing my fingers that the aisle seat will stay empty so that I won't have to smile and make idle chit-chat with some man or woman I'd rather ignore. I pull out my book - *Life Before Man* by Margaret Atwood. It seemed an obvious choice, considering my mood, when I found it last night on the shelf. I turn past the reviews, the quotations, the cryptic dedication to G. It's a paperback with yellow pages which I must have had for years, but if I ever read it, I don't remember. I fold back the pages, careful not to break the spine. *Part One. Friday, October 29, 1976.* What was I doing then?

I don't know how I should live. I don't know how anyone should live. All I know is how I do live. I live like a peeled snail. And that's no way to make money.

I want that shell back, it took me long enough...

There's a blare from overhead and the pilot announces that they can't close the doors to the luggage compartment. Good. With luck I'll miss the connection and throw the trip off schedule before we begin. I feel a twist of something inside. Guilt? Bitterness? Satisfaction? I drop my eyes.

...an armadillo. Armored dildo. Impermeable; like a French raincoat.

I wish I didn't have to think about you. You wanted to impress me; well, I'm not impressed, I'm disgusted. That was...

The sour smell of vomited milk wafts forward. The stewardess hurries past with a damp cloth and an outburst of baby talk, as if the sound of nonsense repeated is the right way to soothe. I tighten my mouth.

You wanted me to cry, mourn, sit in a rocker with a black-edged handkerchief, bleeding from the eyes. But I'm not...

Christ! It's the pilot again. How am I supposed to read with all his noise! At least John doesn't talk all the time.

crying, I'm angry. I'm so angry I

Not that he needs to, I know what he is thinking just by looking. After so many years, how can I help?

"You'll put the papers out for recycling on Wednesday?" I asked when he let me off.

"Yes, you told me, you were quite clear."

He looked surprised when I leaned in the window and kissed his cheek. Then halfway through the automatic doors, when I turned back to wave, his head was tipped.

Elizabeth is lying on her back, clothes...

"Good news, ladies and gentleman. The doors are fixed and we'll be pulling back from the gate as soon as I get clearance. Which should be in

about two shakes of a lamb's tail." The pilot laughs to tell us what a good guy he is. Outside the window a man in a blue uniform gives a thumbs up signal. At center aisle the stewardess begins her pantomime. I watch her point and smile, click and unclick with nails polished an extraordinary fire engine red.

His hand clenched the wheel when I kissed him. He was surprised, that's all - little shows of affection aren't my style. Aren't *our* style. Another howl from the back. The baby is angry now, and who can blame her? The change in air pressure hurts and she doesn't know how to stop it. Swallow and it will go away, I used to tell Danielle. You need to equalize the pressure. Crying only makes it worse.

October, 1976. Danielle was almost two. Trudeau was still Prime Minister but getting older, not as sexy. Was '76 the summer of the Olympics? Drapeau and the stadium and the kerfuffle about the roof that didn't work - John was outraged that they let that architect get away with it, and a foreign one at that, who knew nothing about Canadian winters. Michael was ten then, Ian eight. And I was thirty-three. What was I doing? October. Christ! I was probably wrapping home-made Hallowe'en treats, decorating the driveway with pumpkins I had carved, proud of the way I was using my artistic talents to enrich my children's lives.

1976: of course! That was the year Jimmy Carter was elected President. That smile of his, soft and so shaky that if anyone said a word you expected him to cry. I liked him. Although it was a bit embarrassing to see him walking down Pennsylvania Avenue with Rosalynn, holding hands. It wasn't dignified. It's a new age, we need a new way of doing things: did he say that? Or was it René Lévesque? Oh, my God, 1976, that's when he became Premier. Then a couple of years later there was the referendum. We thought when we won it was over.

Elizabeth is lying on her back, clothes on and unrumpled, shoes placed side by side on the bedroom rug, a braided oval bought at Nick Knack's four years ago when she was still interested in home furnishings, guaranteed old lady...

Damn it, will he ever shut up? Air speed, ground speed, altitude: who cares? Who cares how Elizabeth is lying? Who cares about Elizabeth? My stomach turns. Compose yourself, Ginny. Think about something calm. Quiet water. Empty space. Blankness. I force myself to breath regularly; and after a moment I straighten my seat and pull the U.S. Air magazine out of the seat pocket in front. There's an article on changes in the New South. According to the author, Virginia is the state to watch. A tradition of innovation. A unique environment where the future can flourish, where technology and history combine. One cliché after the other.

The center spread has the familiar slogan inside the heart: *Virginia is for lovers*. There are pictures of happy families frolicking on the sand at Virginia Beach; school children posing in front of the state capital (designed by Thomas Jefferson after the Maison Carrée at Nimes, Mother whispers in my head); a young couple staring at the statue of George Washington (carved from Carrara marble by Houdon; yes, Mother, I know). There are graphs, a workman in a hard hat deferring to a sleek-haired woman with blueprints in her hands.

Who do they think they're fooling? The happy families, the loving couples, the successful architect at work: is there anyone who still believes such claptrap? Or that a photograph can make it so? I shove the magazine in the seat pocket and close my eyes. Behind me the two businessmen who pushed past down the aisle are nattering in voices too loud to ignore. Occasional words and phrases stand out: invoices, huge amounts, so then I say,

and the bitch sticks her. One has a hacking cough and the thin, nasal tone of upstate New York. The other's voice is flat. He lowers it, says something I can't hear. Didn't have to paint her a picture, did you, the first one says, in a voice filled with contempt. He coughs, then falls into a hacking fit that I hope chokes him to death. God, I hate men like that. Matching ties and socks, neat little smiles, square jaws. They think they own the earth, that no matter what they do, other people will lie down and accept it - even thank them.

"A snack?" The stewardess holds a drink box and some plastic-wrapped cookies in my direction. Her nails are sharp; pointing at me so directly, like the finger of Uncle Sam in the poster, they change her question to an accusation. She needs ME. But I'm saying no. She backs down the aisle. Over her shoulder the rows of seats march away into the distance like headstones in a military cemetery, precisely placed, body by body with never a gap. At Ives Cemetery the graves were scattered, the spot that was Alice easy to miss.

What's wrong, we're not good enough? I should have told the man at immigration that he was right, Baltimore was the bane of my existence growing up, I hated it because it made me different from everybody else. Yankee-pankie, lost her hankie, Barbra chanted, and I ran crying to Mother. Being born in the north doesn't matter, she said, it's how you behave that counts. If you want people to think you're a real southerner, act like a lady. And pull your skirt down, your underpants are showing.

The Mason-Dixon line. Jesus. We haven't crossed it yet but we're getting closer, I can tell. There's a smell in here now like a fireplace after it rains. Damp ashes, stale air. How many times has this air flown from Montreal to Baltimore and back? Summer nights lying in bed, trying to find a cool spot on the pillow, telling myself that if I lay still, I'd be cool. Those flowers outside

the window which smelled so sweet. The air like cotton wool soaked in syrup, sticky and thick. Hot.

I slept through a fire the last time I was in Baltimore.

"You didn't hear the alarm? The bells rang for a good twenty minutes." The hotel clerk gave me a look, then checked the charges on my bill. "Did you use the mini bar?"

I shook my head. She tore off the print-out, slid it over for me to examine. Then discreetly she checked to see if my hair concealed a hearing aid.

"What caused it, do they know?"

"The usual - somebody smoking in bed."

An ancestor of mine died that way, my great-grandmother Virginia, the one I was named after. But she was ninety-nine, so if it wasn't a fire, it would have been something else. The undercarriage drops. What in the hell am I doing, going off to Richmond for a week? It was so awful the last time, I swore I wouldn't go back. The way Mother and Daddy argued and Aunt Catherine's syrupy smile at the funeral lunch. A receiving line, for God's sake! And she and Mother talking that night, making lists of who had come and who had stayed home. And then the snow storm and the flight which was late and waking up the next morning and watching that program on television in the hotel, never realizing that there had been a fire, that I might have died in my sleep, been burned to death without even knowing.

But that was the morning I realized how completely I'd cut myself off. Not when I was talking to the desk clerk but before, when I was sitting in bed eating breakfast. I was skimming the paper I'd stuck in my bag the day before, shaking my head over the lack of news and wondering how people in Richmond ever survived, with *Good Morning, America* playing on the tv in the

background. A man was talking. At first I didn't listen, but then he mentioned Charles City County which Mother and Catherine had been going on about the night before. So I looked up over the top of my reading glasses to see who he was.

"What a dork!" he said. "Can you believe it? Look at those white socks!" as if knowing not to wear white socks with black pants was the difference between success and failure. "What a dork!" he said again to the picture of himself with his high school sweetheart, underlining it to make sure viewers realized how much he had changed since he graduated. In the picture he was dressed for the prom, a white carnation in his buttonhole and thick black rimmed glasses circling his eyes, like a dark-tanned Buddy Holly. His sweetheart was wearing a 50's special like one I once wore, strapless, with layers of gauze tulle, the ethereal look that leaves you red under the arms.

He introduced Carol Cox and the Charles City County High School Marching Band, and they marched down the field, not too badly out of step. Carol pranced on in her military-style drum majorette uniform, spinning her baton and flashing her teeth for all she was worth. She threw her baton into the sky, the camera zoomed in. Disaster. She picked up the baton and continued gamely, but you could see it on her face. Her life was ruined.

And that's when I realized how completely I had severed my roots and how thoroughly Richmond was excised from my soul. Because Carol Cox was black. So was the man in the photos. So was every single member of the Charles City County High School Marching Band. But segregation was declared illegal by the Supreme Court in 1954, in *Brown vs. Board of Education*. Grandmother Dora, my favorite grandmother, was sitting in our living room on Palmyra Avenue the day the ruling was announced, wearing a green suit one shade darker than the sofa itself, with a cream blouse, black pumps and

pearls. When she said that the ruling meant the end of the world, Mother and Daddy nodded in agreement; they understood that what she meant was, the end of the world as we knew it.

I asked myself: do things change? *Can* they change, even if we want them to? Or do they have a shape which is their own, which is bred in the bone, so to speak, which they can never entirely eliminate and never entirely escape?

The lounge in the Baltimore airport where I wait to change planes is littered with discards: scraps of paper, wads of gum, used tissues. I feel the irritation begin to grow again, and now it's mixed with disgust. Beneath a No Smoking sign, a metal cylinder topped with sand is stubbed full of dead butts. They reek of nicotine, a sour yellow smell which reminds me of the sign at North Hatley. I sit and read Daddy's itinerary for what, the dozenth time? the hundredth?

When the letter arrived, John patted my hand and said I'd be fine. A week in the south would do me good. Remind me where I came from.

"Of the sweet little thing I used to be, you mean?"

He pulled the knot on his tie. "You're lucky to have parents who want to share their memories," he said.

"I know. But Barbra will be there."

"It will be fun," he said. "You'll see."

Fifteen minutes more to wait. I pat my shoulder bag to make sure I still have the camera, then rub my thumb against the gold medallion he gave me for our first anniversary, against the slight indentation which I've almost erased over the years.

J.E.P.

A.V.P.

12.20.65.

John Edward Paige. Alice Virginia Paige. His mother corrected me soon after we were married - I'd had our towels monogrammed with a "D" for Dare. In Canada ladies drop their maiden names, she said. You're Alice Virginia Paige now, not Virginia Dare Paige. I nodded. It was a new country and I wanted to do things right. What did it matter to me what initials I used?

I look around. A man in a striped shirt and cowboy boots is reading a copy of *Time*. The cover shows the Prince of Wales standing guard over a tiaraed Princess Diana. Both are smiling broadly. *Private Lives: How the Fairytale Unraveled*, the banner reads. A woman across the aisle sees the magazine and leans forward to read the small type. She says something to the heavyset man beside her; he laughs, then coughs and sputters like Daddy does in the morning. I recognize the sound - it's a smoker's cough like I had until I quit, and although his persistent hacking is awful, it makes me feel nostalgic. The sense of power that smoking gives you, the feeling that your breathing controls the movement of the world: what is a cough compared with that?

I was a smoker when I met John - everyone was then, except him - but early on he made it clear that he disapproved. No cigarettes in the bedroom, he said; it was a smoke-free zone. So it was.

I stopped smoking a few years later, in the spring of 1968. Students my age were throwing paving stones in Paris and smoking pot in Berkeley; and in Montreal I was pregnant for the second time. Knowing how much John disliked the habit, when the doctor warned me of potential dangers to the baby, I took his advice; John was so pleased that, when I started again a few

weeks later, I couldn't bring myself to tell him. So each evening before he returned from work, I washed the ashtrays, opened the windows and brushed my teeth. I left the car windows open. In bed I faced the other way and hardly ever let him kiss me. Then Danielle was born and I decided enough was enough. Did I want my daughter to follow in my footsteps, as I was following in Mother's?

We were relaxing over coffee after an intimate little dinner at a neighborhood restaurant. At what seemed an ideal moment I reached into my handbag, pulled a cigarette from the pack of du Maurier's and leaned towards the open candle.

"Put that out!" His voice was low and full of steel.

I crumpled. Not a word of protest. Not a hint of a scene. I stubbed out the cigarette and abandoned Danielle to her own resources.

But I kept smoking all the same. For the next twenty years I hid the evidence - under a nightgown in my dresser drawer, inside the roasting pan, in the glove compartment of the car. Each morning when John pulled out of the drive, as soon as I was sure he wasn't coming back to check on me - not that he ever did, but I was always afraid he might - I unearthed the truth. It was the best moment of the day. I sat at the kitchen table with my coffee, a sharp pencil and the cryptic crossword from *The Globe and Mail*; and when I inhaled, I ruled the world.

Weekends were tricky. I went to the dépanneur for bread we didn't need, dragged Michael and Ian through museums and art exhibits I didn't want to see and, eventually, when Danielle outgrew her stroller, considered buying a dog. I know how silly this sounds - how silly it was, like the act of a child who denies eating cake when icing is smeared on her face. John knew what I was doing - he must have: the smell of tobacco clings like nothing else. Still,

he pretended he didn't, and still I'm not sure why. Perhaps he was wary of the power he had; perhaps he was frightened to test its strength; perhaps he wanted to avoid a scene.

It wasn't John who made me stop, it was realizing how unacceptable it was to other people. For weeks after I quit, I couldn't breathe and the smell of a newly-lit cigarette was exquisite pain. Now the smell nauseates me. Across the corridor a teenage girl with a ring through her nose has just flipped her lighter closed and shoved it into the pocket of her jeans - although where she finds the space is a mystery to me. What a sight she is! Her index finger is stained a sulphurous yellow and her fingernail polish - neon pink - is chipped. From biting her nails? Yes, there she is doing it now. She's nervous, fidgeting and shifting her weight from one foot to the other, easing the strap on her shoulder, as anxious as I was every morning waiting for John to leave.

The P.A. system calls out the flight for Richmond. Around me people gather bags and push their way forward. A black woman with hennaed hair pushes past with a cleaning cart; quickly the girl in jeans stubs out her cigarette and heads to the gate. I fold the itinerary carefully and stow it in my shoulder bag where it won't be lost. Boarding, there's the familiar push to find a seat, the shoving from behind, the fool who tries to move against the traffic. A tiny old woman is ahead of me with a straw bag as big as she is and a brown paper bundle tied with string. She's too short to reach the overhead bins and since no one stops to help her, the line is stalled. Which is just fine with me. If we never start we'll never get there. Why did I want to go? Barbra's right. It will be bickering non-stop and games and everyone trying to pretend they're having fun. Which accomplishes nothing.

Why did I give up? That's what I can't understand. The business with the cigarette at the restaurant was the end. After that, no more defiance, no

more passion, hardly even a kiss. If you can't win, join them. But what in God's name convinced me I couldn't win? If only I'd forced a confrontation earlier. If only I'd told him straight out. Look, John, we've got to do something about this. We can't continue the way we are. I tried. Last fall, right after I started back to university. We went sitting at the kitchen table reading the papers.

"The twenties show at the museum closes before long," I said. "We should go."

"Mm-m-m?"

"I said, let's go to the museum. To see Metropolis."

He turned sideways in his chair and buried himself in the newspaper again, forbidding me to interrupt. I sipped my coffee and waited. It was Saturday, I had all day. "Bourassa: No snap emotional decision on offers," said the headline on the back of his page. The details of the latest proposals were less interesting than the graphic design above, an elongated box with the words *Shaping the FUTURE* inside. Suddenly the slogan struck me as unbelievably arrogant, coming as it did from an English language paper in a small and fading backwater of the world.

Outside the wind was rising. Bare branches scraped against a colorless November sky. It was the essence of autumn, the bleakly rugged romanticism which Tom Thompson painted, which decorated every Canadian classroom in the fifties and shaped the minds of its children beyond recall. I tried to find comfort in the patterns of black on gray but all I could see was another winter. But then I smiled. Beside the words a fleur de lys superimposed on a maple leaf was tipped at an alarming angle.

"When do you want to go?" I said.

"What?"

"Do you want to go now or this afternoon?"

"Go where?"

"To the mu-se-um. To see Me-trop-o-lis." I spoke deliberately, enunciating each syllable as if he were a foreigner with a weak grasp of English.

He shrugged. I clenched my lips and considered my options. I could slam down my cup and splash coffee on his paper. I could wait for him to make the next move. From the front page, Mordecai Richler grinned sardonically. If I can set a province on fire with a single article in *The New Yorker*, he said, surely you can kindle a spark.

"Well? When do you want to go?" I made no attempt to hide my impatience.

"Whenever. I don't care. You decide." He started reading again, then glanced up. "Can I have some more coffee?"

"You have some."

"What?"

"Your cup. I filled it a minute ago."

He looked down, puzzled. "Oh. So you did." He sipped, frowned, started reading again.

I stared through the page and dared him to continue. I swallowed my coffee as loudly as I could, knowing how the sound annoyed him. I shuffled the papers, tapped my foot and began to hum. Still nothing. So I laughed.

"Hey, John, listen to this. You won't believe it." I folded over the paper and pretended to read.

"Concern is rising over a woman in Kansas and her..."

He glared in my direction.

"Okay, I won't read it. But you have to listen." He sighed. "This woman and her teenage daughter went to a funeral and when they came out, they disappeared into thin air. Literally." He lowered his paper as I knew he would and waited to see if I was using the word correctly. "Everybody in the town believed they'd been abducted by space aliens - no, don't ask me why, the piece doesn't say - but then they found them on a plane, on their way to Israel along with the doctor whose funeral they went to, who wasn't dead after all but -"

His frown brought me to a halt. "Don't be silly."

"Oh, come on, John, lighten up. It's not every day that a married woman runs off with a dead man. And takes her daughter with her. What do you think, was he having it off with both of them?"

He didn't reply, only refolded the business section neatly and pushed his chair back.

"We'll go whenever you're ready."

At the museum he walked quickly past the drawings of Grosz and Otto Dix - their vision was too distorted, he said - and I thought it would be no use, we'd be in and out before we'd become a couple again and not two people sharing a house. Then we came to the scale models of the city of the future.

"Now this is more like it." He leaned his elbows on the glass case and studied the straight lines of the buildings. "Look, Ginny. See the proportions? Do you understand? This is the way to build a building. No junk. No arches or columns. Just the bare bones. If it isn't functional, eliminate it." He stared at me and his head tipped slightly, as if my function in the design was the subject in question.

The room was dim, the ceiling low. Spotting the walls were pencil drawings of more buildings, equally bleak. I followed their thin, neat lines to

where they converged in the distance and my throat began to close. There was no life in them, no possibility of deviation, no chance of surprise.

"I have to get out of here, John," I said. "I can't breathe."

He pushed the back of his hand in my direction. "Fine, go ahead, I'll be along in a minute."

I slumped onto a bench at the top of the stairs. From the room beyond came the sound of the blues - first Josephine Baker, then Billie Holiday. I ran the pictures through my mind. What happens when the lines finally meet? Do they collide? I imagined a train. Through the archway the portrait of a woman in black by Tamara de Lempicka towered over a fractured city. How confident she appeared, how self-possessed! She had no regrets. I stared. The strip of red carpet which rose diagonally from the base: what a perfect foil it was for the gray tones of the city in the background. And what effect did the gray have on the red?

I was thinking this through when John came out, so animated he could scarcely contain himself. We should do this more often, he said.

You can dodge if you choose. You can stifle the fire, drink your coffee lukewarm and never dare. Or you can risk it all. He took me to dinner that night at the Ritz Carlton and ordered a bottle of champagne. Why don't we stay the night, I said; no one is expecting us at home, we can please ourselves. And we did. Upstairs, I inched my toes down the bed like I did as a child at the farm on winter nights, over sheets as smooth as ice. John laughed at my restraint. He stood on the bed, pulled the sheets loose and, holding one like a sail, skated across the carpet and back to the bed. Then we were careening along, fires burning out of control, melting, like the sun does, rough spots on the ice. After, we started to talk. We would look for a villa in Tuscany where I could

paint and he could raise grapes for wine. We toasted our future. Then in the morning he went back to work.

When I find my seat and row number, my heart falls. The girl in jeans is there in the seat next to me. I put my shoulder bag on the floor and try not to look at her too closely - she's so thin it makes me hurt. But I can't avoid it. She's reading a letter she's obviously read many times before. The corners are dog-eared, the paper creased. She smoothes it out before putting it away, then swallows hard, like she's trying not to cry.

I wish there was something I could say.

Last fall I received a letter from Adam Rogers, a boy I dated my first year at Randolph-Macon Woman's College. He wrote that I had appeared to him in a dream. He awoke one night and there I was, an eighteen year old angel with short dark hair, in a navy blue skirt, Weejuns and a white blouse buttoned to the collar. I didn't speak, he said, only looked at him "with a look that I hope never to see on any corporeal person's face." Then I turned and walked away. This was in the Trailways bus terminal in Charlottesville, Virginia.

I did a quick calculation. Adam must be turning fifty, too. An event like that pulls you up, makes you examine yourself and measure your present life against your potential. It wasn't me he was remembering, it was himself.

I wonder who I would be now if I had married him.

Once I belonged to an organization made up almost entirely of women. At an annual meeting sometime in the early eighties, one member about my age suggested that we amend the Constitution by replacing all the "he's" with "he and she." It was more accurate, she said.

Older members were opposed. They pointed to Clause 25 (a) which stated that the word "he" includes "she" in its meaning. The younger ones were not so sure.

"You have to pay attention to details," one said. "What words don't say can be more important than what they do."

To my shame I voted to leave things alone.

Beside me the girl blows her nose and clears her throat. She isn't as young as I thought. And those wrinkle lines will only get worse if she keeps squinching up her face. I feel a painful rush of sympathy.

"Are you going to Richmond or on to Charlotte?" The question is so banal I almost blush. And it's not as if I care. I offer her a Tic-Tac but she shakes her head.

"Are you sure? Come on, it'll make you feel better. Freshen your breath. Not that I mean..."

She smiles at my confusion. "It's okay. Sure. I'll have one."

I shake a few into her palm; as we take off, she throws them into her mouth like they're aspirin she has to swallow without water. Everything about her looks tough - the stud in her nose, her chipped nail polish, the spiked hair with dark roots showing through the bleach. Yet her nicotine-stained fingers are long and thin, almost delicate, and the pad at the base of one is compressed as if for a long time a ring was there. I repress an urge to put my arm around her and pull her head down on my shoulder. I can almost feel the tickle of her hair against my cheek. It's soft, not spiky at all.

As if she senses what I'm thinking, she turns towards the window and leans her forehead against the glass. John does the same when his head aches.

"I expect it will be hot in Richmond," I say.

"Yeah, I guess."

"I'm going there on a visit," I say. "For a week. What about you?"

She looks at me through cat's eyes, hard and cold.

"I live there."

"Oh? Where?"

She doesn't answer.

Rude little thing. I pick up *The Globe and Mail*. The Irish have voted two to one in favor of the Maastricht treaty, taking Ireland one step closer to union with the European Community; last week the Danes rejected it. Marcel Masse is continuing to fight an interior battle between his responsibility as a federal cabinet minister and his loyalty to Quebec. The Leaning Tower of Pisa will topple sometime between today and a hundred years from now, when its center of gravity moves beyond the sticking point. *Les Misérables* enters its final four weeks. I turn to my horoscope.

Planetary activity should finally enable you to shake off your lethargy and tackle problems which have dragged on too long. Make a decision and stick to it, even if others say you are moving in the wrong direction.

What could be clearer than that? I turn back to the girl.

"Were you in Baltimore for long?"

"Not exactly."

"I was born there. But I live in Montreal now."

"That's nice."

I search for another question to ask, another bit of trivia to fill the silence. If only I could I'd tell her there's no point in worrying about things you can't change, that it's better to focus on the future; but she'd think I was completely batty. I suppose I could tell her about Barbra and the trip. Make it into an amusing story. My parents are such funny things - you'd never believe they're almost eighty if you saw them, they're in wonderful shape, and

so active. I compose the phrases in my head and hear the syrupy vowels grow stronger. John laughs at my imitations but when he tries to copy me he can't - the words clot in his mouth like soured milk.

It's too late for advice. Too late for sympathy. Too late for pity or recriminations or dreams of changing the past. The plane is circling. I close my eyes and hurriedly try to smooth myself out for what's ahead. One thing at a time, that's the only way. The girl will have to take care of herself.

Out the window a dirty brown strip of road meanders through a green field. Once summer has caught hold the grass will burn to brown. Summer here is a slap of heat and wet air too thick to breathe. I feel it rising up from the ground to meet me now.

* * * * *

There's a photo on Mother's dresser taken the year before Barbra was married, when the four of us were still a family. Barbra and I, full-faced in white cotton blouses with little round collars and sausage curls, glow with the certainty of inexperience, while Mother and Daddy, dark and solemnly respectable, tower on either side. Inside the terminal my eye passes over the tiny couple who step forward to welcome me. This man with the hollow chest, this woman in old lady's lace-up Naturalizers: they aren't my parents. My mother wears elegant pumps to emphasize her ankles. My father's black hair shines and he strides purposefully through the crowds, knowing they will part. This man limps. He winces when he picks up my suitcase.

"What have you got in here, rocks?"

Mother presses her cheek against mine, then circles me to put her good ear on my side. I start on the elaborate tale I've concocted about the miseries of modern air travel, the noise and fuss which others make, the inconveniences. Over her shoulder I see the girl in jeans. She is standing by herself next to a giant suitcase, picking at her neon-pink nails. As I watch, a man about John's age joins her. He says something and the girl throws her head back and laughs. The sound is outrageous, a jubilant peal that rolls around the room and bounces off the low ceiling like a child's red rubber ball.

"Are you two going to stand here all day? Parking isn't free, you know." Daddy grunts, then limps towards the door with his left arm extended to balance the weight of my suitcase in his right. I hurry after him.

"Here, Daddy, let me do that."

He shakes his head. "I'm not so old I can't carry my own daughter's suitcase."

"Are you sure?" Mother's question has a sour edge which makes him scowl.

Outside, waves of heat rising from the asphalt smack my face. Immediately beads of sweat pop out on my upper lip: the air is humid enough to drink. Irritation etches itself into my face. My mouth pinches to a crease. My eyes squint. I search through my handbag for dark glasses and a handkerchief to wipe my face. I have to be positive.

"My, it's good to be here," I say.

Mother seems not to hear. She is moving ahead with her eyes fixed on the pavement, her head tilted to catch the sound of cars approaching. Her ankles bulge over the sides of her old lady shoes but her back is unbending, as always. I remember that sniff which she uses to put Daddy in his place, and

the "how long must I endure?" sigh which punctuates her sentences when anyone else speaks.

"Is your leg all right? You seem to be limping." I link my arm in Daddy's and feel his skin slip over muscles gone soft.

He doesn't answer, only shuffles along a bit faster. His arms are thin, almost hairless, and whiter than I remember. There's a slightly grimy band-aid above his elbow - old people heal slowly - and the outline of another just below. He's definitely favoring his right leg.

"Let me help you with the suitcase, Daddy. I know it's heavy."

"I'm fine," he says a bit huffily. "You want to worry about someone, worry about your mother."

"Victor." She gives a tight-lipped glare over her shoulder.

We walk a few more steps, then he puts the suitcase down to light his pipe. The familiar smell of tobacco circles up and I do my best to relax into it, to let it wrap me in comfortable memories of the past. When we continue, he tells me in a voice too low for Mother to hear about the medical problems which plague her now, the hearing loss, the loss of balance, the consequent nausea and the sinus infection she can't shake off, regardless of what the doctors prescribe.

"She said not to mention any of this. So don't let on or she'll be mad as hops."

I nod solemnly and agree, neither surprised by his apparent disloyalty nor worried. The pleasure he takes in outlining her frailties means she is fine, or as fine as anyone can expect. She'll be eighty in the fall. It's unreasonable of her to expect perfect health - or confidentiality from him: he can no more keep a secret than John can share one.

"He's filled you in on my problems, has he?" Mother is waiting by the car. "You don't have to pretend, Ginny, it's par for the course. Tell him to keep his mouth shut and he broadcasts to the whole world. As long as you remember he exaggerates."

"What are you on about, woman?" Daddy frowns. "I didn't tell her anything."

"You expect me to believe that? With your head all hunched over and Ginny listening like it was gospel? Tell me another." She sniffs, knowing she has won this skirmish. "You sit in the front seat with your father, I'll be fine in the back."

I put my shoulder bag on the seat and pull out the old Kodak. "Ta-da!"

"A picture?" Daddy pauses to consider. "Good idea. You should wait until we're home, though. The background is nicer."

"It's my graduation present, Daddy," I say. "Don't you recognize it?"

He frowns at the camera, his brow furled in a caricature of puzzlement. "Well, of course, I do." He strings out his words to give himself time.

"The camera that was always out of focus, Victor," Mother says. "Surely you haven't forgotten." She turns to me. "I'm surprised you held on to it, Virginia. Or could find it."

"It was in the attic, Mother. I knew where it was."

"Don't talk to me about attics. That's where your mother's been. Just wait till you see what all she's found."

"Victor." Her voice fires another warning shot which Daddy deflects with a mock salute and a zipper motion across his mouth.

He turns to me. "You see what I have to put up with? Do this, Victor, do that: never a minute's peace."

I step between them like the referee in a wrestling match, deliberately officious. "Now stand here by the car. I want to take your picture."

"You mean that old thing still works?" Daddy beams, as pleased as I knew he'd be. But my surprise has no effect on Mother. She moves out of position.

"Why shouldn't it?" she says over her shoulder. "It's not like Ginny wore it out. She never used it after that one summer."

I ignore the criticism - it's too early in the week to take offense.

"It's good as new, Daddy. Just right for a young lady." He looks puzzled. "Don't you remember? The man at K-Mart said that to convince you to buy it. I wanted the German one and you..."

"We bought it at McCutcheon's," Daddy says.

"No, it was K-Mart. You said we could get the same camera at half the price."

"I have the invoice. I'll dig it out as soon as we're home."

"There was no K-Mart then." Mother is scuffing the bottom of her shoe against the concrete barrier edging the parking space, and her face is curled up like she's stepped in something unpleasant.

"Does it matter where we bought it?"

"You seem to think it does."

"I remember, that's all."

She harumphs and I push her into place next to the car door. When I tell her to smile, she does, although the smile barely creases her face.

"Okay, now. One more, just in case. I want to get this right." I snap the shutter, advance the film and snap again. It's perfect. The scene could be anywhere. And these two old people squinting beside a slightly dented car in an airport parking lot could be anyone's parents, or no one's, just two old

people who happened to pass by. Nothing marks them as special, no signs of age or infirmity, no tilt to the head or furl to the brow. This is snapshot banality at its best, no sentimentality in the pose and no ironic commentary on its absence, only a glare of light and a streak of dirt on the side of Mother's blouse. I smile. It's surprisingly easy to arrange.

Daddy pulls the car from the curb without looking. Mid-way into traffic, he reaches around to fasten his seat belt. He fumbles for the catch, the car swerves into the center lane and I flinch involuntarily, like you do when someone jabs a finger at your eye. Mother shifts around on her seat but says nothing. Does she notice how erratic his driving is, or is she so accustomed that it seems normal?

We pass the Civil War trenches which surround the airport and I steel myself to hear her mention them in that pointed way she has, which is intended to remind me of all that I've thrown away - country, family, my own past. And for what? An icy land with no romance in its soul? A place that won't fight to stay together? Instead she begins to talk about how Richmond is changing. It's too much, too fast, she says. There are too many foreigners - by which she means people from northern cities like Baltimore or Chicago or Montreal. She sighs.

"You hardly ever hear a real Richmond accent anymore."

There's a ritual air to her complaint which reminds me of her performance at birthdays and Christmas dinners. I hope we didn't interrupt anything, she says - we've just called to say hello. A frown crosses John's face when I hand him the phone but he warms up his voice to inquire, southern style, when they are coming to see us. We'd just love to, Mother coos, but it's so cold in Maun-tre-all. And when you can't read the signs...

"Watch out for that car, Victor!" Mother leans forward and grips Daddy's shoulder. The skin on her hand is loose and spotted with brown.

He raises an eyebrow at me - see what I have to put up with? - and leisurely steers back into the curb lane.

"He's determined to kill me, you know, Ginny. He's tried everything else." There's no Richmond drawl in her voice now. It is sharp, her enunciation precise, and she pauses between words so there's no possibility of mistake: he has tried ev-er-y-thing else.

Daddy laughs dismissively. "You women!"

My stomach tightens. I could strip the skin off her hands as easily as skin off a chicken breast. "Now, Mother, you know you don't mean that," I say.

"That's what you think." She crosses her legs and the sound of fabric against fabric is a victory cry.

We turn onto the expressway which circles the city and by-passes the neighborhood where I grew up. The house is a man's face, I told John before he came the first time. The upper windows are the eyes. They're evenly spaced like yours - I kissed his closed lids - and when the blinds are pulled, they look mysterious. I lowered my voice seductively but he scarcely blinked, only lay there in his friend's borrowed bed, pretending to be uninterested.

"How is everyone at home," Mother asks.

The sour feeling fills my throat. I force it down and try to think of a story about Danielle or Michael and Ian, or even one about John, although I don't want to talk about him, he's always been a problem for Mother and Daddy, too presentable to object to, too coolly Canadian to like. He's not some no-account, is he, Daddy asked on the way to the airport to pick him up.

"No, you'll like him," I said. "He's smart."

We had moved up in the world by then, to Sherwood Farms, a Restricted Residential Setting. On the way home, Daddy talked over his shoulder about Virginia architecture, Mother correcting him every second word. Then we turned off River Road and John saw the sign.

"Does that mean what I think it does?" he whispered.

"You need to understand the south, John, if you and Ginny are going to get along. People here live with their own kind." Daddy deposited his pipe in the ashtray. "I believe you'll find that's true of most people, most places. Those French Canadians - you wouldn't want one of them living next door, would you?"

"Such large families they have," Mother said. "I don't know how they manage."

"We're not prejudiced, despite what you read. And some Negroes are fine people." I shuddered, knowing what was coming. "You take Uncle Henry now. He wasn't really my uncle, he was our cook, and a finer Negro gentleman you'd never hope to meet. He worked for my mother's family when she was a girl and when she got married, he came with her. Used to whop the living daylight out of me and my brother when we got rowdy. If I was good enough to whop Miz Dora, he'd say - Miz Dora was my mother - I'm good enough to whop you. And he did. Hard, too."

He rubbed his backside as he always did at this point in the story and shook his head ruefully, in memory of the good old days. Was this man for real? Under the cover of my madras skirt, I squeezed John's hand: better to make a joke of what you can't alter. I sensed a niggling doubt. Could he marry into a family where such views were held - and stated as if they were nothing to be ashamed of?

"Watch what you're doing, Victor. You're going too fast."

Daddy grips his pipe in his teeth and scowls at the road ahead. We're in the fast lane now, whizzing uncomfortably close to an old Volkswagon beetle. Two faces, bleached white with fear, stare out at me with open mouths, stunned either at Daddy's ineptness or at my courage in sitting beside him.

"It *would* be nice to get home in one piece," I say.

He grumbles but slows down a fraction, then begins to explain the plans for the week, who we're scheduled to meet, where and when, punctuating the recital with puffs of smoke. Each item reminds him of another - another person, another place, another time - what the person said or did, how he responded.

"You missed the exit, Victor." Mother's shot zings over the seat.

"What?"

"I said, you missed the exit."

"You should have told me."

"You're the driver."

"And you're the navigator. Now we have to go all the way round the barn and back."

"We wouldn't if you paid attention to your driving."

I wait for his reply and for her put-down, the petty bickering which they call conversation. But to my surprise he grips his pipe tighter and gives her the last word.

The 1961 family reunion was to be held at a small church camp outside Damascus, Virginia. Naturally, Barbra made a guess as we set out down the drive about who might see the light along the way and what it might reveal to the lucky one - our instruction in Sunday school was ammunition in the battle she was waging against conformity, in religion and life in general.

Uncharacteristically, Mother let the remark pass. She was staring out the side window, the AAA Tour Guide with the informative entries which normally she read aloud unopened on the seat beside her. I leaned back and listened to the hit parade. "Runaway" by Del Shannon. "Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow" by the Shirelles. "Little Darling" by the Diamonds. Half asleep I watched the countryside scroll past the window. There was no rush. We'd get there whenever Daddy decided the time was right.

It was almost dinner when we did. Inside the camp, the aroma of fried chicken was fighting against the smell of disinfectant. And losing: in Mother's family cleanliness was next to godliness, but only barely. Dauntless enemies of filth, my aunts had scoured and mopped and polished until the camp was immaculate. Window panes were spotless. In the central hall every cushion sat straight, every chair aligned.

I blinked. Was I seeing double? I knew Mother was next to me, her hand was gripping my elbow to steer me around for introductions. Yet there she was by the window, admiring the view, and there she was again by the refectory table, talking to a man with a beaked nose. In the corner three more of her were perched on a sofa, and another two were pecking over photos laid out on a card table. Everywhere was the same small head, and a body like a peacock's breast. Everywhere the same skinny legs and feet, the high forehead, the eyes narrowed in judgment, the nostrils widened in perpetual disdain. I felt a tickle of alarm.

"Scary, isn't it?" Barbra said. "Like a scene from a horror movie. *Revenge of the Pods*. Or *The Creature from the Lothrop Lagoon*." She laced her fingers in mine and put on a Bogart voice. "Stick with me, kid, you'll survive."

I thought of the horror show heroines, how they always crept up the attic stairs when they knew they shouldn't. I felt no fear. My future was in full view, an inescapable carbon copy of the past. I might not like it but at least it was safe.

"Stop that giggling, Ginny," Mother said.

Perhaps it was her voice which caused the roomful of heads to turn. Perhaps it was the crash from the door behind us as Daddy came in. Whatever the cause, in the silence which followed, heads swiveled, eyes stared. Then someone recognized Mother and stepped forward.

I sighed. We were part of the group. There were introductions and directions - the dining room was here, the bedrooms there. There was unpacking - Barbra and I were to share with our cousin Peggy who we met in the room. There was waiting in line and finding a seat for dinner. The oldest man, Mother's second cousin Garland, announced a contest. We would go around the table, he said. Each person would stand up and say something about a relative. It had to be more than their name, or where they lived, something interesting about them, like what they did, or what their hobbies were. Did everyone get the idea? We nodded.

"And remember the golden rule now, ya heah? Say about others what you'd have them say about you."

A chuckle ran around the room. At the other end of the table Mother laughed politely with the balding man who sat beside her, then whispered something which made him smirk. I bounced in my seat - I loved games like this. I introduced Peggy and mentioned the boy she liked who was going to The University in Charlottesville in the fall. At her turn, Peggy announced that I had topped the honor roll three terms in a row and could say things in French like *please* and *thank you* and *pass the chicken, I want another piece*.

She pointed at the stack of bones on my plate and said I could also ask in English. Gotcha there! someone shouted. Everyone but Mother tittered - they knew a good joke when they heard one.

Barbra excused herself before we began, pleading indisposition. When Peggy and I came to bed, she was reading.

"You fake!" I said. She shrugged. "It was fun. And everybody was asking about you, what was wrong, were you sick or what."

"I hope you told them I was contagious."

"No, that you were stuck-up."

She licked her finger and made a mark in the air - one up for me. Then she told us to hurry up and turn out the light, she needed her beauty sleep.

"And tomorrow will you stop acting like Mother, Ginny? It's too revolting for words."

I pulled the pillow around my ears and pretended to snore, which made Peggy snigger. She and I understood each other perfectly. We knew that Barbra was putting on an act, so that tomorrow she'd be the center of attention. How are you dear? Are you feeling better, the aunts would ask. We rolled our eyes and whispered in the dark as long as we could.

When I awoke the room was black, the moon which earlier had been shining so brightly hidden behind the clouds. I moved uneasily, afraid that the creaking springs would disturb Barbra or Peggy asleep on the bunk above. My face was hot and my stomach cramped, the stiffly starched sheets damp and sticky. I searched for a cool, dry spot, felt the ooze of blood. I heard my aunts whispering behind their hands. Did you hear what happened to Virginia? Martha is so embarrassed - she tried to wash the sheets but she can't get them clean. Mother will be mortified, I thought. Even if she appears nonchalant,

she'll take it out on me later. You're not a child anymore, she'll say. You are old enough to control your body, and it's about time you learned.

I slid my suitcase from under the bunk and slipped the pad from its wrapper. Across the room Peggy turned and sighed. With my left hand pressing my gown into my crotch and my right stretched before me, I tiptoed into the corridor.

The hall led through a series of rooms which opened directly one into another. At the far end a window looked out onto the garden. As I started down the hall, the moon came out from behind the cloud. Light flooded in, magnifying the shadows and illuminating my reflection in a mirror. I saw myself standing there, a wraith-like heroine in a snow-white gown dramatically spotted with blood. *This is a horror movie*, I thought. In a minute the music will swell, warning me to stop, that something awful is about to happen. I stepped forward and gasped. I'd vanished. My reflection had disappeared. Where was I? I took another step and felt something gritty under my feet, bits of gravel that someone had tracked in on their shoes. A sharp point dug into my instep and I felt an enormous sense of relief. Okay, I'm not in a movie, I'm not dreaming, this is real. I scratched my bare foot back and forth across the roughness until it hurt.

Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, the moon vanished and I knew that in the morning the gravel would be gone. One of the aunts would sweep it up and it would be like it had never existed at all. I noticed some gravel in the hall last night, I could say; and one aunt or another would look me straight in the eye and say, oh no, you are mistaken, Ginny. She would offer the denial with a clear conscience, for in her mind she wouldn't be lying but stating the truth as it should be. There would be a touch of anger in her voice, and disappointment: I should know that unmentionables aren't to be mentioned,

even behind closed doors; if I haven't learned this by my age, there's something wrong. I smirked, satisfied that I understood how the world worked.

Outside the moon pulled a thin cloud across its face and again I felt the blood ooze. In the garden a movement drew my eye, a flash of pale skin against dark grass, a profile too familiar to mistake. It's the middle of the night. What's Mother doing outside? And who is that with her? I strained through the window and all the romantic films I'd watched on Saturday afternoons unrolled in my mind, all the magazines which whispered of forbidden love. I pressed my face against the glass, hardly daring to breathe. The woman's robe flowed when she turned away. What had he done to displease her? The man knelt like a supplicant before an altar. Was it Daddy? No, the shape was wrong. Then who?

The noise when I knocked over the table aroused a campful of aunts and uncles and cousins. A tragedy must have occurred, why else the crash? My aunts tutted at the blood and shooed the men out of sight. One led me off to the bathroom, another swept up the vase I'd broken. The couple outside disappeared.

The next day I searched Mother's face for signs. What about the man who was going bald? Did she smile at him in a special way? Did she preen more than usual when he spoke? I was titillated at the thought of her breaking the rules, certain that it couldn't be true. If I asked her, she'd tell me to wash my mind out for thinking such a thing. What on earth would I be doing outside in the middle of the night, she'd say. You're imagining things. She'd be so convincing I'd begin to doubt what I'd seen. And from then on she'd watch me with a sharper eye than ever: for if I was able to see evil where it didn't exist, able to mention it, however obliquely, then I could sin myself.

The scene stayed in my mind throughout the summer and into the fall. In September when I went away to Randolph-Macon, I lay in my unfamiliar bed and called it to mind, etching it more deeply every time. The slope of the bushes, the angle of the head: I saw them as clearly as if I were standing there. In the History of World Art course which I took that year, I saw the scene again, in a painting by Emanuel de Witte, a seventeenth century Dutch artist, entitled "Interior with a Woman Playing the Virginals." It is a typical genre painting, a cheery domestic scene with a dog curled by the fire, a maid with a broom, a bucket and mop. When Miss Turner flashed the picture on the screen, she pointed out the use of perspective, how the light suffused the house and highlighted the signs of prosperity, the large curtained bed, the virginal, the lace on the cap of the woman who was playing. Her back was turned. She isn't so much an individual as an element in the composition - Miss Turner hit the screen with her pointer - which is a triangle with points here, here, and here.

It was later, when I was in the library memorizing the picture for a test, that I noticed the shadow on the window and the figure behind the curtains on the bed. Clearly it was a man - his moustache removed any doubt. Then I noticed the clothes tossed on the chair in the foreground and I wondered again. Would the musician's husband be in such a hurry? The woman wasn't young, she was a matron, and her body was as thick and solid as mother's. I stared at the untroubled scene, at the rooms which opened one into the next, like Chinese puzzle boxes shrinking into the past. It was possible. Mother *had* been in the garden, I'd known it all along. There was no reason now to ask why.

We pass the gate where the Sherwood Forest sign used to be and turn into the drive.

"Here we are," Daddy says.

"And about time, too," Mother answers. She waves to Mrs. Kerchner who is weeding her garden.

"Why don't you go over and speak to her, Ginny," Mother says.

"I'll wait until Barbra comes and we can go together."

"She'll think you're ignoring her."

I slam the door and push through the hedge. "Hello, Mrs. Kerchner," I say.

She looks up and shades her face against the sun, pushes herself up from her knees. "Who's that? Oh, Ginny. Your mother said you were coming."

"Am I interrupting?"

"Don't be silly, I can finish this any old time." She pulls off her gloves and brushes her hands through her hair. "What a mess I must look. I'm embarrassed for you to see me."

"No, you look fine, nothing wrong with a little dirt."

She rubs her hands. "It's hard to keep up, but you can't hire gardeners anymore, they say they're going to come and they don't, or they leave the grass half cut and charge you an arm and a leg."

"It looks good to me."

"It should do, the amount it cost."

I nod. What am I going to say now? I can't ask how she is, I'm not interested in hearing about her aches and pains or the doctors and nurses she has to put up with, how rude they are, how you can't trust them anymore, most of them are black, and it doesn't matter what people say, they do smell and no wonder, that oil they put on their hair.

"How was your flight?" she asks.

"It was fine." We look at each other and smile. "Did Mother tell you about our trip?"

"She hasn't talked about anything else for weeks. She was so disappointed that John couldn't come. And the children, too. How are they?"

I say that Michael is still struggling to support himself as an artist, and she nods, what else can you expect? Ian is doing well, I say, he has just been promoted for the third time in a year.

"And that pretty little girl?"

"Danielle is going to Harvard in September. Her first year."

"So you'll have the house to yourself," she says. "Are you looking forward to it?"

"Yes, I have to say I am."

"You're not afraid of being lonely?"

"Oh no, there's plenty to do."

She pulls a large white handkerchief from her pocket and wipes a drop of perspiration from her upper lip, glances down at the bucket of weeds, up at me. "When is Barbra getting in?"

"Around five, I think." She wipes her lip again and stares. "I'd better let you get back to your weeding," I say. "Mother will be wondering what I'm up to."

"Yes, she probably will."

I'm halfway through the hedge when she calls.

"You tell Barbra to come see me now, you hear?"

The smell is what hits me first. It's a combination of musty tobacco and overheated wool carpet, the familiar, stuffy smell of home. If only they'd open

the windows once in a while. A blast of air pushes up from the floor vent and the air conditioner groans to life.

"Shut the door, Ginny," Daddy shouts. "Unless you're planning to cool the whole yard."

"Sorry, Daddy." I close it softly. There's no point in getting angry. If he needs to boss me around, it's his problem, not mine.

Mother calls in from the kitchen. "Your suitcase is in the bedroom, Ginny."

And where else would it be?

"Thanks, Mother," I shout. I keep the crossness out of my voice and, when I pass the mirror in the hall, I force out a smile. The convex surface broadens my face and transforms my effort to a snarl of teeth so fierce and bad-tempered that I have to laugh. Artemisia Gentileschi I'm not.

I stick my head into the den and Daddy looks up. "Mrs. Kerchner said to say hello."

"What took you so long? Lunch is cold." He's stretched out in his leather recliner reading the issue of *Time* that the man in the airport had, with the Prince and Princess of Wales on the cover.

"Blame Mother. She was the one who told me to go."

He scowls and puffs a bit faster. No wonder the house smells. I make a show of coughing and he bangs his pipe into the ashtray.

"Martha?" he shouts. "Where's lunch, I'm hungry."

We sit at the table, me at the end, the two of them facing each other like they've done for years, the finish where they sit worn down to bare wood. Mother has fixed sandwiches on gooey white bread that sticks to the roof of my mouth, with cole slaw and a marshmallow jello which is an amazing shade of lime. Daddy frowns and pokes it with his fork.

"What's this stuff?" Mother doesn't answer. He pokes it again, shoves back his chair. "Isn't there anything decent in this house to eat?"

She continues chewing - deafness comes in handy when you want it to. He crosses to the fridge and stands with the door open, drumming his fingers against the back while he examines what is inside - plastic meat and overcooked beans and lettuce going brown at the edge.

"He's grumpy when lunch is late," Mother says.

"Hey, Daddy." His fingers keep drumming. "Are you going to stand with that door open all day? Electricity costs money, you know."

He stomps back to the table scowling, with a bowl of something unidentifiable in his hand.

"I told you we were having a light lunch," Mother says.

He bangs it onto the table and glares; and I can't help thinking how disagreeable their life must be, so many years with nothing but bad temper between them. He forks whatever it is into his mouth, slurps his tea, spills crumbs down his front. Mother picks at her jello. Her jaws click as she chews. I say that Mrs. Kerchner is looking older than the last time I saw her, and does she ever do anything but complain?

"Not that I know of," Daddy says. He puts his fork down and reaches back for his pipe.

"Not at the table, Daddy, please."

"It's my house," he says. Mother clears her throat. "Well, it is."

"I'm still eating, Daddy."

"Oh, all right." He scrapes back his chair.

A minute later, from the other room comes the sound of his chair squeaking back. I put my fork on my plate.

"Thank you, Mother, that was delicious."

"Do you think so?" She begins to stack the dishes and carry them to the sink. I begin loading them into the dishwasher.

"No, not like that," she says. "I'll do it. You go unpack before Barbra gets here. And call John."

"Yes ma'am." I salute the way Daddy did and she sniffs. "Well really, Mother, I've been running my life for some time now."

A flicker crosses her face. "The towels in the bathroom are clean," she says.

I nod and start down the hall, towards the bedroom which used to be mine. My suitcase is on the luggage rack. I take out an unwrinkled skirt and matching blouse and refold the tissue to use again. The closet is packed with designer clothes in plastic bags - beaded cocktail dresses, a peacock-blue ball gown, tweed suits in various shades - clothes she can no longer wear but saves, goodness know why. Because she may need them? Because they're too good to give away? I frown. I won't call John now, I'll wait until Barbra arrives, so that when the three of them start in on each other, I'll have an excuse to leave. I flop onto the bed. My God, I'm a wreck. How am I going to stand a week of it? I massage the soft spot below my ankle. Do you think she has any slippers in the closet?

I shove the bags out of the way. Maybe here, on the shelf at the back? My hand touches the pattern and I know immediately what I've found. I feel a tiny flush of pleasure as I pull it out. The old photo album. Yes, it's exactly the way I remember. Burnt into the cover is the Dare family crest, a knight in profile and a motto, **Vincit Veritas: Truth Conquers**. I carry it over to the bed. The pages inside are soft and the ink which Daddy used has kept its color, despite the passage of time.

Christiansburg High School, 1931. They sit side by side but look disconnected, like only a fluke of timing joined them on the steps. She is wearing a sleeveless white dress, thin gauzy material which drapes over her crossed legs. Her hair is cropped, with waves and a spit curl. He is wearing a dark suit he hasn't grown into. His hair is black and shiny and his smile is barely there.

Miss Williamson, Ginter Park Elementary School, 1948. Barbra's kindergarten teacher stands next to a hedge wearing what looks like a man's overcoat. Her glasses glint. I swallow, suddenly remembering the day. The Easter eggs are hidden in the hedge. I don't want to put my hand in, it is scratchy, but Mother says I must. You'll never get ahead if you follow the crowd, she says. Get out of line and set your own course. I am four and a half years old. I know Mother can't be saying these things but she is.

Cypress Gardens, Florida. 1955. Barbra is sixteen, and beautiful. She is standing beside a palm tree like a model, one foot slightly in front of the other, her body turned. Her arm rests on a branch which curves across the path and her head is tilted to capture the onlooker's heart. I close my eyes and Daddy is taking the picture. Okay, Ginny, he says, it's your turn now. I put myself in her place, reach for the branch; but I can't touch it, I'm too short. So I cross my arms and frown.

I look down at the page, prepared to see my younger self. And there I am. My arms are akimbo. I am thick and waistless. My dress strains across an unbreasted chest. But there is a radiant smile on my face. I don't look awkward, I look confident, open to the future, young.

I look around the room. The flowered wallpaper I chose is a formal stripe now, blue on silver-gray. The drawers which were stuffed with the paraphernalia of my life are full of Mother's now, old calendars made from tea

towels, sweaters stained under the arms, pocketbooks which match shoes long since walked to shreds.

I reach for the phone. John is out, his secretary says. No, he didn't say where he was going, or when he'd be back. Yes, of course, I'll tell him you called.

I bite my lip and dial again. "You've reached 985-2848," I hear myself say. "I'm sorry that we're unable to take your call right now, but if you leave your name and..."

"Hello?" Danielle interrupts.

"Hi, Danielle, it's..."

"Wait a minute, let me get the machine." The receiver clunks down and my voice stops mid-phrase.

"Hello, are you there?" she says.

"It's Mum."

"How was the trip?"

"Fine. I got in on time. My suitcase, too."

"That's good."

"Is your father there?"

"It's the middle of the afternoon."

"He's not at the office. I thought maybe he'd come home."

"Afraid not." There's a pause. "Why? Is something wrong? You sound funny."

"I'm fine, a little frazzled maybe, you know what it's like when it is hot."

Yes, Grandmother and Granddaddy can be a bit much. She laughs. She'll tell him I called.

I dial again. The phone at the cottage rings and rings. I hang up, lean back on the bed, open the album again.

Damascus, Virginia, 1961. Peggy and I are sitting on a ledge at the camp, unbelievably young. Disappearing out the picture is a bare foot, a thigh, swimming trunks. Is it a cousin? The uncle with the balding head?

That's the trouble - it's so easy to invent the past and so hard to destroy it once you have. I can put a body on that leg, change it from male to female. I can take the picture out of the album, hold it so close to my eyes that it becomes a confusion of dots, tear it to pieces, burn the scraps, mix the ashes with dirt. What I can't do is forget.

I wanted the woman to be mother. I wanted to believe that she was more than she seemed, that behind the face she presented to the world was a passion as fiery as any on the screen. But not for my father - that was impossible. He had no flair for romance, he was a tyrant, unlovable. I could count on him only to rule.

Peggy lived near Damascus. At the end of the reunion weekend, after we begged and begged, Mother and Daddy finally agreed to let me visit. They would pick me up the next day, three o'clock sharp, and I was to be ready to leave, suitcase packed.

They arrived at two. I was in the car with Peggy and her boyfriend and a boy he had brought for me, a tall boy, blond and attractive in an ordinary way, but older than the boys I knew. Was it that which made him exciting? We passed Mother and Daddy on the road and I crouched in the back out of sight, scarcely daring to breath. We drove around for a while, then parked someplace cool and shady. I was wearing shorts and a halter, and when I pulled him on top of me, his zipper left a scratch.

We returned around four - which is when you said you'd be here, I was planning to say. Coming up Peggy's drive, I saw Daddy pacing back and forth

across the living room, chewing the stem of his pipe. When he heard the tires on the gravel, he glared at his watch and slammed out the door.

"It's about time, young lady. We've been waiting for hours."

I answered without thinking. "It hasn't been that long."

"I told you to be ready."

"What do you mean, not that long?" Mother said.

"We've been waiting two and a half hours for you." He checked his watch. "No, it's closer to three."

"That's not true," I said.

Mother narrowed her eyes. "What makes you so sure?"

Daddy exploded when he realized I'd knowingly made him wait. He shouted, he threatened, he raged. Mother lectured me: on my lack of consideration for others, on the character flaws which my disobedience revealed, on the wicked slyness of my behaviour. This was the worst, she said, the slyness. She pulled my hands out to the side. What was this on my stomach? I scratched myself on the rocks at camp, I said. Peggy nodded. Yes, she had been there, she saw it happen. Mother frowned. She didn't believe me but what could she do?

In Richmond my punishment began. For every minute they waited, I spent an hour pulling weeds in the garden. Every blade of grass was dug out by the roots. Every lump of dirt was raked smooth.

I'd like to say that I learned from this experience not to insist on the truth. If I had let his notion of time prevail, if I had groveled and said I was sorry, if later, when she wasn't there to hear, I had blamed Peggy - her watch was wrong, how was I to know; I said I had to leave but they wouldn't listen; any excuse would have served - I could have lessened my punishment, maybe escaped it altogether. But I couldn't do it. Not because of any virtue on my part

or because I believed that lying was wrong. Even then I could spin a story with the best of them, and did whenever I could get away with it. But there is an attraction to being in the right which is hard to resist. It makes you feel superior. Look at me, I'm not afraid. Other people can lie or twist the truth to suit themselves. I don't need to.

Occasionally this attitude works to your advantage. People hear what you say and admire your courage. But more often it works the other way. You tell them the truth and they punish you harder.

Mother comes into the bedroom.

"Am I interrupting something or are you hiding in here?"

"Sorry, I got caught up."

She sits on the bed. "Where on earth did you find that old thing? I haven't seen it in years." She turns the pages of the album and stops, as I did, at the picture on the high school steps. She licks her lips and concentrates on the page as if trying to re-enter that time, when she wore white lawn and her hair waved down like angel's wings. Her mouth slackens, her eyes lose their focus, her body softens and her shoulders twist, like she's about to look up at someone standing behind her. Then she shakes her head, a sharp flick like you give a rug to remove the dust, which makes the bedsprings creak. "Where did you find it?"

"On the shelf in the closet."

"Your father must have brought it down from the attic. But I can't believe he didn't tell me."

The acerbic note is back. I shrink against the pillow and wait for her to aim her venom at me. What will it be? An attack on my appearance or on my behavior?

"Sparky Mounhousen took that picture. He's dead now." She stands and wipes her hands, reaches into her pocket and pulls out a small package. It's neatly wrapped in brown paper from a grocery bag and sealed with masking tape.

"These are some tapes your father and I made about things in the house, what they are, where they came from, things like that. There are some stories I thought you might want to hear. Nothing much, just some bits and pieces of family history."

I groan. Bits and pieces? Not a chance. These will be the stories I've heard a million times: the dining room table made from walnut trees that grew on the farm where Daddy grew up, that were timbered the year he was born; the china tea service painted by Great-Aunt Florence, each cup with a scene from the family history, which is never to be used except on special occasions; the Seth Thomas mantle clock which Great-Great-Grandmother Lothrop carried into North Carolina; the buttons and insignia from Great-Grandfather Dare's uniform that he wore on his way home from Gettysburg; the convex mirror in the hall, which was a wedding present from Grandmother Dora which always made me cry when I was young. (Every time you passed it, you said that's not me, I don't look like that, and started bawling your eyes out, Daddy will say.) He will be there, disputing Mother's every word, arguing that Grandmother Dora didn't buy the mirror from the family Mother said she did: they were Republicans and his mother never spoke to a Republican in her life if she could avoid it.

"Do you have a tape recorder? I can listen to them now, if you want."

"No, no. Barbra will be here soon and I only made one copy. When you get back to Montreal is fine. But can I trust you to keep them safe?"

"I'll protect them with my life, Mother."

"There's no need for sarcasm."

"Yes, I'll take care of them."

"I want to be sure that when your father and I die and you and Barbra start going through our things, you'll know what's worth keeping and what you can throw away." I turn the package over. "No, don't open it, there's nothing to see. We just wanted to make sure there weren't any arguments about dividing things up."

I cross the room to the dressing table and busy myself with the knickknacks to give my anger time to cool. A tape is supposed to stop that? The surface is cluttered with rubbish - a pearl-trimmed pin cushion, an ashtray from Lake Louise, a cardboard foldover calendar sent by an insurance broker to a regular customer.

"This is last year's calendar, Mother. Why in the hell don't you throw it away?"

"There's no need to swear."

"But there's so much junk."

"There are some nice things there."

"Like this dish from Luray Caverns?"

"You brought that back from a school trip in grade five."

"So?"

"You gave it to me."

"What's the point in saving it now?"

"None, I suppose. Throw it away if you want."

"Give me a garbage bag and I will. And do you mind if I do the living room and the dining room too? And the den and the guest room?" Her shoulders tighten. "I'm sorry, Mother. I didn't mean to..."

"No, it's all right, I *should* clean things out, I've been meaning to, but I keep thinking that maybe somebody will want them." She pauses. She is standing mid-way between the bed and the door, in a sunny spot where the late afternoon sunshine highlights the crevices in her face, the fine hairs and knife cuts around her lips. She wants me to tell her that I'll treasure every knickknack, that I'll throw nothing away, that I'll keep every single thing which has touched her life, even gifts from adolescent daughters. But I can't say it. I won't.

She moves stiffly across the plush carpeting, out the door and down the hall and I throw the calendar into the trash. Why did I explode like that? What good did it do? Now I'll have to be extra nice and she'll know I don't mean it, that all I'm trying to do is make it up. I push the clutter to the side. In a few minutes I'll go into the kitchen. I'll peel the vegetables or set the table; or perhaps I'll lean against the counter and watch her fumble through these tasks which she used to perform so easily. I'll chat of inconsequential. Perhaps I'll ask her about Sparky. Whatever happened to him, I'll say. She will look out the window and rub her index finger against her nose or across the age spot on the back of her hand, as if rubbing will make it disappear. I'm not too sure; we lost track of each other somewhere along the way. Or maybe she'll look down at the floor where the linoleum has worn thin. Sparky? Oh, he married my friend Evangeline Hartz and became a minister. She'll pause to consider the wonder of it, that she might have become a minister's wife instead of who she is. She'll give the carrot a final scrape. But he left the ministry some years ago. Last I heard he was selling life insurance, and not doing well.

Vincit Veritas. I swing around on the bench and run my finger across the letters on the album, remembering the speaker at Ian's graduation last

June. He talked about the Harvard crest. Originally it had three books with the word VERITAS written across their pages, he said, and the book in the middle was face down to indicate that the mind could never learn all there was to know. In 1885, in a spirit of optimism, the book was turned up. He talked about changing times and how they alter our perceptions of truth, then reported the results of the previous year's fund-raising activities and delivered a well-honed pitch for more: because, of course, the book was turned over again some years later, returned to what it had been at the first. Ian laughed. He thought this was a good story. John thought so, too, although he said it was the only touch of humility he'd noticed all weekend. It's Harvard, Ian said, what do you expect? We were standing in the large open area in front of the Widener Library, a classical building, perfectly symmetrical, which houses those three symbolic volumes and an ever-growing number of more. The building's full name is the Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Library - Harry drowned on the Titanic and his mother donated the building in his honor. With this condition: that the design never change. If even a single brick was removed, the building became the property of the municipality. A bit of a problem, Ian said. John chuckled. What did they do? Ian pointed to the window which joins Widener to the library next door. Perfect, isn't it, he said. The Widener will and the Harvard way.

I don't know the terms of mother's will, but one thing is sure. She intends to control my future like she has controlled my past. She doesn't want me to ruin what she has built any more than Harry's mother did. But she isn't blind. She sees the modifications I've made and she worries. As well she should.

* * * * *

We are in the kitchen when the front door slams.

"Speak of the devil," I say.

Barbra twirls in like Loretta Young, a full skirt and a sugary smile and the promise of delights to come. She embraces Mother, swirls around to me.

"Ginny! How wonderful you're looking!" She holds me at arm's length and then pulls me toward her and gives me a kiss, a big, noisy smack which means nothing. She is wearing a royal blue dress that matches her eyes, an upturned collar which sets off her hair - which this month is red - and much too much perfume.

"Hm-m-m," I say. "Don't you smell good. Like a real ole southern belle."

She smirks and whispers in my ear. "If you're going to do a thing, do it right."

"Was the plane late? We were getting worried." Mother checks her watch to see if she's justified in complaining.

"We stopped at..."

I interrupt. "No, wait, before the welcome wears off, let me take a photo."

"Well, of course," Barbra says.

I take Mother's arm. "Come on, stand here by the sink. You too, Daddy." I'm speaking louder than usual to balance Barbra's excess but still Mother twists her head as if her deafness has returned. Daddy groans theatrically and limps across the room, stumbles and almost falls. Before Barbra can compose herself, I snap.

"Okay, smile," I say, and I snap again.

Mother offers to make tea and Barbra says she'd love some, she's *parched, absolutely parched*. We sit on the edge of our seats in the living room and sip cautiously - Mother has brought out Aunt Florence's painted tea set.

"As a special treat," she says. "To mark the commencement of this very special week. And to thank you girls for indulging an old lady."

"Now Mother, I won't have you saying such a thing. You're only as old as you let yourself be," Barbra says.

"Wait until your bones ache as much as mine do, you won't be so sure." She snaps her lips shut like she has fired a winning shot. She has chosen the cups with each of us in mind. Barbra has the one with the simpering belle in front of the farmhouse where Daddy grew up. He has the scene in the woods with men felling trees. I have the family in a wagon journeying south.

"What is your cup, Mother," I ask.

She holds it up to the light. "The girl on the swing is Florence, so the man pushing her must be the one she married."

Daddy puts his finger to his lips and whispers. "We don't mention his name - he drank."

"He did not," Mother says. "I've never heard of such a thing."

"He deserted her, too. He left for work one day and ended up in Montana."

"Too many cups of tea?"

Daddy slaps his knee and tells me that's a good one, he can't say for sure but it wouldn't surprise him. He clanks his cup onto the saucer. We'll have to excuse him, he can't spend all day gabbing, he has work to do.

"Oh? And what work might that be, pray tell?"

"Just going over what you've done, making sure everything is ready for tomorrow. I don't want to be blamed for your mistakes."

"My mistakes?" Mother's face reddens.

Daddy clomps out of the room and Barbra asks for another cup. Did she tell Mother about the role she was rehearsing or what she said to convince the director to give her time to come? No? Mother listens, stony-faced. She takes the cup from Barbra's hand and puts it on the tray with the others.

"I'm going to see about dinner," she says.

"Do you want some help?" I ask, but she's out of the room and doesn't answer. I follow Barbra down to the bedroom and sit with my back propped up against the pillows, watching her shake out blouses and skirts rolled into balls.

"Okay, so I didn't fold them," she says. "Do you have a problem with that?"

"I didn't say anything."

"And I didn't use tissue paper." She slams a drawer.

"Don't worry, Barbra, it wears off. A couple of hours and you're used to them."

"I hope you're right." She rubs her forehead and scowls. "How much stuff did you bring, Ginny? It looks like you're moving in."

"I was thinking about it." Her head jerks around and I shrug. "It may turn cold."

"Don't you wish." She picks up the package on the dressing table.

"What's this?"

"Daddy's birthday present."

"Oh, shit. I forgot." She shakes out another blouse, buttons it onto a hanger and shoves it into the closet, pushing the clothes bags farther down the rail. "Why in the hell does she keep all this junk?"

"It's not junk, it's useful. That ribbon, for instance." I point to a tattered bow on the shelf in the closet.

"Thank you, my dear, that's perfect."

"Oh, yeah? For what?"

She holds up her finger, a "watch this" sort of move, leans over the mirror and ties the ribbon around her neck, a great big bow with the ends puffing out. She gives a Loretta Young twirl. "Voila! What do you think? The perfect gift, n'est-ce pas?"

"It's not va-la, it's vwoi-la," I say. But it doesn't matter. She's out of the room and twirling down the hall.

Barbra had not settled on an acting career when she entered the Miss Teen Fashion Contest. This annual event, run by Miller and Rhodes Department Store, was a commercial version of the Miss America Pageant, the competition as stiff, the honor of winning as great. Miss Teen Fashion had to be beautiful - her picture, a large poster-sized portrait in color, stood on an easel near the cash register. She also needed a good sense of fashion; she advised the buyer in the teen department for a full year and got a 10% discount on all the clothes she bought. Most of all, though, she needed character. The winner had to teach the young girls how to present themselves to best advantage, had to encourage them to do their duty, to be poised and to praise others before they praised themselves.

Barbra entered the contest her junior year in high school. She practiced for weeks before, balancing apples on her head until she glided like the Lady of the Lake. She smiled and curtsied. She prepared answers to every question she and Mother could think of - What is your favorite book and why? Who, of all the men who've ever lived, would you most like to fix dinner for? She tried on every outfit in her closet to find the one which looked the most stylish and tasteful, rehearsed her answer to the one question she knew she'd

be asked, why she'd chosen to wear what she had. It was a navy sheath, with white gloves which stopped just below her wrist bone. You'll never go wrong with an outfit like this, Mother said. Not if you answer in a nice clear voice.

Barbra was careful not to get her hopes up - winning isn't everything, Mother said - but I knew she would. Walking down the runway, her gloves were spotless and the broach which held her scarf in place added just the right touch of color. Her dress followed the lines of her body like a dream. (A sheath is so slimming, Mother said. Not that you need to worry about your figure the way Ginny does. She is going to be a regular chubby if she doesn't watch out.)

She didn't win, of course. I've forgotten who won, but I remember what she said. When she described her outfit she said her navy dress was sea blue, her scarf, vanilla froth. She wore one glove and carried the other and her scarf was looped but not secured.

"It's lucky for her it didn't come loose," Mother said.

Barbra shrugged. It wasn't important, she only entered because Mother insisted.

I admired the way she hid her disappointment. It wasn't as if the winner was prettier or had chosen her outfit more wisely. It was her words which made the difference. And that seemed unfair.

Daddy is in his recliner, almost asleep. He squeaks it upright when he hears us, blinks as Barbra pirouettes across the room. She is smiling her stage smile, broad enough to reach the last row, and looks as sincere as a ventriloquist's dummy.

When I lean down to give him a kiss, it is an old man's cheek I touch, soft, as if even his beard is giving up. "Happy Birthday," I say, and hand him the k.d. lang tape.

"What's this? You didn't need to buy me anything."

"That's what I said." Barbra tilts her head and raises her hands to her chin, elbows out. "So I'm giving you me. See?"

"Oh, go on with you!" She points at the ribbon around her neck so he can't miss the connection. "Martha, get yourself in here," he shouts. "You have to see this."

Mother comes in wiping her hands on her apron. She's glad we remembered Daddy's birthday, she says, he gets all hurt when we don't, even if he pretends not to care. I bring out the camera and make a ceremony of taking the pictures - Daddy and Mother, Daddy and Barbra, the three of them. Daddy takes a picture of his three bosses, as he calls us, then one of Barbra and me, Barbra with the ribbon, Barbra without.

"Supper's ready anytime," Mother says.

"Aren't you going to open my present, Daddy?"

"Of course, I'm sorry, I was laughing so hard at Barbra I forgot." He fumbles with the wrapping, then gives it a rip. kd lang? He's not sure he knows her, but if it's country music, it's bound to be good.

Over dinner we talk politics. Ross Perot will get the country back on track, Daddy says, if people have the sense to vote for him. Mother snorts. Perot doesn't know what he's talking about, and Daddy doesn't either.

"You see what I have to put up with?" He turns to Barbra. "Your mother is going to vote for that Hillary woman."

"Don't be ridiculous, Victor. You know good and well I'm going to vote for President Bush. Hillary Clinton, indeed." Mother's mouth tightens. "I

don't approve of this 'two for the price of one' business. If she wants to be a politician, she should run for herself, not get elected on his back."

"But she's not on his, she's on hers," I say.

It takes a minute, then Mother's face turns red. "I don't like that sort of talk," she says.

"It was just a joke."

"It isn't funny."

"Sorry," I say, and try not to laugh.

After dinner we sit in the den, Barbra on the sofa, me on a chair across the room. The television is droning in the background. Mother is reading the paper, clicking her tongue and drawing Daddy's attention to items he hasn't missed. I pick up a section she has discarded. The crossword puzzle is finished, except for 22 down: a shrewish woman, six letters, third letter "r". I consider the options. Virago. I fill the word in. Too bad proper names aren't allowed.

Mother folds the final section of the paper, crosses to the cupboard where Daddy keeps his slides. "Here you are, girls," she says, and takes two books from the shelf, gives one to Barbra, another to me, ceremoniously, as if these books are something we've been waiting for. I open mine cautiously, then smile. Trust Mother. It isn't a reward, it's a penance, page after page of family history. The book is a large ring binder divided in two sections, one for the Dares, one for the Lothropps. Each generation is marked with a colored tab, and behind each tab is the evidence she has dug up about them: birth and death certificates, records of military service, newspaper reports of weddings and funerals. There are photographs: parents, grandparents, great-grandparents; the houses they lived in; the stones which mark their graves. In the front is a family tree. I locate myself. Alice Virginia Dare, born November 11, 1943. John is perched on the branch next to me, joined with a

dotted line. Shooting out from us are leaves: Michael, Ian and Danielle, their names and dates of birth almost falling off the edge of the page, as if the distance from Richmond to Montreal is too great for a single branch to span.

"My, you've been busy," Barbra says.

"You may not appreciate how much time she has put into these," Daddy says. "She's been weeks compiling the information and photocopying it and trying to get it in order."

"'She' is what the cat dragged in, Victor. I'm Martha and I'm right here. And don't talk for me, I can talk for myself."

"She's worse than a schoolmarm when she gets started, correcting me and telling me what to do. A slavedriver. Never stops."

"A maid is more like it. Cleaning out your smelly pipes and your ashtrays and sweeping up behind you."

"It's wonderful, Mother," I say. "You should be proud." To my surprise I find I mean it.

"I had a terrible time arranging everything. I wasn't sure whether to start with today and go backwards or do it the other way. And there were so many bits and pieces that didn't fit in, no matter what I did."

I turn the pages and familiar faces stare out: John and me at our wedding, my cousin Carter eating watermelon at the farm, Daddy and his brother in baby clothes, Grandmother Dora wearing a hat with an enormous ostrich plume. Everyone looks fresh and innocent and younger than they should, like faces in a high school album.

"I thought you might like this too, Ginny. I came across it in the attic mixed in with some of my old church stuff." Mother hands me a green leather book with imitation gold fretwork, a diary. "It wasn't locked. But don't worry, I didn't read it."

"She didn't have time to," Daddy says. "She only found it this morning."

"I doubt there's anything worth hiding." I check the date. "I was twelve."

"I wouldn't want people poking around in a diary of mine, no matter how old I was," Barbra says.

"I guess my life was duller than yours."

"I can believe that," Barbra says. "You were such a little goody-goody."

"You shouldn't write something if you are ashamed of it," Mother says.

Barbra glowers. "Give me a break, Mother, will you?"

I open the diary to hide my smile. I knew this would happen, I knew she couldn't keep up the act. On the first page a chart lists all the important facts. Best friend: Missy Armstrong. Favorite color: blue. Teacher: Mrs. Bovender. Best subject: English. (I'd written history, then crossed it out.)

Daddy is watching. "She scrounged around in the attic for I don't know how long - she said it was up there someplace and she was going to find it if it was the last thing she did."

"Victor, I'm right here."

"Yes, ma'am. I can see that you are."

"And I don't need you to humor me. I'm not a child."

He scowls. "Is there anything that I can do right?"

"I don't know," Mother says. "You tell me."

There was a reflecting ball in our garden when I was young. It was silver tinged with turquoise, and it imparted to the roses and hollyhocks an odd metallic hue which made them seem more than ordinary garden flowers. It did the same to me. When I held my face close to the ball, it spread. My cheeks became wider than the gardens behind me. When I took a step back, they

shrank. I knew that my face didn't change; but I saw that it did. It's like the mirror in the hall, Mother said. I nodded and pretended to understand. But why was the mirror there if its reflections were false? Or were they true?

I sit on the edge on the bath tub and watch Barbra brushing her teeth. Her lips are taut, her canines exposed. With the toothpaste foaming, she is a rabid dog.

"One down, six days to go," she says.

"Tonight wasn't so bad." Daddy's yellow ribbon is on the floor. I wrap it around my finger to smooth out the wrinkles. "You should congratulate yourself. You did a great job with the dutiful daughter bit."

She bares her teeth and pulls dental floss from the container glued to the wall. There's a plastic ring holder next to it, a cup dispenser and two soap dishes. "My God, can you imagine cleaning this place out? We'll need steam shovels."

I twist the ribbon around my finger. "It shouldn't be so bad. It's all on the tapes."

"What tapes?"

"The ones Mother made. Didn't she give you a set?" Our eyes meet in the mirror. "Don't worry, I'm sure she'll give them to you in the morning."

"Oh, good, I can't wait."

"Apparently they have itemized everything in the house. *One wooden back scratcher, Chinese; value, \$1.50 - that'll be Daddy. And then Mother. Oh no, Victor, that's not from China, we got it in Singapore. At that little shop down from the hotel, what was its name? And don't forget the matches. What do you bet Daddy will count them? Five hundred and NINE, five hundred and TEN, five hundred and ELEVEN: five hundred and TWELVE matchbooks from*

various countries AND eye-talian restaurants, all partially used; value, sentimental."

"Don't worry, Ginny, I don't mind if Mother didn't give me a set." Her voice is suddenly soft and kind. She puts her hand on my arm. "What's wrong? Is there anything I can do?"

"I don't know what you are talking about."

"Look, it doesn't take a psychic - you've been spitting knives ever since I got here." She mimes opening the front of her gown. "Do you want to see the cuts?"

I pick at the grouting on the edge of the tub. "They should get this fixed. More accidents happen in the bath than any place else in the house, you know."

She shrugs. "Suit yourself. I'm only trying to help."

I throw the ribbon into the trash. "It's not you, Barbra, it's them. Mother and Daddy. I can't stand the way they go on at each other. They didn't used to do that."

"I told you it wouldn't be fun."

"And that makes it okay?" She squeezes cream onto a sponge and begins to clean her face. "Did you see that photograph of them with John and me at our wedding?"

"They looked nice."

"Yeah, and now he limps around like he's asking for pity."

"What do you expect? He's got arthritis."

"And Mother can't even peel a carrot, for God's sake ."

"You can't blame them for getting old."

"I don't have to like it."

"You think they do?" She leans closer to the mirror to examine a spot beside her nose. A potential blemish? She refolds the towel and goes off to the bedroom.

I wash my face and brush my teeth, then tiptoe down the hall for a glass of milk. Outside, the trees are dark against the sky, a solid barrier between me and Mrs. Kerchner next door. In the den, I pass the telephone. I check my watch: almost eleven. He'll be home now, watching the end of the news. I play the music in my head: Tonight on Primetime, *What Quebec really wants*. The talking heads will be spouting their wisdom to politicians that no one trusts, and no one will be listening because what they say doesn't make sense any more. But John will try. He'll sit in bed, an ear half cocked, a sheet and blanket over his knees - the window is open - and he'll split his attention between the faces on the screen and the article he is reading, something worthy and dull. A car door will slam - the girl next door is home. She and her boyfriend will stand by the door and talk. The words won't be clear, only the murmur of traffic when they stop to kiss goodnight.

I pick up the phone and dial. When the recording answers, I hang up. Where can he be? And where is Danielle? Did she tell him I called? Quickly I dial again.

"Hi, John, it's me calling, on Monday night at" - I pretend to check the time - "about eleven o'clock. I just wanted to tell you that I got here fine and that Daddy loves the kd lang tape." The sound of dead air fills my mind and despite myself, my voice quivers. "Are you there?" I clear my throat and try to laugh. "What am I saying? Obviously you're not." A pause. "Well, I guess that's it. Give me a call, will you?"

I slump over the desk and shiver. What a stupid thing to do! Why didn't I think before I called him? At least I could have planned what to say. I stuttered like a baby.

My diary. I see it on the coffee table. Was I better when I was twelve?

January 1, 1955.

Dear Diary,

The new year is finally here. Missy spent the night with me last night - we stayed up and saw the new year come in. Today we went to the movies and saw "White Christmas." It was real good. We sat with Duff Youngman and Howell. Missy didn't want to but I made her. She said she didn't want their cooties all over her.

January 2, 1955.

Dear Diary,

I've made my new year's resolutions. Mine are to get Duff and Howell to like me and to write in my diary every day of the year. Mother wants me to keep my room straight. I don't know if I'll do that or not.

We went over to church for the Wednesday night supper. Duff wasn't there.

January 3, 1955.

Dear Diary,

Today was a pretty ordinary day. Duff was playing kickball on the same field where we were playing tag. He told us to get off! Boy, was I mad at him!

I was boiling at Missy, too. She was practacly telling who I like, in front of Howell. And Howell, stupid thing, stood there and listened. Well, I guess I would have, but boy, was I mad. (Conclusion - All today I was mad.)

January 8, 1955.

Dear Diary,

Today it snowed! Duff and all the boys in Mrs. Bovender's class were throwing snowballs at me. I had a good time.

January 9, 1955.

Dear Diary,

Today it snowed again! The snow was supposed to melt, but it didn't. They let us go outside to play. Was I glad! Duff threw an ice ball that hit me on the lip. It bruised my lip. Mrs. Bovender said it would feel like a mountain and it did. That must mean he likes me.

I wanted to go to the Wednesday night supper at church but Mother wouldn't go. I was mad.

January 29, 1955.

Dear Diary,

Today it snowed again! The third snow this year.

At Little Recess Duff and the boys in our class were throwing snowballs at us again. They got us over in a corner. Then Duff left! I thought he'd gone away, but he came around in back of us. He pushed me down in the snow and twisted my arm. He does like me!

Today was Missy's birthday. And she was sick. I felt so sorry for her.

And that's it. The rest of the year is blank. I glance over the entries again. This is me? I can dismiss arm twisting as a sign of love as juvenile fantasy, but "practacly?"

The sky is hazy now and the glow around the trees brighter. If I narrow my eyes, I can almost imagine that there is snow on the branches and that the grass is a frozen lake. I close my eyes and see us running before the wind. At the edge of the lake, where the hill begins to climb, pines and cedars droop with the weight of the snow. John knocks the branch with his ski pole and snow thumps to the ground. Too much weight is bad for the tree, he says. I tuck this into my mind with the other facts I'm learning, which I need to know if I'm to spend the rest of my life here with him.

Once again I think of Alice. Was it the same for her? Did she fear the unknown or welcome it with a mind hungry for something new? I see her sitting by the window. She is smiling - she and Susannah are sorting through the scraps her daughter will use to make her bridal quilt. Susannah turns twelve this year. It may take months, but eventually, neatly folded and packed in the applewood box that Amasa is making - inside it will smell like springtime, Alice said when he chose the wood - the linens will wait for a meeting, an engagement, a marriage that will never come.

Susannah doesn't know this of course or Alice either, although sometimes late at night, when she is lying with Amasa and listening to the stream, she worries about her daughter's future. She herself has been lucky in a husband. Most days she is quite content. But Susannah is livelier, less willing to compromise. Where will she find a man who will love her profligate laughter or the lines which rise up from her nose when she frowns? Alice has scolded her about this. Eventually you will have wrinkles, she says, and even in this godforsaken land - she frowns to herself as she says this - wrinkles and roughened hands are flaws to avoid.

Now, though, Alice fears none of this. Now she sees only happiness. Amasa looks up from the book he is reading. Is it the Bible? The thickness of

the volume and the care with which he turns the pages suggest that it is. He smiles at her across the room and in his smile she feels his hand smoothing down her hair when she lies on the pillow beside him.

She closes her eyes and weeps.

TUESDAY

I wake with a start, falling like Alice from a brightly lit world into underground darkness. From the kitchen comes a clank of pans - Daddy is up and obviously wants everyone else to be, too. I glance at the clock. 6:55. At least John is quiet.

I turn. Oh, great, my neck hurts. And there's something behind my eye that doesn't feel like it is going away. Under the covers Barbra moans a complaint. Have I woken her? She moves and the smell of stale perfume rises up but I push down the irritation and lie motionless until her breathing returns to normal. Today is going to be better, it has to be. I'm going to ignore Mother and Daddy's bickering, and whatever Barbra does is going to slide off my back. I flex my ankles to remove the kinks. They can't bother me unless I let them. And why should I? Barbra's right, they can't help it if they are old.

Bang! there's a crash from the kitchen, louder than before. I feel around for my dressing gown and start down the hall. Okay, okay, I'm coming.

In the kitchen Daddy is kneeling, a rag in his hand, wiping coffee grounds off the floor.

"I hope you didn't spill all of it," I say.

"Oh, good, you're awake."

With a groan and a grimace he pushes himself to his feet. He is wearing the wool paisley dressing gown I gave him for Christmas years ago and, apart from the coffee on the front, it looks like it's never left the box. He throws the rag in the sink.

"Go wake up Barbra, your Mother's added a stop to the program." He shuffles across to the table with a mug of coffee, a big white thing too ugly for words, with the motto *Virginia is for lovers* inside a big red heart. The back of

his slippers is broken and his left foot dragging across the linoleum makes a shushing sound, like he's asking for silence to tell a secret.

"Good morning to you, too," I say.

"What?"

"And yes, thank you, I slept very well." He ducks his head and I take a breath and exhale slowly. Okay, so it won't be as simple as I thought. But it's early still, give him a chance. I cross to the refrigerator for juice. On the door of the fridge is an index card typed to look like a newspaper ad.

FOR SALE

One set of encyclopedias in excellent condition.

No longer needed:

Wife knows everyting.

"Very funny, Daddy. But at least you could get the spelling right."

"That's what your mother said." He bites into his toast and chews, a smirk on his face that makes me want to spit. I carry my juice to the window where I don't have to look. The sky is hazy and already the flowers are drooping.

"Did you hear the weather forecast?"

"A scorcher, according to the radio. Hotter than normal."

I feel the heat, the pressure of the day, the glare. Christ! I need a coffee. I open the cupboard. There are dozens of the white things inside, chipped and stained and cracking from use.

"Don't you have any nicer mugs, Daddy? Where are the ones I sent after the last time I was here?"

"In the attic, I imagine." He takes his pipe from the ashtray and clicks open his lighter.

"You're not planning to smoke that, are you?"

He looks me in the eye. "I'll make you a deal. You go wake up Barbra, I'll take my pipe outside."

I find a mug with only a couple of chips, fill it, take a sip. Shit, this isn't coffee, it's water. "Mm-m-m. Tastes good," I say.

He fondles his pipe, clicks his lighter open and shut. "Well? Do we have a deal?"

A breeze coming in through the door ruffles the pages of the newspaper propped against the cereal box. I start to read and don't answer. He rubs his thumbnail back and forth over the wooden bowl of his pipe. It is ridged like corduroy, and he clicks it deliberately, like he is hoping the noise will force me to act. I stretch out my legs and lean back with a contented sigh.

"I like mornings like this - a nice cup of coffee, a newspaper, a little time to relax."

He pushes back his chair "Don't blame me, Ginny. This extra stop is your mother's idea, not mine."

I take another sip. *Education study ranks Virginia in bottom third of states. Governor Wilder to open new sports facility.*

"I don't know why she didn't add it before - she checked the schedule often enough."

"Probably she just thought of it."

"Yeah, that's what she said."

He crosses to the counter and begins to clean out the pipes that are there, digging around in the bowls with a straightened out paper clip. The

smell of dead ash is disgusting - as I'm quite sure he knows - but I bite my tongue and keep still.

"You'll never guess what she wants to do," he says.

"You're right. I never will."

He closes the drawer and begins to pace, the lighter in his pocket clicking open and shut. He's dying to tell me to get a move on, to go wake Barbra, to say come on, we're wasting time, we can't sit here all day, we've got to keep moving, but I'm not going to do it. I glare at the page. He sees me, picks up a different pipe, opens a can of tobacco. There's a whistling of teeth as he tamps down the tobacco; when it is done, he shoves the stem in his mouth and slurps. Then he begins to stare out the window. He cocks his head this way and that like he can't understand what he sees.

"Is there something in the bushes, Daddy?"

"Not that I'm aware of," he says, and smiles.

I fold my hands in my lap. I could prolong this silliness, but why bother? "Okay, tell me. What is it that Mother wants to do?"

"She wants to go to Woodson's Funeral Home."

"You can't be serious."

"She wants to introduce you to the funeral director. She decided last night, before she turned out the light. I think we should introduce Barbara and Virginia to Harvey Woodson, she said. They should become acquainted with the man who is going to bury us. Those were her exact words."

"Let me get this straight, Daddy. You want me to skip breakfast, rush back to the bedroom and wake up Barbra. Then, before she's even out of bed, you want me to tell her to hurry up, to get dressed and be quick about it, because we have to leave early to go meet an undertaker."

"It's your mother's idea."

"Should we wear our white gloves?"

"You know what she's like when she gets an idea in her head."

"What's he going to do, explain his working methods?"

"She wants you to meet him, that's all." He's frowning slightly and I know that any minute now he is going to explode. "Now go wake up Barbra. It's time for her to be out of bed."

"She's a grown woman, Daddy. Don't you think she can get up on her own?"

"Look." He sounds quite calm. Someone who didn't know him might believe he was reasonable. "If we're going to add this stop and stay on schedule, we have to start earlier."

"It seems to me that..."

"That's it, I don't want to hear any more." He bangs down his fist. "Your mother wants to go and we're going, that's all there is to it. You and Barbara be ready. We leave in an hour."

My father is a bully. When I was young, he was a big man with a thick neck and an angry voice which made me shrink into myself. His hair was black, sleekly combed and Brylcreemed into submission. He had a slightly crooked nose, like an Irish policeman from Boston must have, and bright blue eyes which should have twinkled but didn't.

He was my hero. There was nothing he couldn't do, nothing he didn't know. He multiplied impossible numbers in his head. He steered the car with one hand and smoked with the other, his elbow propped on the open window. He held his breath forever.

Now he's a child. He pouts. He plays little games. He thumps around the kitchen and spills coffee and threatens to smoke his pipe to make me do what he wants. He glowers, he sulks, he limps. And still he gets his way.

In the living room Mother flips another loop of wool around the crochet hook. She says she has arthritis in her hands but while we've been waiting for Barbra, she has added three more squares. Why does she bother? The afghan is for Danielle, but if she believes my daughter will use it, she is dumber than I think. It's ugly, a zigzag pattern in three shades of muddy beige. A perfect match for the suit she's wearing.

I shift around on the sofa so I don't have to look and open the binder she made. Along with the family history is the itinerary for the trip. Daddy has marked the route in red and highlighted the spots of interest in yellow - Christiansburg, where he and Mother grew up; Damascus, the site of the Lothrop reunion; Liberty Hall, where Mother taught before they were married; Roanoke.

"What's at Roanoke, Mother?"

"Hm-m-m?"

"It's marked in yellow."

"Oh, yes. Your father did that to show the places we're visiting."

"That's my point. What's there?"

"Don't ask me, Ginny. Check the schedule."

I flip to The Martha Lothrop Dare Heritage Tour: Schedule and I run my finger down the list. Day Three, Day Four, Day Five, Day Six.

"Roanoke's not here," I say.

"Did you look carefully?"

"Yes, Mother, I did." I emphasize each word to remind her that I've mastered the art of reading and can even write and count to a hundred without trouble.

"At the map?"

I sniff. But when I look again, I see what she means. It isn't Roanoke that's marked, but a little town nearby, Bethany, where her stepmother lives.

"Constance is still alive?"

"We'd hardly visit her if she weren't."

I glance at the half-dozen graveyards on the list and bite my lip. At least she has on real shoes today and not those awful Naturalizers she was wearing yesterday. Outside, Daddy is pacing the driveway, smoking furiously, scowling every step or two at his watch. First things first; get ready, and then, if there's time left over, you can read or do whatever you want: his lecture runs itself through my head.

"Do you think I should hurry Barbra up?"

"As you please." Another loop circles Mother's crochet hook and pulls itself taut. "I'm happy sitting here, the sun is nice and warm."

I laugh to myself. She has to know that Barbra is dawdling deliberately, hoping that the stop at the funeral home will be cancelled if she takes long enough. I check my watch. 9:15. It has been an hour now. Think of it this way, I said when I woke her. The more time we spend at the funeral home, the less time there is to drive around.

Mother reaches down for another skein of wool. She isn't worried. Why should she be? She knows we'll arrive at Woodson's on time - Daddy has said so.

I glance out the window. He is talking to Mrs. Kerchner now. They're commiserating about something - the inadequacy of lawn care, the recalcitrance of daughters, the parlous state of modern-day life. Is he

dependable, Mother asked when John proposed. I shrugged. I suppose so. She persisted. A husband has to be trustworthy, she said. He has to do what he says he will and come home on time.

The front door bangs. "Time to get a move on," Daddy barks.

From down the hall comes a whirl of air and Barbra waltzes in. "Isn't this nice? All of us here together." She look at Daddy. "Don't be grumpy now, or you'll spoil the day." She stands on tiptoes and kisses him on the forehead, so perfectly the sweet and dutiful daughter that I expect to see her lips marked in red on his forehead.

In the car he sits in the driver's seat and Barbra and I settle into the back. He drums his fingers against the wheel. We're cutting it awfully fine, he says, and why Barbra has to push everything to the limit and make the rest of us wait, he doesn't know. He starts the ignition.

"I'm setting the trip meter at zero. From here on, everything counts."

"Just like old times," I say, and nudge Barbra in the ribs.

Mother's mouth twitches. "Okay, you girls, behave yourselves, or I'll have to draw a line down the middle of the back. And no whining to know if we're almost there."

His hands betray him. His fingers are knotty with arthritis, the skin stretched painfully across shiny red lumps. His nails are cracked and yellow. But the shape of his back and the view over his shoulder haven't changed. With an unaccountably painful stab I think of the book John was pretending to look at yesterday while I packed and the painting by Alex Colville on the cover. A man is driving a car, his hands, like Daddy's, square on the wheel. We can't see his face - Colville has painted the scene from the driver's point of view. In front of him is a railway bridge, metal struts black against a cold

gray sky. On the side of the road there is a hitchhiker, his face blocked by the car's rearview mirror. It is winter, a flat and featureless landscape. Nothing is happening: yet looking, you feel certain that something is about to.

It is the hands. They are the central image of the painting, the mathematical point around which all else revolves. They are the hands of the driver and the hands of the viewer. Looking at the painting, they are mine, the driver is me. And I have a choice. Shall I cross the bridge or stop to pick up the man by the side of the road? Continue or stop? If there were a reason - if, say, he were injured - the choice might be easy, the good Samaritan impulse clearly called forth. The interior of the car presses down. It is dark inside and cramped like a coffin.

"What do you think he's going to do?" John said.

I removed my hand from the back of his chair. Nothing argued for stopping, nothing argued for not. But I had to make a choice, otherwise I stayed where I was, trapped in the car, frozen and bleak.

I do not want my parents to die. As soon as we enter Woodson's Funeral Home I realize that is why I've been so cranky and rude. But death cannot be deflected, although here they are trying hard. The lobby is painted a tasteful spring green with a mural of roses bursting with blooms. There's a marble dome and a fountain beneath which tinkles non-stop, reminding mourners to take heart, life renews itself, there is always another day.

I glance over at Barbra for a reaction but she's Yoko Ono now, shrouded in black and lost behind a pair of over-sized glasses. Sweat pops out on my upper lip. Despite the air conditioning, the place is stuffy and all I want to do is leave. From across the rotunda comes a short little man.

"No, no. We don't worry here about people being late." He waves off Daddy's explanation and look at Mother from the corner of his eye. "Don't mind me," he says. "That's just my little idea of a joke."

He is unbearably jolly, a damp-handed buffoon with coke-bottle glasses, without the slightest trace of the dignity which death demands. As he explains the various aspects of the package which Mother and Daddy have bought, his voice grows louder to drown out the clanking of glass - under the spiral staircase a workman is filling the coke machine. (It's for the convenience of our visitors, he says. Some of them find that a cool drink helps assuage the grief.) Mother and Daddy's file is open on the desk in front of him and he rummages through the pages searching for some form he wants them to sign. In the outer office his secretary is snapping her gum. She pulls it out in a thread, wraps the thread around her finger. What will she do if it snaps? She sees me and winks, shoves her finger in her mouth and pulls.

I smile, but inwardly I'm shuddering. If they have to be buried, let it be done by someone else. Let it be done someplace else, where they don't use euphemisms like "Home." Let it be a dignified service led by a sober-faced man in black, impeccably dressed, with a neat little beard and a red silk handkerchief in his breast pocket, a man who believes that death isn't the end but the beginning, and can make me believe it, too.

Mr. Woodson hands the form to Mother who nods graciously, the grande dame acknowledging the services of a minion. She starts to sign.

"What are these extras?" She points to something near the end.

"Martha." Daddy's voice is a warning. If Mr. Woodson weren't here, he'd bark at her the way he did at me. Sign the damn thing, he'd say, and don't waste my time, we've gone through this. She'd narrow her eyes. I'm not stupid. And there's no need to shout, I'm right here.

"I want to know," she says.

"It's the cosmetician."

"Oh, yes." She signs and passes the pen to Daddy.

Then everyone rises. Mr. Woodson is going to take us on a tour. His eyes bulge at the prospect. Here is the reception parlour, he says, pushing open a heavy wooden door. It holds thirty visitors at a time, but if more space is needed - he points to the folding doors and shows us how they work. I shiver. Why are we doing this? Mother and Daddy have made the decisions, there is nothing for Barbra and me to do. Mr. Woodson wonders about the music. Are there hymns we would like and will there be a choir?

"I've chosen the musical selections," Mother says. "There's a note in the file. Or there should be."

He leads us back to his plywood office to check; in the anteroom, he introduces us to the gum-puller, Miss Kimberly Benson. Mr. Woodson is wonderful, she says. There is nothing he won't do.

"As long as it's legal." He chuckles and opens the file. Yes, Mother's quite right, the note is in here. Surreptitiously he rubs his hands on his thighs. Is there anything else he can do for us? What about a drink? A Coca-Cola? A cup of tea?

"We're on a tight schedule," Mother says. "As you can see, Victor is chomping at the bit."

He nods. He understands how it is, there's never enough time to do everything you want. He shakes hands with Daddy and Mother, with Barbra, with me. If there's ever a question, we mustn't hesitate to call. We start towards the exit.

"When he said a tour, I thought we were going to see the back rooms," Barbra whispers. "You know. Where they do the interesting stuff."

"Don't be crude, Barbara," Mother says. We're by the fountain now and Elton John begins to sing. "Did you understand, girls? Everything is paid for except for the beautician. Her fees are extra."

And that does it. I blink back tears, part anger, part horror, part disgust. "Mother, you can't let that man bury you."

"Hush! He might hear."

"He's awful."

She pats my hand. "I understand you're upset, Ginny. But your father and I have to plan ahead. We're too old not to. You can't leave these things to the last minute, you make mistakes if you do, or forget things you should remember."

Like what? I bite my lip and push through the door that leads outside. The brightness is a shock and I put on my sunglasses to block the glare and to hide any sign of tears - I don't want sympathy, it only makes me feel worse. The sun is almost directly overhead. And it's hot. There's not a hint of shade - the trees planted to separate the rows of cars are spindly little things that won't provide relief for years to come. I wipe my forehead with a flourish.

"Hot enough for you?"

"It's not the heat, it's the humidity," Barbra says.

"What's so funny?" Daddy comes up slowly, puffing furiously on his pipe.

"The weather," Barbra says. "We were just commenting on how nice it is."

"You think so? I find it pretty hot." He unlocks the car and, on her side, Mother slips in.

"Watch out you don't burn your legs on the seat, girls," she says. "And Victor. Don't you stand there talking, get in and get the air conditioner going."

"Yes ma'am." He salutes, begins to bang the tobacco out of his pipe with the heel of his hand. "What about a photo, Ginny? You said you wanted a record. Don't you want to take one now?"

"You can smoke your pipe later, Victor," Mother says. "It's an oven in here."

"What do you want me to do about it?"

"Get the air conditioning on."

"Ginny wants to take a photograph."

"No, I don't." He scowls. "Okay, Barbra, hand me the camera. Daddy wants to take a photo."

"What, for the beautiful scenery?"

"Oh, just get in," Daddy says, and jerks the car into gear.

At the exit we wait for an opening in traffic. Across the road two billboards loom over a tiny patch of green. One shows a young woman grimacing, her face torn with pain, her breasts slashed diagonally by a harsh red banner. *Your body is a battleground*, it announces. The other one shows a fetus floating peacefully in a transparent balloon, buttery-cream letters on a field of virginal blue. *Alive and Growing. 8 weeks in womb - heart beats, brainwaves, fingerprints, feels pain.* VOTE PRO-LIFE, they both say, and give a telephone number for more information.

Mother is shaking her head. In disagreement or distress? I suddenly realize that I have no idea whether she believes that abortion is murder or if she supports a woman's right to choose. I nudge Barbra. "We should start a collection - an 'only-in-the-south' sort of thing."

"No, I saw them in New York last week."

"What's that?" Mother turns and cups her ear. "How's the temperature? Is it cooling off all right?" She adjusts the vents to blow the cold more directly into our faces.

"So, Mother. Have you sent out the invitations?" Barbra adjusts her glasses and curls her lip.

"You girls understand, don't you, that the service isn't at the funeral home?" she says. "Mr. Woodson makes the arrangements, it's part of what we pay him for, but the service is at the church."

"You didn't answer. I asked whether you'd sent out the invitations."

"Don't be silly, Barbra. You know as well as I do that you don't send invitations to a funeral."

"What about the coffin? It's a nice, middle of the line model, I hope. Not too flashy but not too cheap - you wouldn't want the neighbors to talk."

"Yes, that's exactly what it is. I have a picture somewhere if you'd like to see." She starts rummaging through her purse.

"It's all right, Mother," I say. She continues rummaging. "No, really. We don't want to."

"Here we go. I knew I had it somewhere." She pulls out a neatly-wrapped package similar to the one she gave me yesterday. "It is the inventory, Barbra. I meant to give it to you last night but I forgot. Did Ginny tell you? We catalogued everything in the house."

"Yes, so she said."

"The picture of the coffin is at home. I'll find it if you remind me."

"She doesn't want to see it, Mother, she's only making a joke," I say.

"Are you sure?"

I shrug and turn to look out the window. It's so hot that water drops are trickling down the glass. I reach up to wipe them dry but they're on the outside, of course. We're passing through a part of town that didn't exist when I was young, a wasteland of fast food franchises and used car lots. The streets have turning lanes at stoplights to keep the traffic flowing smoothly, from the shopping center on one side of the road to the shopping center on the other. Fruitlessly I rub my hand again across the glass. We pass another billboard, white letters on red. *CH _ _ CH. What's missing?* it says. The air conditioner coughs. Mother cocks her ear.

"I told you to get that fixed, Victor."

"I did." He fiddles with the controls and the regular hum of cool air returns. "See?"

He is weaving in and out of traffic, veering from lane to lane. I hang on to the door handle and steer with my body. At the corner ahead is the answer. *U R.* The air conditioner coughs. A few minutes later it whines. Then abruptly it stops.

"No, you didn't get it fixed," Mother says. "What you did is let the man at the garage bamboozle you." Heat pours out of the vents. "Sorry, girls, I'm afraid we'll have to open the windows."

"That's okay," Barbra says.

Mother cups her hand to her ear. "You'll have to speak up. I can't hear you with the wind in my ears."

"I said, that's fine, I don't mind."

"What about you, Ginny? Are you all right?" I nod.

She settles back, a minute later turns. "I've chosen the music for the funeral," she shouts.

"Yes. So you said," Barbra shouts back.

"You mustn't let Harvey forget."

"Harvey?" I shout. "Who is he?"

Mother shakes her head like a bird with a worm. "That's what I mean about planning ahead, Virginia. Harvey is Mr. Woodson. I introduced you when we went in."

When I was a little girl, too young even for kindergarten, there was a woman who lived with her husband across the street on the second floor of a rented duplex. Inhabiting half of a house made them suspicious characters. They weren't "our sort," Mother said, and warned me to leave them alone. If I wanted to visit a neighbour, Mrs. Robertson next door was a better choice. Or I could call on Mrs. Armstrong, Missy's mother, although what she could teach me about housekeeping could fit into a thimble with space left over. (Feckless, she called her. Couldn't tell a bargain from a broomstick.)

The woman across the street wore skirts which showed off her legs - which she left bare, unlike mother and her friends who wore nylon stockings on even the hottest days. She had long nails which she painted bright red. She sat in the garden where anyone could see her, doing nothing, only sitting and smoking and enjoying herself.

Despite Mother's orders, I often ran across after supper, hoping that she'd be there. Sometimes she was, sitting in the shade filing her nails or waiting for the polish to dry, reading a magazine - not the practical sort that Mother subscribed to which came in the mail, but one with a lurid cover as flimsy as her skirt, the sort which lurked high on the shelves, which Mother said I was never to touch, never to glance at, even from the corner of my eye. Sometimes the woman would brush me off; but if she was in a good mood, she would listen while I told her about my day and, in a languid voice, ask a

question or two. She would let me hold her magazine and fan her, even let me watch her blow smoke rings, one after another. Other evenings, she would say she was tired; or she wouldn't be there but inside. Then I watched through the window. She wandered from room to room in a cloud of cigarette smoke, moving the way that she talked - languidly, like she was treading some liquid more viscous than water. The torpor which surrounded her made my mouth hang open: Mother never walked like that. Some nights I watched her fix dinner, for unlike anyone else, she and her husband ate whenever they chose. (Despite my fascination, I wondered at this - there was a time for everything, and the time for dinner was six o'clock sharp.) If she noticed me under the trees, she would flutter her fingers in a wave, and I would wave back, excited beyond reason. The gesture made us partners in a pact. On those nights I vowed that I would never betray her, that when I was a grown-up I would paint my nails the exact same color of red, blow smoke-rings as round and never wear stockings, however cold the day.

I realize now that the woman was a cliché, albeit one unfamiliar to me at the time. She wasn't (in the terms of the day) a "kept" woman but a wife, and there was nothing exotic about her, nothing brave or unconventional. She wasn't a rebel, she was merely young. Painting her nails in the garden demonstrated no independence of mind, no desire to break the rules; it was a way of passing the time until her husband came home from work. And if her legs were bare, it was to save the cost of nylons, or the bother of washing them out. She was different in one way only: she was childless. With no one to look after, she was free. With no one to mould in her image, she could live as she pleased.

I saw her freedom as insubordination, although I didn't know the word, and it inspired me. The year we started kindergarten, I dared my friend Missy

to cross the road without looking both ways. Her eyes grew wide. It is dangerous, she said. But it wasn't. There was almost no traffic on Seminary Avenue and what at first seemed audacious quickly grew boring. This is no fun, Missy said. I thought for a moment. Okay, we'll sit down in the road and when a car comes along, we'll get up and run. She laughed. Only if you go first.

I agreed. Fired with courage I walked out to the middle of the street, brushed away a few loose stones and arranged my dress so that my underpants didn't show. Eventually a car appeared.

"Run, Ginny!" Missy raced towards the back of the house.

"Stay right where you are, little girl." A woman in tweeds stepped out of the car. She asked us why we were doing such a dangerous thing; and when Missy explained, she nodded. She wrote our names and telephone numbers in a notebook she had in her purse and made us promise never to play the game again. Then she drove away.

Missy and I sat on the curb with our heads in our hands. It was the end of the world, we were done for, nothing could save us. When the dinner bell rang, I made my way home with a feeling of dread. But Daddy said nothing during dinner and Mother was her normal self, no stricter or angrier than usual. When she brought in dessert, I started to hope. Perhaps the woman had forgotten. Perhaps she never intended to call, only to frighten us into being good. Mother waited until our bowls were empty.

"Barbara, you can be excused," she said. "Virginia, you stay here, your father and I want to talk to you."

"You heard your mother, Barbara," Daddy said. "Go on. This doesn't concern you."

His face was hard as rock. He sat me in the middle of the kitchen floor where there was nothing to lean against, on a step ladder with rubber-covered rungs. I began to cry. I'd been bad, he said. Very bad. I nodded. I'd endangered my life for a game. I nodded again. What if the car hadn't stopped? I could have caused a terrible accident, killed myself, killed my friend. I shifted my weight from side to side. There were no arms to hold onto and the pattern on the rubber pressed into my legs.

"No stories now, young lady," Mother said. "We want to know why you did such a thing."

I hung my head. "I'm sorry."

"That's not good enough."

"I don't know why, we just did it."

"We?"

"Missy and me."

"Did Missy sit in the middle of the street?"

I shook my head.

"Did Missy almost get run over?"

"The car stopped a long way away," I said.

Mother stood with her weight on both feet, arms folded in front. The first spank made me scream - Daddy's hand was calloused and the wedding band on his finger stung when it hit bare skin.

"I won't do it again, Daddy, I promise." He hit me again.

"Rules are made to be followed," Mother said. "I want you to learn."

Upstairs, Barbra lay on her stomach in the back of her bedroom closet with her ear pressed to the floor. There was nothing she could do, nothing I could say. I concentrated on the floor, black and white tiles in alternate rows. I counted them until the beating stopped.

Ernest Beauchamps, the trust officer who handles Mother and Daddy's financial affairs, is waiting for us at the appointed hour by the side entrance to his club.

"Only men can go in the front," Mother says with a chuckle, proud of this vestige of the past.

"Did I hear you right?" Barbra asks, and stops.

"What are you doing, we can't keep Mr. Beauchamps waiting." Mother pronounces it Beechum, the Virginia way.

Barbra bends from the waist and lets her head hang down, stays there for a minute, then straightens. She removes her dark glasses and she's no longer the mysterious Yoko but someone whose name I don't know, more masculine, rougher. Inside the club door she shakes hands with our host, a brisk up-and-down movement which ends with a squeeze hard enough to make him wince. He is a southern gentleman, tall, distinguished-looking, wearing a navy summer suit which reminds me of one which John owns. He leads us to the lounge and notes our orders on a chit, his silver moustache bristling with good taste, his narrow-gauge socks showing more than they should.

Over drinks he chats with Mother, jokes with Daddy about some incident known only to the two of them, asks Barbra a question or two, and me a few more. He listens attentively while Mother tells him all we didn't: that Ian graduated last year from Harvard and has a fine job in Toronto, making more money than is good for him; that Danielle plans to specialize in anthropology at Harvard, which is news to me, although I don't interrupt to tell her so; that John is such a successful architect he has little time for visiting, while I have time on my hands, or should do, now that the children are gone.

Barbra catches my wince. "Tell them what you told me about the courses you're taking," she says.

"I'd rather not."

"Yes, Ginny has gone back to college," Mother says.

"Oh?" Mr. Beauchamps raises an eye.

"Luncheon is ready, Mr. Beauchamps, sir." A white-coated butler appears. He prefaces his announcement with a bow and an introductory hum that transforms our meal from 'luncheon' to 'nuncheon.' I glance at Barbra to see if she has noticed, but she is ahead of me, striding into the dining room and pulling out her own chair. When the peanut soup is served, she waves it off and takes instead a celery stick from the cut glass bowl in front of her. She bites off the end like a riverboat gambler with a good cigar, leans an elbow on the table and begins to chomp.

"Barbara," Mother says. The three syllables are deliberately enunciated. "You'll have to excuse my daughter, Ernest. She is an actress."

"Oh?" He fingers his moustache. "On the stage?"

"Excuse me, Ernest," I say, not giving Barbra a chance to respond. A tiny muscle beside his mouth tightens a notch: it's fine for him to call me Ginny but he should be Mr. Beauchamps to me. "I wonder if you'd explain the details of Mother and Daddy's estate. Without going into too much detail, of course - we girls aren't good with numbers."

He makes little tush-tushing noises but the muscles of his mouth relax. Of course he could explain, although this isn't really the place to discuss business. But if Victor - his voice trails off and he glances at Daddy for direction. Daddy nods.

"Let me just say, then, that there's no need to worry. Your father has thought of everything. In fact, if there were many Victor Dares in this world, I'd be out of a job." He laughs - as if the world could dispense with a man like him! He pats his moustache to remove a non-existent stain, folds his hands.

Not Daddy. While we eat our main course (standard summer fare: chicken salad, white meat only, on a bed of iceberg lettuce, with gherkins and piping hot rolls), he explains the provisions he has made: if he dies before Mother, if she dies first, if they die simultaneously, if Barbra survives me, if I survive Barbra. He explains every combination and permutation, every clause and sub-clause, their intent and their effect - which is, as far as I can see, to give the government as little as possible and to maintain as much control over his money after death as before.

Mother nods when I say this. "We Dares like to plan ahead."

Barbra snorts. "You're not a Dare, you're a Lothrop."

"Lothrop: what sort of name is that?" Mr. Beauchamps asks.

"Swiss originally. But there's a bit of everything now, a little German, some Scotch-Irish." Mother takes a sip of iced tea. "The Lothrops are farmers for the most part, solid stock, nothing fancy."

"That is nothing to be ashamed of," Mr. Beauchamps says. "Farm stock is what built the country."

"I'm not ashamed. My family were pioneers. They came down the Wilderness Road from Pennsylvania in a wagon drawn by two horses. Abraham Lothrop and his wife Prudence and their two sons and a daughter. "

"Isn't that interesting," he says, and takes a bite of his roll.

"The way my father told it, the hills were so steep, they had to unload the wagon and let it down backwards on a rope looped around a tree at the top. And one time..." She aligns her knife and fork to indicate she's finished. Mr. Beauchamps raises his hand a fraction and the same creaky waiter appears.

"Washington," he says.

"Yes, sir?"

"Why don't you tell these good people what desserts we have on offer today."

The waiter clears his throat. "Well, now, we have..."

Mr. Beauchamps interrupts. "Washington here is the oldest waiter at the club. And he'll tell you that we have the best desserts anywhere in town. Isn't that right, Washington?" The man nods. "The chess pie is my favorite."

"Then I'll certainly try a piece," Mother says.

"Ladies?" He turns to Barbra and me.

"I'm fed up," I say.

"But thank you all the same." Barbra uses a mother's voice, like she's reminding a child of her manners.

"Virginia was named after a relative of mine," Mother says.

"It's nice to keep names in the family," Mr. Beauchamps says, and coughs. He's trying hard but he doesn't know what to make of us. He nods to dismiss the waiter and turns back to Mother. "You were saying?"

"Yes, I was saying that one time, the wagon toppled over and broke almost everything they owned - except the Seth Thomas mantle clock. Prudence was carrying that." She plants her palms on the table, a gesture so unlike her that it makes me nervous. "She saved the clock but she lost the child."

"Oh, yes?" Mr. Beauchamps relaxes - from the phrasing he recognizes the start of a family tale. I sit up straighter. This is a story I've never heard.

"She had inherited the clock from her mother, and it was the only thing she had, so she worried about it. On one of the hills there was a river, and she wrapped it up to keep it dry and forgot to pay attention to the little girl. The child wandered off."

"For long?" he asks.

"At first nobody noticed she was gone, and when they did, they thought she was gathering firewood or picking berries. So Prudence helped get the wagon across, and on the other side she helped load it up again."

"Was the girl back by then?" I ask.

"I'm getting there, give me time," she says. She takes a bite of her pie. "Mm-m-m, it's delicious, Ernest."

"I'm glad you like it."

I'm sitting on the edge of my seat. Is she making this up? Why haven't I heard it before? She takes a sip of tea.

"It wasn't until they were ready to leave that they started to call. Jacob, one of the boys, said she was hiding deliberately - when they were repacking the wagon, he'd discovered a book of his with a page torn out. I saw her reading it, he said, even though I told her not to."

"How old was this girl," I ask. Mother shakes her head.

"I don't know. Papa never said." She turns to Ernest. "My father used to tell this story to my sister Catherine and me whenever we were bad. Remember what happened to Abraham's girl, he said."

My throat is suddenly dry. "What happened?"

"They called and they searched until it was dark, and in the morning they searched again. They camped by the side of the river and searched for a solid week, according to Papa, but they never found her."

I take a gulp of tea. "That's awful. Why would anyone tell a story like that?"

"Sorry clears no fields and builds no barns - that's what he always said when he finished." She smiles. "My father grew up in the mountains of North Carolina, Ernest. His family had to work hard to make it productive, and that

leaves a mark. He hated waste. Plan ahead, he said. Don't leave things to the last minute."

Suddenly I am unable to remain in the room. I rise, scraping back my chair. "I have to be excused."

Washington rushes over to help. "Down the hall to the right, ma'am," he says.

I storm through the door. What a story to tell to a child! Go off on your own, and bingo! you're lost. And no good regretting it afterwards, because sorry doesn't clear fields. I scowl. In the ladies' room, two women in their sixties are re-applying lipstick. They smile at me in the mirror and continue to talk as if I'm not present, but their voices grow louder - with me in the room they're on show. A story about Maude and Dorothy includes a few extra details to give me a context, an excuse to interrupt, to say, excuse me, but you're not talking about Maude Henry, are you? Then one of them, probably the tall, thin one with the lacquered hair, will say, goodness, do you know Maude?

But I don't, don't know Maude, don't want to know her, wouldn't admit it if I did. How could I? My family is the kind that loses children in the woods and blames the child for disappearing. I smile at the two in the mirror and make a show of picking my teeth.

"You'll have to excuse me, ladies," I say. "But I have a piece of something stuck and if I don't get it out, it's going to drive me crazy." I root around for a minute, then pull out my finger and examine it like I'm testing the wind.

The door doesn't slam behind them, it can't - the architect's choice of hardware has eliminated the possibility of noise - but they exit, nonetheless. When I return to the dining room, Daddy and Mr. Beauchamps are bantering back and forth about some mutual acquaintance, but clearly it's time to leave.

Mother pushes her chair back as soon as I enter, and makes the proper sounds of thanks - how good it was of Ernest to make time for us, what a delicious lunch, especially the chess pie, yes, he certainly was right about that, it was the best she's tasted since she can't remember when. Mr. Beauchamps, in turn, says that the pleasure was all his, especially meeting two such lovely - he bows to Barbra and me and leaves the end of his sentence unspoken - he can't bring himself to call us "ladies," it would sully the word if he did.

Daddy doesn't notice. "Oh, shucks, get on with you," he says, his head bobbing. He claps Mr. Beauchamps on the shoulder. "Proud of them? We're no such thing."

Mr. Beauchamps takes Mother's arm and leads us down the hall, along a rug so thick that it muffles footsteps, past the heads of men who have run this club since its inception, to the side door where we came in. There is a wide fanlight above it and glass panes on either side, and as I stand there, shaking hands for the final time, I see my face reflected. Mother is beside me, Barbra behind, and for an instant we appear like a student's drawing, a single head repeated from three different sides. But when I shake my head, the moment is gone.

Outside, workmen are drilling the pavement to replace a street light knocked over the previous evening. It was a terrible accident, Daddy says. He jingles the car keys in his pocket. A drunk driver. We get in the car.

"What were you two thinking about?" Mother says. "You were acting like children." Barbra slams the door.

"And how do you think you've been treating us? *You'll have to excuse my daughter, Ernest, she's an actress.* Like I was some self-absorbed teenager with a silly idea in her head. I work hard at what I do, Mother, and I don't appreciate your belittling it."

"You were laying it on a bit thick, you have to admit." Daddy is using his conciliatory voice.

"No, Daddy," I say. "It's the club which was laying it on. Separate entrances for the 'ladies,' a whole floor where women can't go - it's not amusing, it's insulting. We're not contagious, you know. We don't leave germs on the furniture."

"Who says that you do?"

"Your precious Mr. Beauchamps, for one. My God, the look on his face when I called him Ernest. You'd think I'd committed a crime."

"It wouldn't hurt to show a little respect," Mother says. She has taken off her shoes and is massaging her toes and the balls of her feet. Her face is grim, her lips a single line. Daddy gives his head a cautionary shake and his eyes search in the rear view mirror for mine. He wants me to be quiet, to let it go; but better he should say that to Mother. She turns. "That's the problem with you two, you don't respect anyone. Or anything. It's not your club. And what's so bad about using one door rather than another? No one uses the front door, the side door is much closer to the parking lot."

"Mother, you can't mean that," Barbra says.

"All this business about women's lib - it's nonsense, if you ask me."

"It's women's rights, Mother."

"There's nothing wrong with maintaining traditions. You throw the past out, what do you have?"

"A country where women can vote?"

"Don't be silly, Ginny."

"And ride in the front of the bus?"

"Stop it," Daddy says.

"Don't tell me when to stop," Mother snaps. "It's like the Confederate flag. We're not supposed to fly it, it's a slap in the face, but I don't see why. It's part of history and you don't hide history in a closet or act like it never happened, you take care of it, pass it on to your children."

"You don't have to be proud, though," Barbra says.

"Why shouldn't I be proud? Your great-grandfather who fought at Gettysburg risked his life for what he believed in. You let me know when you've done as much. And I wasn't belittling you, Barbra, I was just stating a fact. Unless you're not an actress anymore."

Daddy is shaking his head almost desperately now. It's up to us to keep things on an even keel, he said this morning. I don't want any arguments from Barbra, your mother's not up to it. I looked at him over my cup. Do you think I am crazy? If you want the subject changed, change it yourself.

Barbra's face is blank. I roll my window down as far as it will go. The wind is hot and more insistent now after the coolness of the club, the sunlight more blinding. We pass the statue of Stonewall Jackson on Monument Avenue, glaringly bright in the sun, and Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederacy, elevated above the traffic and protected by a colonnade of white marble. We swing around Stuart Circle where the flamboyant Jeb Stuart waves his plumed hat to passers-by, then around Robert E. Lee astride his horse Traveler; and gradually the familiar sights do their work. I relax. The houses we pass are wonderful structures, old brick, as gracefully accommodating now as when they were built. I feel a sense of pleasure when I see them - no, more than that, a sense of pride. This isn't my place and I don't want it to be. The obsession with family connections, with rank and color, the inability to go beyond easy categories and to look at people for what they are: these make me feel trapped, unable to breathe or look the world squarely in the eye. And yet,

and yet. Daddy stops for a red light near the Jefferson Hotel, the site of the old Rotunda Club where John and I held our wedding reception, and I'm forced to admit it. The city is beautiful. The tulips and azalea have finished blooming and the dogwood is almost over, but flowers are everywhere, spilling down walls and terraces with a lavish exuberance you rarely see farther north. There is a charm to everything we pass, a perfumed air which I like despite myself. Everything is familiar, like home. I know what to expect. I know that the statue of Thomas Jefferson which towered above us in our wedding photos is still there, that young girls still come to the ballroom for their first cotillion and descend the grand staircase believing themselves the fairest of the fair. I know that the wisteria which climbs the building will flower this year and next, that the vine will grow woodier, the leaves more dense. And who could help but be proud of a place which produced men like Thomas Jefferson and Patrick Henry, George Washington, John Marshall, James Madison, Robert E. Lee?

But I don't like feeling proud, or the sneaking suspicion that this place is still home. We drive towards the heart of the city and the sour taste returns. Urban decay. This is what I expected to see. And although here the cause is not the threat of separation, the results are the same. The business district is almost deserted, building after building boarded up. Miller & Rhodes, the site of Barbra's fashion defeat, is a hull. The discards of a used-up city - crumpled newsprint and MacDonald's wrappers and litter too old to name - blow down sidewalks and collect in tired little corners, swirling and settling and swirling again. We climb Church Hill to St. John's Church, where Patrick Henry called for liberty or death.

"Anyone want to stop?" Daddy asks.

Mother sniffs and reminds him of a story in the paper about flat tires and tacks on the street and what happens to people who go where they don't belong. We pass run-down houses where women with head scarves and men in tattered overalls sit on folding chairs, stores that accept food stamps. But no one comments. Mother is fanning herself and throwing ill-concealed shafts at Daddy who glares at the street every time she does. It's getting hotter still, although it's almost four o'clock. We drive past the White House of the Confederacy, the Valentine Museum, the Medical College of Virginia where Barbra was born and I should have been, the Virginia State Capitol. Daddy turns in at the gate.

"I've got some daughters here from up north that I'm chauffeuring around," he says to the policeman. He leans down and stares at us in the back.

"That's fine, sir, go right ahead."

Daddy inches around the circle, past the bell tower and the front of the building which Jefferson designed. I picture the interior, cool marble halls which echo, the statue of George Washington, the room with the balcony which collapsed during the trial of Aaron Burr. Mother swipes at the perspiration on her lip.

"I can't tolerate this heat, Victor."

"What do you expect me to do about it?"

She frowns and fans herself harder. "I want an air conditioner that works."

"You're the one who insisted on a tour of the city."

"Yes, and you're the one who got the car fixed."

Daddy pulls over abruptly. "That's it," he says. He grabs his pipe from the rack on the dashboard and lights it almost before he's out the door.

"All our friends are dying now," Mother says. "Or are dead already." She leans her head back on the head rest. There is a small bald spot which lies directly in my line of vision which fills it so totally that all at once this bare spot becomes *her*. The thick white skin of her scalp, the empty pores where the hair should be, each raised slightly like goosebumps - they are all she is. Everything else is gone. All in an instant I begin to sweat. Of course. In their era divorce was impossible. And better the evil you know, perhaps.

I grab the camera and step out of the car, look around for something safe. A black man is slumped on a wrought-iron bench halfway down the hill. On the stairs of the capital a bunch of schoolchildren are lining up for a group photo. I stand at an angle so that I can fit them all in the frame, the man's slumping shoulders, the children's giggling faces, the shiny white façade. The idea isn't original and the contrast, white and black, tells a story less true than I'd like. But what the hell, for the moment it's all that I've got.

Barbra is flipping through the binder when Daddy comes back. She turns a page, pauses, turns again. There's a picture of Granddaddy Luke when he was a boy, looking very much the way Ian and Michael did when they were young, with chubby cheeks and a mouth ready to laugh. Daddy closes the door and starts out the gate. A few minutes later we swing past the square where Hurricane Hazel wreaked such havoc when I was young. I ready myself to hear Mother say, as she always used to do - not idly but with an emphasis that told me there was a connection she wanted me to make - what a shame it was that the storm had uprooted so many trees, "including the biggest, Ginny. Those are the first to go." But she is quiet, her head lolling to the side. I close my eyes and put my head back and let myself drift. The wind in my face is acrid with the smell of smoke - somewhere, not too far away, a fire is burning.

Alice smells it, as I do, and wakes in her rocking chair with a start - she is an old woman now and often dozes in the afternoon. What is it, a chimney fire? Or has lightning struck somewhere in the woods and set a tree alight? She reaches out to warn Amasa, but of course he isn't there - he has been gone for, what? ten years? Still she feels the absence, like an arm or leg which is missing but which aches all the same. She doesn't live in the cabin near the lake anymore - her son, the one she nursed through the epidemic which claimed Susannah and Hector, insisted that she move into town.

"What would happen if you got sick, Mother, or fell and hurt yourself? You're not safe on your own." By which he meant, I'm a busy man, I don't have time to waste running back and forth from here to the village, and the store won't look after itself.

She doesn't resent his selfishness, she's accepts it, knowing that he means well. And he's right. What sort of life would she have all alone? For just a moment she allows her thoughts to touch the ones who died, Susannah and Hector, then Nathaniel, the son who drowned. And the man-boy, the one she won't let herself name. If they had lived, my life would have changed, she thinks. But they're gone. The taste of the word in her mind draws her mouth into a knot and she spits. Gone - what a mealy-mouthed word to describe death. Deliberately she pictures their graves and the stones she and Amasa chose to mark the fact, the lush grass and the contrast between the green and the cold gray slate. And then she pictures Amasa's stone, thick where theirs are thin, with flecks of white which catch the light. She narrows her eyes against the glare. How like him, she thinks - to demand attention and give nothing in return.

Her resentment grows - despite her better instincts, for she knows it isn't fair to put all the blame on him. Yes, he was cold. Yes, he died and left me

on my own; but really, didn't I leave him long before? She thinks of the silent evenings they spent by the fire. She thinks of the man with the dark hair, of his voice, his touch, and the smell of crushed pine mixed with snow. Then quickly, before the picture fully forms, she blots it out.

She focuses instead on the space between the white gravestones and the gray, on the unbroken expanse of green where she will lie. She tries to feel the rough wooden sides of the coffin, the weight of the earth pressing down; but the slope of the ground beyond Black Point asserts itself in her mind, insistent as a fever. So she pushes herself to her feet and crosses slowly to the window, easing the stiffness from her joints. The smell of smoke is stronger now and the light an eerie glow. She pulls the curtains back, squints to block the glare. Is that a young girl slipping out of the house across the road? She shades her eyes with her hand.

She watches the girl glide across the meadow and vanish like a ghost into the woods. It's dense bush now but it will be cleared soon, this year or the next. The town is growing. There are three churches now and a bakery and general store. Amasa would never recognize the place.

Across the road, flames rise from the roof and shoot through the open door. A tree beside the house catches fire. I wait for Alice to call out a warning, to alert her son and his wife to the disaster which threatens, which can be averted only if she acts. She doesn't. She leans on her elbow. The light from the flames attracts her. In its rage her face grows calm. For a long moment she stands motionless, so fixed in time she appears not even to breathe. Across the field the young girl reappears. She stares up at the window and their eyes meet. Then suddenly, decisively, Alice moves. She opens the window, throws open her arms. Joyfully she draws the fire in. And this is what wakes me.

We are lost. Sometime while I was sleeping, Daddy has taken a wrong turn.

"Stop and ask for directions," Mother says.

"I don't need to," Daddy answers. "I know where I am."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, pull over. There's no point driving in circles."

I look out the window. In the distance, dark against the sky, there is something familiar.

"Is that the steeple of Ginter Park Methodist Church?"

Mother frowns. "We're nowhere near there."

"You want to bet?" Daddy is jubilant. He hooks his thumb around the steering wheel the way he used to and props his arm on the window, and whether he knew where we were or not, I can't be sure. He turns a corner, drives a block, swings into the church parking lot and stomps on the brake. Loose gravel skitters.

"Here we are, safe and sound." He looks as proud as if he'd pulled the church out of a hat.

"For the moment," Mother says.

He pulls his shirt cuff back, checks his watch. "We've got thirty minutes, tops," he says, and starts along the path towards the front door. Midway up he stops. "Well? Are you women just going to sit there?"

I start after him. Mother is shuffling through her purse. "Go ahead, I'll be along in a minute."

"Come on, Barbra," I say. "Thirty minutes isn't much. Don't you want to see?"

"Not really."

"You're not curious?"

"I'm curious to see what you make of it, I suppose. But the place itself?" She shrugs and stares at her nails. "I can see enough from here."

"Fine, suit yourself." I hurry after Daddy.

"See what happens when you stop looking after things?" Daddy is pulling a clump of grass from a crack in the walk. The church looks different, but I can't put my finger on why. He bites down on the stem of his pipe. "Is your sister coming?"

"I don't think so. Do you want her to?"

"No, let her be ornery if she wants." He climbs the stairs, rattles the door. He glowers.

"It doesn't matter, Daddy. We know what's inside."

"Wait here," he says. "I'll take care of it." He marches off, shoulders straight, pipe at attention.

I sit with my back to the door, to the façade which is the backdrop in the wedding photo which stands on my dresser. This is where Mr. Helseltine stood on Sunday mornings to shake hands with the congregation and accept their praise for a sermon well done. Above me is the rose window, the church's crowning glory. From here it looks blank, but inside the sunlight will be flooding the sanctuary as it did when I was young. I see the beams of light fractured into shards of brilliance, striking the altar and the stained glass window of the boy and girl above. I see my patent leather shoes swinging mid-air, scuffing against the pew in front, and Mother's gloved hand reaching over in warning, pressing gently on my knee. Hush, sit still, look at the pictures on the windows and be a good little girl. I see myself in a choir robe standing by the altar rail, a big floppy bow under my chin; sitting in the balcony with Missy, fanning myself with the oval of plaited palm supplied by Bliley's Funeral Home, trying not to laugh when the light transformed the

rows of navy suits and clipped white hair into a kaleidoscope of colors; in the Sunday school building, sitting huddled in a candlelit classroom, hands on the Ouija board which was spelling out the name of the man I was to marry; walking down the aisle on Daddy's arm, returning on John's.

It was so easy then. Daddy was a Steward, captain of the team from the Friendly Bible class, directing the people to the altar for communion. Keep them moving, he told his team - the bread of life was one thing but the Sunday roast at home in the oven was another, and no one liked it overdone. Mingling on the church steps afterwards - church was a social as well as a religious communion, and what good did it do if no one knew that you were there? - some up and coming young man would look at his watch. We're out early, he'd say. What do you expect, his companion would reply. Victor Dare was in charge and you can always count on him to keep things on time.

But who is there to count on now? My head begins to ache with the same dull throb I felt this morning. Will John be home tonight? Or will there be a message that he called? Of course, we left early this morning, he couldn't have known. I look up. A sliver of moon is out, along with the first evening star. I close my eyes. I wish I may, I wish I might. The rough edge of the brick digs into my back.

"What on earth are you doing, Ginny?" Mother is part way up the steps.

"Nothing."

"Are you all right?"

"Why does everybody keep asking me that?"

She looks around. "Where's your father?"

"Looking for someone to let us in."

She rattles the handle, clicks her tongue against the roof of her mouth.

"Come on, there's no point waiting. He's inside talking."

"Telling somebody about the two daughters who are visiting," Barbra says.

"I thought you weren't coming."

She shrugs. "I changed my mind."

We walk around the hedge and along the brick path which separates the Sunday school building from the church. It's cooler in the shade between the two buildings. A sign in old English script identifies the space as *The Memorial Garden* but who it's a memorial to, or for what, it doesn't say. There's a wrought iron bench like the one at the state capital, and a sundial which must always be in shade, judging from the moss on the bricks.

"That was a mistake," Mother says. "The architect knew it wouldn't get sun but he insisted that you couldn't have a memorial garden without a sundial. Silly, if you ask me. Same as this." She points to a sign taped to a metal grill cut into the wall. "*Press button to talk* - who'd have thought that Ginter Park would need such a thing."

"Neighborhoods change, Mother," Barbra says.

"In New York, maybe. Not here."

There's a clang of a bolt being moved. The door inches open and a dumpy woman with sausage curls sticks out her head. "Mrs. Dare?" Mother nods and she swings the door wider.

Daddy is standing in the hall by the door to the parlor. "This is Mrs. Ottinger, the church secretary, Martha. I've been telling her what Ginter Park was like when we were members."

Mother puts out her hand and smiles her gracious lady smile. Mrs. Ottinger nods. She is wearing high-topped tennis shoes with a cotton flowered blouse and a short, faded green jersey skirt which rides up in front over her belly.

"I told him you should feel free to wander around, if you want. Everything's pretty much the same. Not as fancy as it was, but then the neighborhood isn't either."

Mother raises an eyebrow. She can tell she's being dismissed and she doesn't like it, certainly not from someone in high-topped shoes. "Ginter Park was such a lovely area when we lived here," she says. "But I'm sure the sanctuary is as nice as ever. Nothing could change that."

Mrs. Ottinger stares at Mother like she's a specimen she barely remembers. "I'll be in the office," she says, and closes the door.

"Goodness gracious." Mother tsks. "What on earth did you say, Victor?"

"Don't blame me," Daddy says. "She was fine until you got here."

"You'd think a church secretary would be more polite."

"Maybe she thought you were patronizing," Barbra says.

"Patronizing?"

"Saying how nice the neighborhood used to be."

"Well, it was."

"Maybe she wants to go home," I say. "It's almost five."

"You're right, we'd better get a move on." Daddy pushes at the heavy door which leads into the church; bristles glued to the edge, like weatherstripping to keep out the cold, scrape against the side.

The room beyond is freezing. There's a powerful smell of disinfectant, and beneath that, a doggy smell, like wet wool. It is dim. The light leaking through the rose window is an icy blue, not the riot of color I expected. In front of the altar there's a set of drums and tacked to the carved oak pulpit is a notice: *Don't even think of moving these*. Mother winces.

"Look at that altar cloth, Victor. Mrs. Bliley would have a fit if she saw how frayed it is. And the carpet! It's worn right through."

She and Daddy point and tsk, happy at the neglect caused by their absence. I walk a few steps down the aisle and sit where we used to, under the mosaic of Christ. Above the altar are the stained glass children who kept me from squirming when I was young. The girl is much as I remember, a sweet-faced child in blue, a workmanlike example of the style of the early nineteen fifties. She stands behind the boy, her hand resting protectively on his shoulder, leading him to Christ. But she isn't simpering. She stands erect. Her arms are strong and muscular, and the expression around her mouth suggests that she will fight for what is hers.

I stare forward, trying to remember. What is the carol we used to sing? *The First Noel, the angels did say, to certain poor shepherds in fields as they...* Yes, that was it. To certain. I thought it was a verb. I thought the angels came to the shepherds to reassure them, to tell them that all was well. Why they needed this reassurance I didn't know, but I envied them nonetheless. I wanted to be a shepherd, to have the angels come to me. I wanted to be certain. And I was.

In 1955, the year I turned twelve, I joined the church. Dressed in the white robes of an angel, I processed into the sanctuary to renew the vows my parents had made at my baptism. At the altar rail I kneeled and spoke the lines I'd committed to memory. I acknowledged Jesus as my lord and master, thanked him for dying to save me from my sins. Then, for the first time as a member of the body of Christ, I ate his body and drank his blood. Or the symbols thereof: as a Methodist I knew that, despite the blessing, no transformation had occurred. The bread remained bread and the wine, grape juice from a can.

Now the cold blue light coming in through the rose window illuminates dust motes hanging midair. Stained-glass Jesuses march down the walls, promising comfort. *I am the light, the truth and the way. Come unto me, all ye*

that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. I bow my head and search for the certainty I felt then. Please God, a scrap will do, even the tiniest fragment. I squeeze my eyes shut so hard that spots appear. I wait and I hope; but it's no good. The sanctuary remains a room, coldly formal, tattered around the edges. The windows remain windows, the words of comfort, words.

Mother and Daddy are wandering down the aisle with Barbra trailing behind, reminiscing about the good old days. Mother has put a jacket on top of her suit and her shoulders, hunched against the cold, pull it tight across her shoulders, making it look like it's one size too small. It's a color she favors, a bright peacock blue which was popular in the sixties, and it looks familiar - probably she's owned it for years. The color doesn't suit you, I could say. Why don't you give it away? She'd shrug. I don't mind, I like it. And it's strong material. It has years of life of it, it's too much good to get rid of.

We walk quickly through the Sunday school building. Mrs. Ottinger was right, almost nothing has changed. The coal room where Tony the janitor used to sit is a classroom, and the bathroom where Missy and I ran to escape from the cootie-laden Howell seems to have disappeared altogether, but the burgundy and green floor tiles in the church hall where we ate on Wednesday nights are as I remember, and the stage at the end of the room. Barbra stops to examine a photograph taken in the forties after the war. The men and women are lined up on the front steps of the Sunday school building like the children on the steps of the capitol. Mother is mid-way up, immediately recognizable. She's wearing black suede gloves and her hands, raised to adjust her jacket, look like the lapels on her suit.

"Where were you, Daddy?" Barbra asks.

He peers over her shoulder. "I don't know. Counting the money in the collection plate, maybe."

Mother starts to correct him, then covers whatever she was going to say with a cough. "Isn't it time to go?" she says.

Daddy checks his watch and nods. "Past time," he says. "We're going to get caught in rush hour now." He starts up the stairs and as we file past the office, Mother pokes in her head.

"I hope we didn't keep you here late," she says.

Mrs. Ottinger looks up from her desk. "No, I'm here for a while yet."

Mother pulls an envelope from her pocket. "I found these when I was going through the attic. There are some old bulletins and a photo or two which I thought the church might like for its records. Nothing much. Throw them away if you want."

Mrs. Ottinger puts the package on the corner of her desk. "I'll give them to the minister tomorrow, he can decide." She unbolts the door and lets us out. The sun is at a slant. Beyond the wall and the cedar hedge, the grass is crossed with shadows.

"Wait a minute, Daddy. Before we go..." I pull the camera out of my bag, hold it up in the air and pretend to snap.

"Oh, all right. But be quick."

I arrange Mother and Daddy side by side on the wrought-iron bench, and Barbra behind, with her hand resting on Daddy's shoulder like the girl above the altar. Mother objects at first. "Look how dirty the bench is," she says. "I don't want to sit on that." She squenches up her face and brushes it with her handkerchief - or rather, brushes the air above. But she goes along when I insist.

Of course the bench leaves a mark on her jacket and on Daddy's dark suit. It doesn't matter, I assure them. It will all come out in the wash.

WEDNESDAY

In the morning, Barbra and I present ourselves in the living room at precisely the hour we are scheduled to leave. Mother is working on the afghan like she was yesterday, Daddy pacing and sending out clouds of smoke. I bang my suitcase down.

"So. What are we waiting for? Let's go!"

"Might as well unpack those," Mother says.

"Your mother has changed the schedule again," he growls. His pipe pulls his mouth out of shape and makes his face droop, as if during the night he suffered a stroke. I take a step forward. This isn't my father but an old man, and the urge to guide him to a comfortable chair and tuck a blanket around his knees is almost irresistible. "She says we can't leave until the air conditioner is fixed."

"It's not me who's insisting, Victor."

"Who is it, then?"

I smile. He isn't tired, he's angry. And from his point of view, understandably so. What good is his planning if every day Mother throws the schedule out the window?

"We could take Mother's car," Barbra says.

"It's too small for four," he says.

"No, it's fine," I say. "There's plenty of room."

"Not with all her junk."

"And what junk is that?" Mother asks. Daddy shakes his head like the question isn't worth answering. She turns. "The heat yesterday wore me out. I didn't expect to feel tired but I do."

"You can rest in the car," I say.

"No, it's too long a day. I can't do as much as I used to."

"Speak for yourself, woman." Daddy uses his country voice, with the exaggerated drawl and the joshing intonation.

"Who do you think I'm speaking for?" She pulls the afghan towards her and stabs it with the crochet hook. There's no need for your humbug, the gesture says, no need to apologize for being tired. It's the truth, one fact among the many which need to be acknowledged - which *I* am able to do, even if *you* are not.

Barbra shifts her weight from one foot to the other. "If we're not following the schedule, what are we doing?"

"I'm resting," Mother says. "All day. You do whatever you want." She twists the wool around the crochet hook and pulls it through, her attention as tightly focused as if the job were the most important in the world.

"Sounds good to me," Barbra says. "Or we could go to the museum. There's an exhibit on American folk art I saw advertised. What do you think, Daddy? Are you interested?"

"In an art show?" He shakes his head and purses his lips. "I have to take it easy. Mother's orders."

"That's enough, Victor," Mother says, and now her sharpness is a warning.

"Do you want to go, Ginny?"

"I don't know, I'm not that interested in folk art."

"No, I've got a better idea: we could drive up to Lynchburg and go to see Randolph-Macon. I haven't been there in years."

"There's not enough time."

"Sure there is," Daddy says. "You can be there in two hours, two and a half tops."

"We could take a picnic." Barbra is excited now. "Where's that old plaid blanket we used to use, Mother? Do you still have it?"

The two of them begin to discuss the possible location of the blanket and the merits of packing a picnic lunch or buying food along the way. Daddy pulls a map out from the closet and shows me the route we should take and what to watch out for. I listen, my face burning. I don't want to go to Randolph-Macon. I don't want to see the place or think about it or talk about the good old days when we were young.

"Let's go to the museum, Barbra. I don't want to spend all that time in the car."

"No, this will be more fun. You know, a 'sisters together' sort of thing."

"Yeah, exactly."

"We can go up on the Skyline Drive."

"I don't want to."

"The mountains will be lovely," Mother says.

Barbra looks at me directly. "If there's some reason you don't want to go, say so."

"I did. There's too much sitting in the car."

"Not once we're there."

"You be careful. If you go for a walk, stay on the path - some woman was attacked up there not long ago."

"Aren't you curious to see how things have changed?"

"No more than you were at Ginter Park."

"They renovated the library," Daddy says. "And they were starting on a new science building."

"I changed my mind," Barbra says. "And I'm glad I did. The church brought back all sorts of memories."

I frown, my throat suddenly tight. "Yeah, that's what I'm afraid of."

Mother picks up her crochet hook and starts another row, stab, twist, pull; stab, twist, pull. Daddy looks surreptitiously at his watch.

"Don't go just yet," he says. "Wait till I make a phone call."

He clomps out of the room. Barbra sits down and starts talking to Mother about various classmates, reminiscing with an enthusiasm I find absurd. I don't see any reason to go into all that stuff now - it's boring, old history, over and done with. And Mother may be worn out from yesterday, but you'd never know it, the way she acts, her back straight, her eyes never missing a wink.

The light on the telephone was flashing when we came in last night. She picked it up and called after Daddy in the den. "Carter wants you to talk to you, Victor. He wants to know when we're getting to the farm." She put the phone down and moved the telephone pad a fraction, to line it up with the edge of the desk. "Have you talked to John since you got here?"

"I left a message with Danielle," I said.

"Why hasn't he called?"

"How do I know? Maybe he's busy. Maybe she forgot. It's no big deal."

"She'll have to be more responsible than that if she's going to make the Honor Roll at Harvard."

"They don't have honor rolls anymore, Mother."

"They have Deans' lists." She cleared her throat. "Everything's all right between you two, isn't it?"

"We've been married for twenty-six years, Mother. Just because he doesn't call doesn't mean something's wrong."

She frowned then as she's frowning now. She turns the afghan on her lap and starts another row. What in the hell is Daddy doing? Barbra is talking about unpacking her suitcase so her clothes don't get wrinkled, which is a fine

idea although not one I'd expect from her. Who is she this morning? Not Yoko and not Loretta Young either, her accent is too southern. Vivien Leigh?

"Okay! Everything is all set." Daddy marches into the room, rubbing his hands. "I've arranged for a tour. They don't usually give them except to prospective students, but I sweet-talked her into making an exception." He turns to Mother. "It was that gal in the office, Miz Molly Bright."

"*You sweet-talked her!* Oh, I just bet you did."

"I said that two very distinguished graduates of her college were visiting us from up north. Now, Miz Molly Bright, I said, they happen to be my daughters, so you can be sure I know what I'm talking about. And I can tell you, if either one decides to, she can make a monetary contribution to your institution that will make your eyes bug out; so I suggest you give them extra special treatment."

"Daddy! You didn't!" Barbra shrieks and covers her face with her hands.

"Well, now, maybe I didn't say that precisely. But I did say that my two wonderful daughters - I'm sure you won't disagree with that assessment - are here and thinking about visiting the college for the day, and is there anything she can do to help. She was more than happy to arrange a guide." He looks at his watch. "For eleven thirty, I told her. So you'd better get a move on."

Nineteen sixty-one was a special year, not only because it was when I entered Randolph-Macon but because the numerals in the year appeared the same, right side up or upside down. For me, this imbued it with a magical glow, transformed it into a sort of mirror between the past and the future. In September, as Daddy loaded the trunk with my belongings, I thought how my

life was about to change. I knew I wasn't gaining complete freedom - college rules included a curfew and an honor code which prohibited with equal weight both cheating and drinking, even for those over twenty-one. I was required to go to classes, but that wasn't a problem, I didn't want to skip them - I was keen to learn whatever there was to know. And finally I'd have the chance. Finally I would have the freedom to ask why things were the way they were, to ask if that was how they had to be. I'd have the freedom to look for answers. If there were several, I'd have the choice, sometimes to give one, sometimes to give another, not lying so much as playing with the truth.

All this seemed encapsulated by the numbers in the year. How often, after all, did such an event occur? We pulled out the drive. The trunk was full and we were finally on our way.

"The last time was 1881 and it won't happen again for ages," I said.

"Until 6119, to be precise," Daddy said.

Mother cleared her throat, and I groaned in anticipation of the moral she was about to deliver and headed it off.

"No, in 6009, Daddy."

He harumphed and said that zeroes didn't count and we argued the point for a moment or two until, finally, he allowed that maybe I was correct.

"That's right, stick to your guns, Ginny," Mother said. "Don't let him convince you of something you think is wrong. But listen to the other side carefully before you make up your mind. You're not as smart as you think." I nodded impatiently. "And you are right, college is a turning point. It's where you determine your life path, whether you strive for excellence or are satisfied with mediocrity. Or it can be, for those who make the most of it."

From her side of the back seat Barbra rolled her eyes at me - for hours last night she had argued with Mother and Daddy about going back. What was

the point, she said. She didn't need to graduate, she was going to be an actress, and the sooner she started, the better. Why? Mother asked. A career could never replace a family. It doesn't have to, Barbra said. No, you can't do both, Mother insisted. If you want a career, you haven't met the right boy, it is that simple. Nothing brings greater joy than a husband and children, nothing. (She was right to this extent: when Barbra met Franklin that fall, she was ready to give up everything for him, and did - for the two years they were married.)

Daddy banged his pipe into the ashtray in the car, tap-tap-tap, a hollow sound, wood against metal. "Listen to your mother, Ginny. She knows what she's talking about." In the rear view mirror I saw his mouth working as he searched for words. How determined he was for me to succeed, and how certain he was that I could, thanks to him.

Barbra and I drive now through the familiar streets, across the metal bridge which still makes the tires hum until my teeth hurt, into the farm country which now is covered with houses. These are the monsters built in the affluent eighties, with Williamsburg mouldings and tidily trimmed foundation plantings. I notice them at first with indifference, then with irritation. The houses are all the same; and although they are surrounded with grass and tall pines and woodland gardens, they look cramped, like the ground is too small for their smugness.

"These houses look like Mother," I say.

"What?" Barbra looks over blankly from the driver's seat - since she had insisted on going, I said, she had to do the work.

"There's no imagination. Haven't you noticed? The houses are all alike."

"No, they're not."

"Not on the surface, but underneath. Can't you see? It's like Colonial Williamsburg - neat little streets with hand-rubbed bricks and boxwood hedges and center hall plans."

"I think they're nice."

"But they're not real."

"They look pretty real to me."

"No, I mean there's nothing original about them. They're copies. Copies of a copy."

"They don't look bad if you live in a New York walk-up." She lifts her chin. All at once I realize who she is today - Sissy Spacek or some variation thereof, the brave little coal miner's daughter who aspires to a world where they sleep on percale sheets, 310 threads to the inch.

"You'd be bored in a second if you lived here," I say.

"Careful about throwing stones, Ginny. Glass houses and all that."

"Anybody with half a brain would tear their hair."

"And anybody with half a loaf would be ecstatic."

My cheeks begin to burn. "Okay, so I can afford to live here and you can't. I'm sorry if that makes you feel bad, but you chose to be an actress, nobody made you."

"You think I'm jealous?"

"Sounds like it to me."

She glances over, then looks back at the road. "Sure, you have things I don't. Like a husband and children. And when you want to talk to them, you simply pick up the telephone and call. You don't wait until Sundays or after eleven when it's cheaper. And when you call Mother and Daddy, you don't shut the window first to block out the sirens or the screams from the street, which just might make them worry about whether you're safe. You don't set

the timer on the clock when you call - what does it matter, it's only money. And if Michael isn't there, you call Ian. Or you call John's sister, or his mother or that friend of yours in the south of France. Or, last resort, you call me."

"I'm sorry, Barbra, you won't get sympathy from me. I'd die to have your freedom."

"Oh, yeah?" She leans forward and pulls her blouse away from her back - even with the air conditioner going, it's hot.

I lean my head against the glass. The overgrown houses are gone now and we're into the countryside proper, fields of fuzzy green and the occasional road turning off to nowhere. I run my tongue back and forth over my front teeth. They are cool and smooth and the familiar shape of them is reassuring.

"Hey, can you do this?" I stick out my tongue with the sides curled up to form a funnel. "Apparently it's genetic. Some people can, some can't."

"No, I'm afraid that's not in my repertoire. But I'll try it at my next audition."

I reach for the radio. Let her bitch if she wants. In a 5-4 ruling, the Supreme Court has reaffirmed the ban on prayers in school, a voice announces. Unemployment is going down. I listen to the end. There is no news from Quebec, even though today is the twenty-fourth of June, St. Jean Baptiste day, and in Montreal people are on the streets cheering, or watching the parade with fear, depending where their loyalties lie.

"And in Switzerland" - the voice shifts gear to indicate that this is a feature item and not hard news - "hikers have discovered a man from the stone-age, perfectly preserved in the glacial ice." I think of how he must be, dark and shriveled, his teeth bared. In Katevale - or Ste-Catherine-de-Hatley, as we are meant to call it now - the flags will be flying, the blue and white

banners snapping in the wind. The sound comes to me, clear and loud, even though the windows are closed.

So much for the meek little woman I imagined. Dr. Johanne Maulebricht is a tall, slender woman in a dove gray Anne Klein suit, or a good imitation of one, with a matching silk shirt which is definitely *not* old-maidish. She comes out of her office to greet us.

"Welcome back to Randolph-Macon," she says.

She is wearing perfectly polished kid leather shoes and sounds unmistakably southern. She makes the standard enquiries - when Barbra and I graduated, what our majors were, where we live, what we do - with a sleekly courteous attention that makes me, with my disheveled hair and overgrown cuticles, feel slovenly and far too fat. She can't possibly care about our answers but she manages to look like she does, manages it so well, in fact, that she almost has me fooled. She has asked a local student to give us a tour of the campus. She glances at her watch. Julie Dixon, her name is. She should be here any minute.

"Although I declare, you are a touch earlier than your father said you'd be."

Barbra assures her that we don't mind waiting, that she mustn't disturb her schedule on our account, a request like ours coming out of the blue can ruin a whole day if you let it. Oh, no, Dr. Maulebricht says. Nothing in the world gives her more pleasure than talking to former students. She would love to show us around herself, but unfortunately...

A minute later she is back in her office and we are seated in the visitors' chairs, reading the material she has given us. There is a college calendar and a glossy prospectus, heavy on photos and light on substance, which shows

young girls with sunshine faces doing the things that students are meant to do. They consult a professor, a woman even younger than Dr. Maulebricht, but equally well-dressed. They study in the library - not the high, airy room that I remember but a low-ceilinged, dimly lit space with study cubicles and computers terminals. They cluster in dorms, play bridge, munch popcorn, discuss boyfriends and the moral imperatives of Kant. They aren't all white as they were in my time; and although this is an important difference, it seems superficial compared with the innocence which marks them - as, I suppose, it must have marked us.

I stare at the wall and try to see the faces of my friends - my roommate who left after freshman year, the mis-matched pair from across the hall, the one tall and fair, the other short and dark. There's a painting which catches my eye, a pastel by Mary Cassatt of a mother and daughter looking at a baby. It is vaguely familiar - I remember it hung in the corridor outside this room and for four years I must have passed it daily. But did I ever really see it? The baby is a bright-haired little boy, his cheeks and the tip of his nose a rosy foil to the mother's moss-green dress. His skin, tinged in spots with the blue that you see on snow in the paintings of Lawren Harris or Maurice Cullen, throws the Mother and daughter into the shade. The daughter in particular. She is sketched in profile with slanting lines to suggest a dress, her only color a scribble of red on her arms. Did I ever stop and look at this painting? Did I ever wonder if its message was right? Even the red on her arms seems less her own color own than a reflection of his.

"Hey, Barbra," I say. She looks up. "Did you ever wonder what would have happened if you hadn't come here to college? If you'd gone up north, say. Someplace like Smith or Vassar. Or to one of the big co-ed universities."

"Would my life be different now, do you mean?"

"Yeah. Something like that."

She studies me for a moment, then lowers the calendar to her lap. "No, I don't think so. I'd still be an actor, so I'd live in New York because that's where the work is. And I'd still be struggling for parts because that's what actors like me do. Why? Would yours?"

"I don't know. I mean, when you think about it, how much of anyone's life is what they make it and how much is just luck? Or not even luck, chance. It's easy to say you'd be an actress, but how do you know for sure?"

She shrugs. "I just do."

"I don't know, you walk down the street one day and bump into somebody and get to talking, and you go out for a drink and see a movie, and before you know it, you're married with children and a house in the suburbs and a garden you hate. And when you try to remember when it was you decided to do all this, you can't. In fact, you're not even sure you *did* decide - it just happened and you went along with it because it was easier not to stop."

"No, I decided, all right. Don't you remember those fights I had with Mother and Daddy?"

"But say you looked out the window one night and you saw somebody you knew; and if you looked a minute earlier or a minute later they wouldn't be there, just like you wouldn't have bumped into that man who became your husband if you'd taken a minute longer to brush your hair that morning or to change your blouse. That party where I met John - I almost didn't go."

"Are you sorry you did?"

"No, that's not it so much as..." My words trail off and I try to think what it is that I'm trying to say. "My life has just happened, that's what bothers me. I didn't make it, it made me. But if I had never met John, I wouldn't be who I

am. I don't know who I'd be but I wouldn't live where I do, I wouldn't have three children - or if I did, they wouldn't be the same three."

From down the hall comes the sound of a door slamming and footsteps on the terrazzo tile. Young what's-her-name come to guide us at last. I stand and brush my skirt into place. As long as she's not too perky. I can stand anything but that.

She breezes in, her collar turned up at a jaunty angle, as perky as they come. Her hair bounces like a shampoo commercial. She wears a sparkly gold charm bracelet, baggy madras shorts and springy-bottomed tennis shoes - a perfect match for the girl I was expecting, except for one little thing. She is black.

She leads us along the corridor of Main Hall, her smile as vivacious as any in the book. Yes, she's from Lynchburg. An up-coming senior. Majoring in sociology. No, she isn't sure what she'll be doing next year. Banking, maybe, or management consulting if the right firm comes along. She leads us outside into the glare. Would we like to visit our old rooms? We nod and she starts off down the path. Yes, there are other black students at Randolph-Macon. No, they aren't all southerners. The percentage? She'll be happy to find out. No, it's not a problem, someone at the library is bound to know. She pauses. Is she walking too fast? No, we're still relatively spry, I say. She ducks her head and laughs. She didn't mean to imply that we were old, in terms of demographics, in fact, we're better situated than she is, ahead of the baby boom rather than behind it - and not only behind the baby boom but behind Generation X and Generation Y as well, or whatever they call people in their twenties now, the ones who want to work, at least, and can't find jobs.

Will that be a problem? Barbra asks. Julie shrugs. It depends. A friend who graduated last year works in New York and she's hoping to interview for

the same company. Why business? Barbra asks. Julie bounces like Dennis Rodman. Simple - she wants a job that will pay well and companies are hiring more women now, particularly African-American women. Although she'd be sorry to move away from her family and all her friends at Randolph-Macon. She tells us how proud she was when she was accepted, how much she values the friendships she's made, how sure she is that they'll last.

From down the hill comes a grinding noise - a workman with a chain saw is attacking a cherry tree. He severs a dead limb from the trunk and we wait for the noise to subside. What about a family, Barbra asks. Any plans there? Julie shakes her head. Eventually maybe, but no time soon. And certainly not before she's been married a few years. No, she doesn't have a serious boyfriend. None of her close friends do, they're too busy studying. She trots up the stone steps in front of East Hall and I bite my lip to keep from laughing. Apart from the color of her skin, this girl could be me. I wore a charm bracelet like hers when I was a freshman. I wore madras shorts and tied my hair back with a grosgrain ribbon. I chattered the way she does, too, with just as much confidence.

I climb the stairs more slowly, follow her in through the door, stop. The hallway is carpeted in the same soft shade of green I remember. It stretches to the same metal fire door at the end, and I know that, if I push it open, it will resist, then swing closed behind me with an aggravated sigh, like Mother makes when Daddy lights his pipe. Mid-way along the hall is the bow-fronted mahogany table, the polished surface a bit more pitted with time; above it is the gold-framed rococo mirror where I checked my hair before entering the parlor - which is where my date would be waiting, perched on the edge of a stiff-backed chair, still upholstered, no doubt, in scratchy tones of green.

I step forward and look. The room has been transformed. Instead of straight-backed chairs, there are comfortable sofas and a big-screen tv. Posters cover a large cork bulletin board and dirty mugs and empty envelopes of sugar litter a coffee table. The Bishop who established the college is still glowering from between the windows - someone has to maintain decorum - but the other stiff-necked men who decorated the room have disappeared. I laugh. Of course it's different, I should have known.

So why does it happen? There is a murmur of voices and all at once the room is peopled with soft-spoken young men in jackets and ties. A girl pushes past. She is my double: a sunny young thing with short dark hair wearing a navy blue skirt, Weejuns and a white blouse buttoned to the neck. She looks around, and from a chair in the corner he rises up and steps into the light.

We met in late September at the freshman introductory dance. He was a senior at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville and so, strictly speaking, shouldn't have been there; but the chaperone said it was all right since he was a family friend of the girl across the hall. (He's like a brother, Sarah Jane pleaded.) She introduced us in the corridor outside the gym. He was tall, a gravely courteous boy - or not so much a boy as a man - from the mountains of Tennessee.

"Alice Virginia Dare. That's a nice old-fashioned name. Do you know what it means?"

I looked up, startled. No one had ever asked before. "Alice means the truthful one and Virginia is after Elizabeth, the virgin queen."

"Did they name you right?" he asked.

I blushed. "Yes, they did. For now, at least."

He laughed and led me onto the dance floor, but he didn't hold me like the Richmond boys did, pressing themselves against me and rubbing their

hands up and down my spine. He held me more properly, almost at arm's length. There was something about that which excited me more.

"Will you call?" I asked at the end of the evening, and marveled at my courage.

He smiled and said yes, he thought maybe he would. But I should know, he was planning to enter law school in the fall and grades were important. I smiled and said I understood, I had plans, too; but inside I was jubilant.

We met the following Saturday afternoon. When I came into the parlor, all I could see was him, his thin face, his black hair, the stubble which shaded his jaw and made him look like Kirk Douglas in "Spartacus." He drove a convertible, and we started up into the mountains with the top down, the radio blasting out a new hit by the Shirelles. *Will you still love me to-mor-row*. We sang along and I waved my cigarette in time with the music, feeling freer than I'd ever felt before. At a viewpoint on the Skyline Drive overlooking the valley, we parked the car. He draped a tartan blanket across his arm and swung a knapsack over his shoulders.

"Beer," he said to my unspoken question. "And books. I told you. Grades are important."

We followed a gravel path into the woods to a rocky clearing protected from the wind by masses of wild rhododendron. He spread the blanket in the shade, popped open two cans and handed one to me. I took a sip although I knew it was against the rules. No, because it was. I didn't like the taste but I drank it anyway - this was the freedom I was looking for, the chance to make up my own mind. I leaned against the trunk of a tree and read the book I'd brought, a paragraph or two. Mostly I studied him. He was beautiful, an angel by William Blake, dark lines straining for heaven, dangerously exciting.

"Right," he said after a while. "That's enough of that." He tossed the book to one side and pulled me flat on the blanket. When we kissed, he tasted like malted honey mixed with smoke. We studied the sky and played the games people play when they're getting to know one another, naming clouds and telling lies for the fun of it.

The next weekend we packed a picnic and went to Natural Bridge. (What's that? he asked when I suggested it. I was amazed. How could he not know about Natural Bridge? Mother had called it one of the seven wonders of the natural world.) We wandered alongside the stream which had carved through rock to form a narrow gorge. High overhead was the arch of stone. A shower sent us running for cover and we raced towards a cave I remembered, hollowed out during the Civil War. On a rock near the entrance, I told him how George Washington, surveying the area for the King, had followed the stream to where it disappeared, how, even though he had sent divers through the hole, no one had ever discovered where it went. Drops of water sparkled in the air and we marveled that nature still held such mysteries.

In the evening we returned for the sound and light show. Reclining chairs lined the bank of the stream. We found a pair at the end of a row, removed the side arms and lay down under a single blanket.

"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep."

The voice came from nowhere, like the voice of God, so deep and portentous that we exploded with giggles. A few chairs over a middle-aged woman turned.

"Sh-sh-sh," she humphed. "Show some respect."

Quickly the voice moved us through the geological strata of time. We burrowed deeper under the covers. Here the Indians passed. (They flash down

the stream and name the valley Shenandoah, after the daughters of the stars, God says.) Here the young adventurer, George Washington, carved his initials in the rock. (God points his light at a scrawl too high to verify.)

"And now, in a modern miracle of engineering, a highway crosses the rock. But forever it will arch across the sky like a rainbow, the promise of God's eternal goodness."

"A sample of which," I said, "is currently on offer at the gift shop and souvenir stand located immediately across from the exit."

He laughed. Around us people were gathering their blankets and starting towards the exit. I shivered and pretended to be cold so that he would hold me closer. And the next weekend he proposed.

We were lying in bed, in a motel half a mile from the school. "We won't get married right away, of course, but in the summer after I graduate," he said.

"What about my graduation?"

"If I'm accepted at Harvard, you could transfer to Radcliffe."

"And if you're not? Or if Radcliffe doesn't take me?"

"We'll figure out something." He slipped his arm under my shoulders and pulled me closer. "I know you're young, Virginia. But don't worry, I want you to finish college. My wife has to be well-educated."

"It's my brain that you're after?"

He ran his hand down my back. "What else could there be?"

A minute later, I pushed back the covers and started to dress. No, there wasn't time, I had to leave, I'd be late getting back to the dorm as it was.

"You haven't given me an answer, Virginia."

The words of the ceremony spoke themselves in my mind. Wilt thou love him, comfort him, honor and keep him, in sickness and in health; and

forsaking all others, keep thee only unto him, so long as ye both shall live? I shuddered.

"I'd like to think about it, Adam."

"Of course, it's a big step."

I touched his cheek. "Don't be upset. I just need to be sure."

"I thought you were," he said, and nodded at the bed.

I bent my head to hide my confusion. Boys didn't think sex was love, girls did. Weren't they the ones who sang the songs? Stop, in the name of love. Who's sorry now? Will you still love me?

"Think about it," he said, and pulled on his trousers. "Take as much time as you need."

"It's such a surprise."

He began to button his shirt. "Tell you what," he said. "Why don't you come home with me for Thanksgiving - meet my folks, my friends, get to know the place."

"I'll have to ask my parents, they're pretty strict about stuff like that."

"So they should be." He checked his watch. "We'd better step on it or you really will be late."

I kissed him when he dropped me off, said I wouldn't be able to sleep for thinking about him. For thinking about it.

"Can you tell?" I asked. "People say you look different."

"You look fine," he said, and brushed down a piece of my hair.

I kissed him again. "I have to go, Adam, I'm sorry." I ran up the steps, preparing an excuse for the housemother who would be waiting by the door. Did we run out of gas? A flat tire? I already knew what I'd say to Adam. I was too young to get married. I wasn't ready for the vow.

I called him the following night, before he could call me. He had paid me a wonderful compliment and I was grateful, he mustn't think I wasn't. But I was sorry, marriage was too big a step right now. Yes, of course, I wanted to date him. How could he ask such a thing, he knew how much I liked him.

But the truth was, the excitement was gone. I wasn't ready to settle down, I wanted more - more experience, more fun, more pleasure. I wanted to explore. Why should Barbra be the only one with a career? Maybe I'd become a lawyer myself. Maybe I'd go into advertising or public relations. Why not? Anything was possible. It was a question of making up my mind.

At least, this is what I thought. Or what I told myself I thought. I turn away from the portrait of the stern-faced bishop on the parlor wall. Barbra and Julie are standing by the window and Barbra is explaining what it was like in the bad old days: the eleven o'clock curfew which was extended to eleven thirty on Saturdays for students whose grades were good enough, the limit on the number of classes you could cut, the book you had to sign when you went on a date.

"You want to know what I remember?" Julie looks at me and I force out a smile. "Physics."

Barbra laughs. "I know what's coming now," she says.

"I took it my freshman year to get the science requirement over with."

"A lot of people do that," Julie says.

"At the end of the year, after the exam, I gathered up my notes from the year, the lab experiments, everything - a stack of paper this high. I carried it into the bathroom, put it in the toilet and set it on fire."

"Omigod," Julie says.

"Omigod is right." I laugh. "The flames shot up almost to the ceiling and I thought the whole place was going to catch fire. So I flushed the toilet. Of

course, the porcelain was so hot by that time that the front broke off and water went everywhere."

"Heat expands, cold contracts," Julie says. "It's pretty elementary."

"To you, maybe. But I didn't learn a thing all year. Or at least not about physics."

She jingles her arm and her charm bracelet sparkles against her skin. They still have distribution requirements, she says, and she thinks they are a good idea. They force you to try new things, to learn about subjects you think you aren't interested in. A friend of hers took sociology because she had to and ended up majoring in it. Barbra agrees. She wouldn't have gone into acting if it hadn't been for a class in modern dance. She starts to describe the dumpy little woman with the crooked eyes who taught the class and what an inspiration she was; and Julie says yes, she knows what Barbra means. Ms. Maulebricht is like that, and isn't it amazing that she's so pretty and so nice when she is as smart as she is.

We're on the third floor by this time, in the bedroom where Barbra lived her final year. The room is empty, the walls and mattresses bare. Barbra begins to describe the tie-dyed curtains she and her roommate made, the Yield sign they "found" one night and hung over the bed as a joke. She calls on me to support her. Do I remember the girl from Georgia who wore that awful pink pancake make-up and never put it on her neck, so that when you looked at her from the side, you thought her skin was two different colors? I laugh. Oh yes, the Georgia peach. And does she remember the girl who got married and wasn't allowed to live in the dorm because she might tell the other girls something they didn't already know? Barbra laughs. Then there was the other one, the girl who got pregnant and had to leave.

"I don't remember her," I say.

"Maybe she was earlier," Barbra says.

Julie looks sad. Teenage pregnancies are such a terrible problem in the black community, she says. Personally, she can't imagine anything worse than being a single mother, although we mustn't get her wrong, she doesn't mean that she disapproves of a woman raising a family alone, only that it's such a hard job, so lonely even with all the support in the world, and it's not good for the children either. But the way she figures it, you have to take responsibility for your actions and think about the consequences beforehand. Which is one of the reasons she's so proud to be a student here, because the faculty members are such wonderful role models. She glances at her watch. Speaking of which, Ms. Maulebricht said we wanted to see the library?

We start down the stairs. Julie tells us about the number of books in the library, the special collections, the technological changes that make it possible for a student here to research almost any subject she likes. She holds the door for us to enter.

"You look around," she says. "I'll see if I can find out the percentage of Afro-American students."

"It doesn't matter," I say. "I was just curious."

"It'll only take me a minute," she says. "I don't mind."

She disappears into a back room. Barbra picks a book off the shelf, puts it back. A computer is open on the circulation desk and I scroll idly through it. *Daughters of Eve*, by Gamaliel Bradford. The listing pops off the screen.

"I'm going to take a look at something, Barbra," I say. "I'll be back in a minute." I note the call number, walk around until I find the location, open the book and begin to read.

It's a collection of biographies, as I remembered. Each woman in the book is named and analyzed as an aspect of Eve. Catherine the Great is Eve

enthroned. George Sand is Eve and the Pen. Madame de Maintenon, mistress to Louis XIV, is Eve as dove and serpent. I stop to consider the combination. Was she dispatched in search of dry land or condemned to crawl upon it? And what happened to her pompadour in the meantime? I skim a few pages. Here is Mademoiselle de Lespinasse, Eve as lover. According to Mr. B., this was a woman who knew "the wildest torment of self-forgetful passion and ennobled it by the completeness of self-surrender." Oh really? I think of the professor who recommended the book, a short, stocky gentleman descended from Thomas J. ("Stonewall") Jackson, the illustrious Civil War General. He was putting it on the reading list, Professor Jackson said, although the connections with American biography were tenuous and the women, some of them at least, had led lives he could not admire. Certainly he wasn't suggesting we emulate them. However, biographies about women were few and far between, and seeing that we were women - or would become so in the not-too-distant future - he thought it worthwhile.

I read a little more. Professor Jackson may not have intended us to follow the path, but what were malleable young woman to do? Make your mark on the world, Mother said. Use the talents God gave you. Remember you're a Dare, and behave accordingly. Hers was the first lesson, and it ended when the car door slammed and she and Daddy left me here on my own. And here was the second. To make your mark in life, ignore the conventions. Use your talents as Eve had done. Be a woman. Relax. Surrender to passion and be ennobled. Abdicate responsibility and be celebrated, written up in the history books as an example to others. Of course you will be punished. (Mademoiselle de Lespinasse was attacked by smallpox.) Your children will be brought forth in sorrow and your husband will rule over you. But what does this matter? Your mark will be made.

I dredge up Dr. Jackson from the past. He is a portly man with white hair who wears a tweed jacket and rides a bicycle so slowly he might as well have walked. He is unfailingly courteous and when he calls me by name, it is never Ginny or Virginia but always Miss Dare. Under his guidance I study William Byrd, the founder of Richmond, Jonathan Edwards, the Puritan preacher, Robert E. Lee and General Ulysses S. Grant. I do not study Pocahontas or Dolly Madison or Susan B. Anthony. I do not study Louisa May Alcott, Georgia O'Keefe, Mary Cassatt, Helen Keller, Margaret Sangster, Eleanor Roosevelt. I do not study Ellen Glasgow although she was a Richmonder and a Pulitzer prize winner, or Pearl Buck, a Randolph-Macon graduate. I do not study Nancy Astor, the native of Danville, Virginia, who battled wits with Winston Churchill. And I certainly do not study Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman or Maggie Walker, the Richmonder who was the first woman in the United States to be president of a bank.

What I remember most clearly from my studies is this. In his coded diary, after recording the weather and the state of his bowels, William Byrd noted that he and his wife had quarreled. She had "pulled her brows" and threatened to pull them again. No matter, he wrote. In the afternoon the quarrel was reconciled with a "flourish performed on the billiard table," after which she read him a sermon in Dr. Tillotson. And in this way authority was maintained.

It is cooler in the mountains. Barbra and I spread the picnic blanket in a small clearing surrounded by pines and aspen which sway in the breeze. There's a stream nearby which reminds me of the one at North Hatley, and listening to it gurgle over the rocks I feel a sort of perverse pleasure, as if I'm witnessing the final rush before the water dries up for the year. On the

opposite bank, rhododendron are blooming. The flowers aren't the deep red which I know from cultivated gardens but a vibrant purple, their color in nature, and against the dark green foliage they shimmer and shift like the shapes in a Vassarelli.

"Did you hear that?" Barbra asks. Thunder rumbles in the distance.

"Let's hope it breaks the heat."

"Right, I don't know how much more I can tolerate." She is rummaging in the picnic hamper, and although there is no special emphasis in her voice, I know that it isn't only the weather she is talking about. There's a hangnail on my ring finger and I pick at it with my teeth while she unloads the glasses and plates. An awkward twist to her movement draws my eye. Is it Lucas Cranach's Eve that she reminds me of? I reach for my shoulder bag - Mr. Bradford's influence if it is.

"Oh, hell, I forgot to bring the camera."

"I wondered," Barbra says. She hands me a glass. "Are you planning to help or are you just going to sit there?"

I shrug and open the bag with the food we picked up, some bread and cheese, a bit of fruit. The wine Daddy gave us is still cold, thanks to the icepack he wrapped it in, but nowhere near cold enough to kill the taste - it's Virginia wine, far too sweet, with a smell of damp cardboard, like boxes from a basement that floods.

"Okay, so I've been a bit on edge the last couple of days," I say.

"A bit?" She rolls her eyes. "Heaven help me if it gets worse."

"I said I'm sorry."

"Did you? I must have missed it."

"Maybe not in so many words." I rub at the hangnail, then try to smooth it out. "John and I had a big argument the day before I left."

She nods as if she's been expecting as much. "Oh, yeah? What about?"

"It doesn't matter, the details aren't important." I wiggle on the grass, then take another sip of wine and grimace - it really is undrinkable. "I'm thinking of leaving him."

"You're what?" Barbra sputters in her glass.

"You heard me."

She rocks back on her heels. "Whoa, Ginny. Are you really?"

"I thought maybe you knew."

"How could I?"

A loud chirping pierces the air and I look around for its source. "There it is," I say, and point to a pine on the other side of the stream. She follows my finger. "See? Up near the top. That little brown bird."

She shakes her head. She is wearing dangly earrings and the reflection hits me in the eye. "Why, Ginny? Everybody argues once in a while."

The bird flutters up to another branch. "It may be a vireo, I can't really see." I reach for my wine glass, eyes on the branch.

"I don't give a damn what kind of bird it is. What happened with John?"

"Nothing really. It's just that..." I take a sip, put my glass down, try to think how to explain. I look at her hands. The skin is red and shiny like the hands of a cleaning woman which are always in water, painfully raw and ugly. She picks up her glass. "Did you notice what you just did?"

"I asked you about John."

"No, you picked up your glass without looking."

"Is this another genetic thing like that trick with your tongue?"

"I noticed it yesterday when I was in the kitchen with Daddy."

"What are you talking about?"

"I was reading the paper and watching him out of the corner of my eye and drinking my coffee; and I realized I wasn't paying attention to the coffee cup except for the chip on the handle, but that I wasn't spilling it, the way he was spilling his tobacco. And then I started thinking that that's the way things are for John and me. I don't need to see him, I know where he is, the same as I know where this glass is. I don't need to look, I know what he's thinking, I know what he is going to say, how he's going to react. It's like there's a map imprinted in my brain."

"You live with somebody, you get to know them."

"I suppose." I stare down at the picnic blanket, twist a strand of fringe around my finger and watch with interest as the tip turns red. "I don't know, seeing all this stuff today, I can't help thinking what I used to be like."

"You're not even fifty, Ginny."

"I will be this fall."

"So?"

"So I used to be as bouncy as Julie. Did you hear her? She wasn't worried about getting a job, it was whether the right firm came along."

"She talks a good game."

"No, she believes it, the same as I did." I stretch out my legs and wiggle my toes. "Hell, now I can't even sit on the ground without getting pins and needles." I take another sip of wine. "Do you remember Adam Rogers?"

"The boy who asked you to marry him?"

I nod. "I got a letter from him not long ago - he's a lawyer in New York."

"Better than a life insurance salesman, I suppose. What was he writing about?"

"He said he'd been thinking about me - actually, that he'd been dreaming about me - and was wondering what I'd done with myself."

"Ah, mid-life crisis."

"Yeah, I brushed it off, too." I trace the pattern on the blanket, a yellow thread which weaves through squares of red and black. "You know what I remember most about him? How pleased I was when I turned him down."

"You were pretty excited, the way I remember it."

"Of course - I was flattered. It didn't exactly hurt my ego. How many girls do you know who get a proposal after going out with somebody for only a couple of weeks?"

"I thought you'd never quit talking about it."

"Because I thought I was doing something brave. There I was, not even halfway through my freshman year and already I had made the decision that I wasn't going to be like Mother, that I wasn't going to get married and have children, I was going to be independent."

Her eyebrows pinch together. "What are you saying, that you wish you'd said yes?"

"No, I'm saying that it didn't matter. I just realized that today. Turning him down was what you'd expect me to do. A smart young thing - of course I wouldn't get married before I graduated, how else could I teach my children all that good stuff about art and Greek mythology? But what would be different if I had? My accent?"

Barbra looks down at her hands. "I'm playing a seventy year old woman in this new play," she says. "I don't know if I told you." I shake my head. "It's a good part. I like playing old - it gives you a preview."

"Yeah, and being old isn't all bad: I know, I've heard it before. What I keep wondering is what it would be like if John wasn't there." I reach for my

glass and narrow my eyes the way a painter does, to bring things into focus.
"Don't worry, I'm not asking for advice."

"That's good, because I'm not giving any." She kneels on the blanket and leans forward to break the bread, a chunk for her, a chunk for me. Slowly she unwraps the cheese. "I'm an actor, Ginny, and an actor is an inventor. I'm always coming up with new ways to play a part - a different accent, a gesture, a way of walking, it doesn't matter what as long as it isn't me. I don't invent my characters but I have to make them real. I can't worry about whether they're cruel or silly. If they aren't likable, I can't be either, and too bad what people think. I remember once playing Sandy, the young wife in "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf." I couldn't get beyond nice, the reviewers said. And if there ever was an unnice character, Sandy is it."

"I'm not nice," I say. "John's home stewing right now and I'm glad he is, it makes me feel good."

She's been building a sandwich as she talks, layering slices of cheese and tomato, and she stops now, midway through taking a bite. "So what will you do if you leave? Get a job?"

I chew deliberately, pushing the fear her question brings into a back corner of my mind. "I don't know. I'm still trying to decide."

Mother is standing at the door. "You're back early."

"It was no fun without you," Barbra says. She stretches, her hands pressed into the small of her back. "Ginny didn't have anyone to pick on."

"No one my size, you mean."

Mother turns her ear to me. "What was that? I missed it."

I shake my head. "It doesn't matter."

"She said there was no one her size." Barbra's voice is louder.

"There's no need to shout, Barbra," Mother says. "I can hear perfectly well if you enunciate."

"The car is fixed." Daddy comes out of his office with a book in his hand. He shakes it at me. "I told you so," he says.

"Told me what?"

"Your camera. I found the receipt." He grabs onto my elbow and pulls me into the room, points to a large cardboard box which once upon a time held Indian River grapefruit, Grade A, finest.

Behind his back Barbra is laughing. "What in the world is all this, Daddy?"

"My account books," he says. "One for every year back to 1932."

"You've kept them?" she asks.

"Well, obviously," Mother says.

"The receipts are upstairs, these are the master files, but it's easy to find something. All I need to know is the year." He opens the book, points to an entry on the page marked June. "See? *June 2, Kodak camera, Virginia's high school graduation gift, \$32.95, McCutcheon's Camera Shop.* Do you want me to get the receipt?"

"No, it's okay."

Daddy thumps the book shut. "It's no trouble. I can get any proof that you want. Or I can tell you how much I spent on you in 1961, the whole year: your clothes, school supplies, allowance, everything."

"She's not interested, Victor," Mother says.

"Maybe later, Daddy. Right now I'm tired."

He shrugs. He's disappointed, but what do I care? I start for the bedroom and Mother calls after me.

"Oh, Ginny," she says. "John called." I stop abruptly but I don't turn around - I don't know what my face may show. "We had a nice chat. He's busy with some project, he said - I didn't catch what it was."

I force up the corners of my mouth so that my voice will come out right. "Thanks, Mother. I'll give him a call."

In the bedroom, I stretch out on the bed and close my eyes. Let John wait. I think of a painting I saw not long ago, by a Canadian artist named Joanne Tod. It is called "Two Perspectives" and, as much as contemporary paintings are "about" something, this one is "about" art and the inability to objectify personal experience. In the first perspective a woman is standing in a gallery staring at a painting the viewer can't see. She is wearing a white sheath with little cap sleeves, low black pumps and a matching chunky necklace, like Jackie Kennedy might have worn, with a bright red jacket hanging over her arm. Around her is the museum's collection. There's a snow scene with men in the woods, a lake fringed with nondescript trees, an impressionistic work of two women, one of whom bears a striking resemblance to the woman in the sheath.

All this is floating in the center of a larger canvas. This is the second perspective - an auditorium packed with people applauding, painted not in enameled colors but in lifeless shades of grey.

A woman views a painting in an art gallery; in turn she becomes the object of observation. This much is clear. Ostensibly private acts occur within very public spaces. Much as the objects the woman is regarding cannot be divorced from history, so the ideas which occur associatively as she looks become colored by that inescapable interrelationship.

My God, Ginny, is this the junk you study? he asked. I didn't want to argue so I let it go. But without that framework would I ever notice more?

The people applauding form a loose circle around the woman in the art gallery, and this circle becomes complete only when I am there. When I look at the painting, I am part of the crowd; and so I become painted, as they are, in shades of grey. Yet simultaneously I am set apart. For many of the spectators aren't facing inwards towards the floating gallery scene but outwards, towards me. Some like what they see. Others applaud grimly, like parents at a graduation ceremony they fear will never end. One young boy in glasses with a fifties-style flip of hair is sneering. A girl in scratchy lace looks amused.

The diversity of their responses shouldn't surprise me - I realize that not all people think alike. But looking from the outside, what principles do they use to judge me, to praise or condemn my opinions and my thoughts and the sour moments of my soul? A clunky necklace, a bright red cape: is this enough? Of course I am colored by my history. Everyone is. But I can step outside the circle.

As long as I do it on my own. I stare at the phone, pick it up, put it down. This is where I start. I'm not going to call.

THURSDAY

When I look out the bedroom window the dream is still fresh in my mind - Alice climbing a hill, her face flushed with exertion. She pauses to wipe the sweat and admire the view opening up around her: the brilliant blue sky, the glistening shield of water which reflects mountains and trees and rocks. When she stops at the edge of a field she laughs. I laugh too. While Barbra bangs around in the bathroom, Doris Day is singing "Que Sera, Sera" in my head - it seems that overnight the decision about John has been made.

I carry my suitcase to the car and Daddy fits it in beside the cooler and the hamper and the other paraphernalia Mother deems essential for the trip. When Barbra wanders out, Mrs. Kerchner next door waves, pushes herself up from her knees and, leaving her trowel on the grass, starts over to say hello.

"Let's get a photo of the four of us," I say. "Mrs. Kerchner can take it." I look around for a spot. Not beside the car - I want this picture to be different from the one I took when the camera was new, when Mother and Daddy and Barbra posed by the front bumper and only the tread on the tire was in focus. I want to be front and center, so that years from now, when I look back, I'll remember how self-assured and confident I feel.

"What about on the porch?" Barbra suggests. "I can pretend to be coming out the front door and Daddy can be glowering at his watch."

"We'll take it by the lilac," Mother says. She and Daddy move automatically to the center and motion for Barbra and me to stand on either side.

"No, I want to be next to both of you."

"Come ahead, then," Daddy says and moves a step to the side. I slip between them and with my arms wrapped around their waists, smile full-faced

into the camera. When Mrs. Kerchner can't find the button to press for the picture, I show her and adjust the focus again, positive that this time I've got it right. She snaps, moves back a few paces, snaps again.

"Okay, let's get this show on the road," Daddy says. "We have to make up for lost time."

A delivery van passes and I wave at the driver, a young black man in a white t-shirt who smiles and waves back. Mother asks Daddy if he's sure the back door is locked and Mrs. Kerchner assures Mother that she needn't worry, she'll keep an eye on things while we're gone. And then we're in the car.

"Seat belts fastened?" Daddy asks. His left hand is gripping the wheel while his right reaches across his shoulder for the seat belt. He honks good-bye, a cheerful toot-toot-toot that starts me laughing, and swerves around the corner, still fumbling for the catch.

I look over at Barbra. She and I have changed places today - I'm behind the driver's seat, she's behind Mother. Beside her on the seat is a bottle of mineral water. She uncaps it, offers me a sip; and as I tip my head back to swallow, I feel so buoyantly happy that I grab the door handle to hold myself down, although why I should bother I don't know. What does it matter? I can float off now if I want. I smile. The balding spot on the back of Mother's head doesn't seem sad today, it seems normal, like the progression of the seasons, the growth from child to adult.

"It's cold," she complains. She snuffles and reaches for a kleenex. Without harumphing or rolling his eyes or shifting his shoulders for the benefit of the back seat, Daddy reaches forward, turns down the fan and adjusts the vents so that the cold air doesn't blow directly on her neck. A moment later he signals the turn onto the interstate.

"We're on our way now." There's excitement in his voice, and satisfaction, as if finally everything is going the way he planned. He pulls into the fast lane. "I spent yesterday afternoon reworking our itinerary," he says.

"We cut out the stop at Liberty Hall." Mother is shuffling through the maps to make sure we have everything we need. "I knew from the beginning that it wasn't necessary - it's nothing but an old barn now, it hasn't been a school for years."

"What are you talking about? You were the one who wanted to go," Daddy says.

She sniffs and turns the corner down to mark another page in the AAA guide book.

"We cut out Monticello and the Civil War iron works, too," he adds.

"Those were to make sure you girls don't forget your Virginia history," she says.

"And the University."

"We wanted you to see your grandfather's room on the green." She turns in her seat. "Did I ever tell you that his room was next to the one Edgar Allan Poe lived in?"

"Yes, several times," Barbra says.

"It's all right, Mother," I say. "We've seen it. And we could never forget our Virginia history." I give her shoulder a reassuring pat and, as I do, catch the ever-so-slightly stale smell of her, like milk on a baby's breath.

"That's what I told her," Daddy says. "There's no need to stop at the University, they've seen it a million times."

"A million times, my foot." The exasperation sounds more habitual than real. Daddy stretches his arm across the back of the seat, as expansive as a

young man with his first conquest. An air of well-being surrounds them today, which I'd attribute to a long and successful evening of love-making if they were John and me. Or John and me in the early days. There were no reservations then, we made love every day. Then the children came and I stopped wanting to kiss. I lean forward into the space between them.

"Do you remember what it used to be like when we went to Grandmother Dora's? Getting up when it was still dark and crossing the nickel toll bridge?"

"That clickety-clickety the wheels made on the metal strips, like the bridge was hollow - my goodness, yes, I haven't thought of that in years." A dreamy look crosses Mother's face and her hands relax in her lap.

"I spoke to Carter yesterday afternoon," Daddy says. "I told him we were going to be late but he wouldn't hear of it. He insists we get to the farm while there's still daylight. He wants to show us around."

"Wants to show off, is more like it," Mother says.

Beside me Barbra bristles - Carter was her favorite cousin when we were young. Imps, Grandmother Dora called them; peas in a pod who could always be trusted to get into trouble if they were left on their own. The binder Mother gave us is open on her lap and she jabs her finger at the page.

"What's Sunset View Cemetery?"

Mother clears her throat like she's about to read an entry from the guide book. "It's where your grandparents are buried."

"Why are we going there?" Barbra asks.

"Because you have to ask what it is."

We swerve to pass a pick-up truck. There's a dog in the back with its nose pressed against the window and a little girl who waves. When I wave back she sticks out her tongue.

"What about cutting out the stop at Constance's house?" Barbra says.

"Certainly not," Mother says. "She's counting on us."

"She's not counting on anything, Mother - she's a hundred and fifty if she's a day," Barbra says.

"She doesn't turn a hundred until next year. And it's Helen who's expecting us, not Constance."

"I'd rather spend the time with Carter."

"I don't care what you'd rather do, Barbra," Mother says. "I promised Papa before he died that I'd look after Constance. And when I make a promise, I stick to it."

"Mind you," Daddy says, "no one thought she would last for another thirty-five years."

"It's not thirty-five, Victor, it's thirty-two."

He laughs and pats her on the knee and says thirty-two, thirty-five, what's the big difference? She humphs and tells him to keep his hands to himself, he should be lucky enough to find a woman like Constance, although why anyone would want to marry him, she doesn't know, he needs more attention than a baby. She's not getting rid of him by kicking the bucket before he does, he says. She snorts. She has no intention of doing any such thing so he shouldn't get his hopes up, whatever girlfriend he has stashed away will just have to wait.

"See what I have to put up with, girls?" He hooks his thumb around the wheel and Carter appears in my mind, a tall blonde boy grinning over his shoulder as he and Barbra race into the woods beyond the poplar tree, leaving me behind. Involuntarily I shudder.

"Are you cold, Ginny?" Mother reaches for the temperature controls. "I can adjust the vents."

"No, I'm fine. Excited about seeing the farm. It's been a long time."

"You know whose fault that is, don't you?"

The car veers towards the side of the road - Daddy has a cassette in his hand and is fumbling around for the tape deck. A moment later kd lang begins to sing.

"What in the hell is that?" Barbra asks.

"It's the tape Ginny gave me for my birthday," Daddy says.

"It's kd lang," I say. "She's from Alberta."

Barbra listens a moment, then rummages in her handbag and pulls out a small box.

"It's okay, Barbra," I say. "We can change it if you want."

She clicks open the lid. Inside are earplugs, molded pink plastic, which she inserts with a show, to make certain I notice.

Mother's head begins to sway and her fingers to tap in time with the beat, although she claims to be no fan of country music - hillbilly stuff she called it when we were growing up, with a scorn intended to make us equally scornful. Daddy turns down the volume and starts on a story about Carter and his switch from big city businessman to gentleman farmer. It seems he made tons of money on the stock market - Daddy explains a series of complicated transactions in such detail that only a financial wizard could follow the trail. From Carter's profits he moves on to political analysis. Perot has the right idea, he says. Everyone knows what's wrong with the government but only a hard-nosed businessman has the determination to fix it. I object. The world isn't black and white, there are subtleties in every situation which determine the rights and wrongs; and if you close your eyes to the circumstances, you might as well shut down your mind. Mother shakes her head impatiently. Some things are right and some are wrong and there's no fudging the line between them. Perot may not have all the answers but Clinton doesn't either.

Look how he vacillates, saying one thing on Monday and another on Tuesday, trying to please everybody - which he should know by now that you never can do.

"Besides which, Perot's not a philanderer."

I laugh. "Oh, come on, Mother, it's only sex. What difference does it make?"

"What do you mean, *only* sex? A good husband doesn't go out gallivanting and a good wife doesn't give him cause. You make a promise when you get married, you stick to it."

"You said that already, Martha." Daddy reaches over to pat her knee again but she's having none of it.

"So? At my age I'm entitled to repeat myself." She twitches her skirt into place and looks at me from the corner of her eye. "Go ahead and laugh if you want, Ginny, I don't care. I'm old-fashioned and I'm not ashamed to admit it. I believe in right and wrong and in fidelity and hard work and love for my country. And if you don't, I feel sorry for you."

She fusses around in her seat and the wattle of flesh under her chin wobbles with indignation like a crotchety old hen's. I stretch my toes inside my shoes. I must ask Carter if he remembers the time he dared me to steal a pack of Granddaddy's Lucky Strikes. My God, he was surprised when I did it! I glance over at Barbra. She's leaning back against the seat, earplugs in, eyes closed. Was she the one who told?

"Hey Daddy," I say. "Turn up the music, will you? I can't hear."

kd's voice drifts into the back but it's Doris Day who fills my head. Que sera, sera. By the time we reach the exit for Bethany, I've decided. First thing after I'm home, I'll buy a pad and some brand new pencils. I'll start drawing, small sketches at first to get my eye back, then larger ones to see what I can

do. I'll let myself go completely and paint the world the way I see it, with all its absurdities and contradictions. Out the window now trees arch over the road. I imagine painting the branches, not as a canopy over a bed, but as a leafy hammock waiting for someone to fall asleep in. The fields sprouting green are like Monet's waterlily pond, with liquid shadows fading from blue to violet and watery rose; I'll paint them as a suburban swimming pool with a Dustin Hoffman graduate floating unattached, his sunglasses reflecting the world outside, the puffy plastic coils of his inflatable waterbed, the sprays of chemicals hooping over the rows of tender young plants.

Unless I can't do it any more. I feel a sudden stab of panic. What if I can't? We pass an old church and the panic subsides - the building is sagging on the foundations and badly needs a fresh coat of paint, but the sign out front makes me laugh. The Power House of Deliverance Family Church. If worshipers there can believe, then so can I. If I can't paint, I'll sculpt. Or I'll take up photography in a serious way. It doesn't matter what, it's the freedom to choose that counts, not the choice. I nudge Barbra in the ribs.

"Ready for the show?" I ask.

She stares at me blankly and closes her eyes.

We turn onto a street without sidewalks where the houses are boxes with tidy gardens front and back. Deliberately I let myself slide across the seat.

"Smile, Barbra, it's Candid Camera."

"What did you say?" Mother turns in her seat.

"Nothing, just making sure Barbra is awake."

"Now listen, you two, I don't want any games today. Helen won't understand."

"Cross my heart, we'll be good as gold." The excitement is building again, and a wonderful sense of power. The world is mine. I can make it what I want it to be.

"See that you are," Mother says.

We stop in front of a faded clapboard bungalow surrounded by a picket fence which is struggling to stay upright against the weight of uncut grass. Almost before the engine is off, Daddy springs out of the car. He lights his pipe, takes several frantic puffs and blows out a stream of smoke. Like a signal, the door of the house opens and a woman starts down the walk. She's plain-faced, with straight-cut gray hair, a great barn of a woman with heavy arms and scrawny legs with veins which bulge, dressed in what must be her Sunday best.

"Well, look who's here," she says, and hugs Mother with her hands held out stiff from Mother's neck, not touching. Her enormous bosom cantilevers over the sidewalk, an unbridgeable gap. Mother introduces us. This is little Ginny? My, my, how long has it been? And Barbra. She gives her a hug.

Daddy is pushing at the fence. Helen nods at the grass and explains that with the cost of nursing being what it is, she doesn't have much left over for extras.

"We'll talk about that later," Mother says and links her arm in Helen's. They start towards the house. Her mother is asleep, Helen says, but she's more than happy to wake her.

"No, let her slumber," Mother says. "We have time."

We enter what Helen calls her front room and I bite my lip with pleasure. It's perfect. The furniture is neat and clean, with white nylon antimacassars at the back of every seat, but threadbare, in places worn through. The television set is on a metal stand which was new in the fifties,

with a spider plant in a jelly jar on top. On the wall three ducks ascend in a diagonal across wood-grained plastic towards a picture I vaguely remember from my Sunday school classroom - Jesus surrounded by little children. The words underneath the picture are too small to read but I know what they say: *Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not; for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven.*

"How is Constance doing?" Mother asks.

"As well as can be expected," Helen says, and sighs. If only I can capture this on canvas - the magnificent ordinariness of it, the picture on the wall, Mother and Daddy on the sofa and Helen with the seam beneath her arm gaping like an intimation of death. Her dress is made of some shiny blue fabric and when she speaks, it catches the light and winks.

"Let me get you something to drink," she says. "It's a thirsty day out there."

"Are you sure it's not too much trouble?" Mother says.

Helen tuts at the idea and the two disappear into the kitchen. There is a clatter of glasses and cookie tins, and the hollow drum of water filling a metal kettle. The cupboard door opens and shuts and the refrigerator hums. Daddy fingers his pipe and pulls his cuff back ostentatiously to check his watch. I wander over to examine the books on a shelf near the door and overhear Mother. I wish you'd let me help out more, she says. There's a blur of words, then her voice again. What about the nursing costs? You'd be doing me a favor.

Helen sees me and gives me a tray to carry into the living room. She follows with a drink she's prepared, pink like cotton candy, which spills down the side of my glass when she pours. Mother passes pastel concoctions of

marshmallow and coconut, which I hate, but I take one to be polite, then tuck it half eaten into the fold of my napkin.

"Do you have your camera, Ginny?" Daddy says. "Maybe you could take a picture."

"If that's all right with you, Helen," Mother says.

"It's fine," she says, and putting her weight on the arms of the chair, she pushes herself to her feet. Erect, she has a dignity that reminds me of Artemisia in front of the easel, her face intent on her own affairs.

"See that camera, Helen?" Daddy says. "It was Virginia's high school graduation present. Cost me \$32.95 in 1961. And it's still working."

From the other room comes a high-pitched twitter like birds on a wire.

"That's Mother," Helen says.

"Shall we go straight in?" Mother asks.

"No, let Virginia take her photograph. Mother won't mind." She sits on the sofa while I hook up the flash and screw in a bulb, and when I say ready, she looks into the lens without smiling, straight at me. Beside her, Daddy cradles his pipe like an offering. Mother crosses her ankles and folds her hands in her lap. Their heads form a diagonal at odds with the flight of the ducks, Daddy's the highest, then Helen's, then Mother's at the end. They can be the three monkeys if I get the shot right, or the three kings bearing gifts. I can shift them around so the diagonals match or make the lines cross like an X to cancel them out. I can photocopy the photo, cut their faces, mix and match, do whatever I want. Behind me the sound comes again.

"Perhaps we should go in now," Mother says.

"You'll have to excuse me." Barbra looks around for her purse. "I need to powder my nose."

"First door on the right," Helen says.

I snap another picture as Helen stands, her bulk of flesh leaning into the floor. I snap again as she leads us down the hall. She must see the flash but her step doesn't falter. There's a sour smell which grows stronger when we enter the sickroom - a vase of flowers is rotting on the window sill.

"They're from a wedding last week," Helen says. "The couple was going away for their honeymoon and the minister asked if he could give them to a shut-in. Such a kind man." She smiles down at the corpse on the bed. Hair like black wire springs from its upper lip and from a mole just below the sharp bone of the cheek. Skin hangs slack like laundry on a drooping line. A tiny black nurse bends over.

"It's Miz Martha and Mr. Victor, come all the way from Richmond to see you. You remember Mr. Victor, don't you?" She pulls my father around into Constance's line of sight. A lipless mouth opens over a black hole and sounds emerge, incomprehensible as solar noise. "Give her your little finger, Mr. Dare. She likes something to hold on to." He puts out his thumb and the corpse grasps it firmly.

"Ou-u-ouch! Not so hard, Constance." Daddy mimics pain and the nurse laughs. I read the metal badge over her breast pocket - Sally Hemings, R.N. I think of the picture in the other room, the children gathered round, black, white, red and yellow. Does Sally know she shares a name with the slave girl said to be Thomas Jefferson's mistress? And if she knows, does she care?

"She likes the men," Sally says. "Always has, from what I hear."

Mother's face is grim - she doesn't approve of joking around where her father is concerned. Never mind that he was almost eighty when they married and she a sprig of sixty-two. Never mind that their marriage lasted only a year. They were husband and wife.

There's a titter, then a guttural croak. I close my ears against the sound - when she and Grandfather Lothrop were married, Constance's voice was as smooth and cool as water over stones. From the corner of my eye I see Barbra tiptoeing down the hall towards the living room. She glances back and gestures for silence, her finger across her lips. Chicken, I mouth, and she nods.

We stand around the bed and stare. Sally explains what she does and Mother asks a careful question or two. I edge back towards the door. I want to take a photograph but it seems ghoulish - and rude, like the tourist who seeks out the dirtiest house or the ugliest child for the slide show he'll give once he's back at home. But the patterns of light and dark are irresistible. As discreetly as possible I adjust for light and distance.

Helen notices. "Don't be shy," she says. "Take as many pictures as you like."

I shake my head. I don't want to disturb anyone.

"It's fine," Helen says. "She doesn't mind."

In the car Mother frowns. What was I thinking of to take a picture like that? Don't I have any manners?

I wanted something to remind me, I say. And something to remind Danielle and the boys. How else are they going to learn about their past?

She settles into her seat while Daddy fusses about the schedule, how we'd never be on time for anything if he wasn't there. I nod. Inside I'm planning a new tableau, the Jesus picture with Constance as the center. I'll prop her up in bed with rocks for pillows. Or should I make a family tree? The metal bedframe sprouts leaves and the sickroom becomes a tangled garden. Vines tumble from the jar on the windowsill, the carpet blooms. Mother and Daddy are by the bed/tree holding hands, as upright as the couple in American

Gothic but without the pitchfork or the house behind. Barbra is a flower, bright red with flashy petals.

And me? I cast around for an image to suit. Shall I be a lion? The picture above the altar at Ginter Park Church comes to mind. The young girl's hair waves down her back and joins with the lion's mane so imperceptibly that the join is hard to see. But the lion has the face of a man so that won't do for me. Shall I be the bird in the window or the butterfly or the fawn still wearing its spots? I run the catalogue of possibilities through my mind. I want a true portrait, something with a backbone, with the sort of unbreakable strength which needs no display.

I think of Velasquez, and his portraits of Spanish court life. When John and I saw "The Maids of Honor" in Madrid, he couldn't understand why it fascinated me. Just look, I said. He shrugged. What's so special? I smiled. It's the indirection, John. The center isn't what you think it is. Not the little girl in the silly dress, you mean? No, and not the attendants either, although the picture is named for them. And not Velasquez, although you can't ignore him, staring out of the canvas the way he does. John put his hands behind his back, a bored expression on his face. Okay, so tell me, he said. I smiled. Do you see what Velasquez is painting? He tightened his mouth and sighed: How can I, the easel is facing the other way. Don't get cross, I said. Look on the wall behind him, at the mirror. I know it isn't clear, but if you look hard, you can see two figures. He nodded. Yes, I see them. That's the king and queen. They are the center of the picture even though they aren't in it. Isn't that brilliant? It's like Velasquez was saying that they were too important to be seen by ordinary people, but that it didn't matter, the world revolved around them all the same. So? he said, and walked away.

I think of the painting again. Tight against the rear wall, silhouetted by the light, a courtier is pulling back a curtain. He sees what the observer cannot. And now I remember something else. The courtier is laughing.

Outside Christiansburg we drive through the gates of Sunset View Cemetery. "Talk about originality," I say. Barbra shrugs, a gesture which I accept as sufficient although the meaning isn't clear - is it a "what more can you expect from people who live here" shrug or a "who gives a damn?"

Mother gets out of the car, smoothes out her skirt and adjusts her blouse, checks to make sure she has her handbag, her handkerchief, a spare roll of film. Beside the drive is a marker with the name DARE carved in large block letters. Plaques laid flush on the ground name those present: Grandmother Dora and Granddaddy Luke, Great Aunt Florence whose husband ran off to Montana, cousin Harvey who died when he was young. Mother paces out an unbroken patch of grass the length and width of two bodies.

"This is where your father and I will be buried," she says. "It's a nice spot, don't you think? Sunny. And there's excellent drainage here on the slope." She rubs her foot back and forth over the grass.

"It's bluegrass," Daddy says, and they laugh.

I shade my eyes and look out towards the town below, a tidy collection of bricks and pavement and parked cars. A familiar golden arch rises near the stubby-topped Methodist Church which Grandmother and Grandfather Lothrop attended. Apartments and office towers crowd the sky. Daddy lights his pipe and the smell of tobacco and warm wood circles up.

"Can you believe it," he says. "When my father bought this plot he complained about the cost - \$120 up front, on the barrel. He said it was highway robbery. I'd say we got our money's worth."

Mother laughs. "Like Ginny's camera?"

"I told you I found the receipt?"

"Yes, Daddy."

"And that it came from McCutcheon's?"

"Okay, don't keep rubbing it in."

He chuckles. "I can't have my daughter thinking she's right all the time."

"Certainly not," Mother says.

I step forward and touch the gravestone. It is made of granite, plain and unadorned, the letters roughly carved, the kind of marker which yesterday I would have chosen without a second thought, even though secretly I might have wanted angels weeping and verses lamenting and fingers pointing to the sky. Now the single word of challenge is enough. I raise the camera and move forward until the word is all I see. I move closer still, so that the grain of the stone is sharp. Daddy pulls me up.

"Come on, that's enough," he says.

He and I start across the grass and up the hill towards the Lothrop plot. His skin is powdery soft, like the crepe petal of a poppy. And loose. It moves beneath my fingers and I'm afraid that, if I hold too hard, it will tear like a paper bag with groceries which leak.

Mother and Barbra are at the crest of the hill, staring at a stone which looks identical to the one below. Mother's arms are akimbo and she is frowning down at the weeds around the base.

"You'll have to speak to whomever's in charge, Victor. Papa paid for perpetual maintenance."

Her father's name is there on the left side of the stone, the deeply chiseled dates of birth and death showing signs of age already. Charles Wesley

Lothrop, 1878 - 1961. I see him at the dining room table, arms wide, a gold chain bisecting an expanse of navy serge. He pulls the watch from his vest pocket, clicks open the cover. As late as all that? On the right-hand side of the stone the letters are smaller. Agnes Martin Lothrop, 1875-1956. Her funeral was in the church down the hill. I wore a sleeveless black dress which we bought for the occasion, with a matching jacket which Mother made me wear despite the blistering heat. I sat in the front row pew and counted the letters on the stained glass over the altar, determined not to cry - since Grandmother Dora was my favorite grandmother, to cry for Grandmother Lothrop seemed disloyal, like a public play for sympathy which she had failed to earn.

I stare at her name and at the wavy line which separates it from his. It was 1956 when she died. I was almost thirteen. Did he have his name carved beside hers then, with his year of birth and a dash? It's easy to believe - the Lothrops are thrifty souls who plan ahead: Mother made me wear the dress all the next year, in spite of the sweat stains under the arms.

"There's room here for you if you want it, Ginny," she says. "Room for John and the children, too. Papa bought a double plot."

I laugh. Barbra is staring at the marker with a petulant expression. She checks her watch, takes a step down the hill, taps her foot ostentatiously. From the road below comes the sound of bicycles - two young girls are pedalling along the gravel road, ringing the bells on their bikes and shouting back and forth. They speed past Grandmother Dora and Granddaddy Luke, around to the cemetery office which serves as a chapel, stones kicking up from their wheels.

"Was I ever that young?" I ask.

Mother doesn't hear me. Or in any case she doesn't answer.

"Time for a photo," I say.

"No, this is too much," Barbra says.

"But the view is so nice. And I want to use the timer."

"Do you know how it works?" Daddy asks.

"Be sure you get the focus right," Mother says.

She and Daddy move into place while I set the camera on the top of a gravestone and kneel to adjust the view. Grimly Barbra turns to face the camera. The angle I choose cuts off the names and shows only the top of the stone, left rough-hewn to display the quality of the rock, with their hands resting on it.

"Smile, Barbra," I say.

"No, I won't smile," she answers. "It's a farce."

"At least try to look pleasant," I insist.

I set the time release and hurry into the spot I've left for myself, on the opposite side of the stone. I strike a pose there with my hand on hip and my elbow jutting out, and just in time the camera flashes.

On the way down the hill Mother takes my arm. "Do you remember the project you did in grade eight?"

"The one on Richmond houses?"

She nods. "I found it in the attic the other day. If you remind me, I'll give it to you before you leave."

"I can't believe the stuff you've saved, Mother."

"I grew up in the Depression."

"Even so."

She shrugs. "You got an A+."

"I didn't deserve it."

"Why not? It was a good project. I was quite proud."

"It was just a collection of stuff from a book."

"No, you worked hard."

"You did, maybe."

She opens the car door. "I don't care. Do what you want with it. It's nothing to me."

I climb into the back next to Barbra. Her eyes are closed, her chin sagging on her chest. She's asleep, or pretending to be. Daddy reverses with a jerk and turns the radio back on, the volume up high, but her eyelids never flicker.

An hour later, when we turn off the river road onto the mile-long driveway which leads to the farm, she stirs.

"Do you mind?" she says. She brushes her hair in the rear view mirror and pins it up on one side to display her profile, outlines her lips and, with a lipstick brush, paints them far too bright a red.

A cloud of dust rises behind us. In front, the road is clear. I fluff my hair and hold my breath. In a moment the road will dip to the creek. We'll cross the little bridge, turn the corner and start up the hill. I prepare myself to see the house again. It is bound to be smaller, and the outbuildings will be gone - the icehouse, the woodshed, the little barn with the ladyfinger vine. The barn cats I never could catch will be asleep in the sun and the garden will only be a suburban lot. But what else will have changed?

At the creek there's a cattle guard I'd forgotten which rattles and bounces as we cross. We turn the corner and there it is, the white-frame house where my father was born, and his father, and his, looking exactly the same as it always did. The boxwoods are not a leaf taller. The walnut trees still tower over the wobbly picket fence. But halfway up the hill, there is a neatly painted sign. The ornate letters, shaded to make them appear three-

dimensional, scroll across a creamy board. From the bottom left a tree rises up, its branches shading the single word. Eden.

"Oh, my God," Barbra says, and laughs.

"It's not funny," Mother says. "In fact, I think it's in very poor taste."

"It's better than Buena Vista," I say. "Or Bellevue."

"It never needed a name before."

Daddy bites down on the stem of his pipe and pats his pocket to find his lighter. Up ahead Carter is standing by the gate, his hands clasped behind his back. When he see us he salutes, a small tip of forefinger to forehead, and gestures towards a gravelled parking spot.

"It's about time," he says through the window in the same mock country accent that Daddy uses to sound humble. He is wearing chinos and an open-necked denim shirt that makes his eyes look bluer than ever. "I thought you folks'd never get here." He shakes Daddy's hand, then bends down to look into the back seat. "Barbra, you get out of that car and lemme take a look at you. You, too, little Ginny."

He opens Mother's door and gives her a bear hug. He kisses me on both cheeks - "Montreal style," he says, as if telling me something I don't know. Then he turns to Barbra and, holding her at arm's length, looks her square in the face. "My, my, if you aren't a sight for sore eyes." He pulls her towards him and kisses her once, twice. "In France they do it three times," he says and pulls her towards him for a real kiss.

Mother clears her throat. Daddy blows a cloud of smoke and blusters out a story about heavy traffic and women who won't be pushed around.

"Quite right, why should we?" Mother says.

Daddy snorts. "See what I have to live with?"

"I surely do," Carter says, and winks. He hooks his arm through Mother's. "Come on, Aunt Martha, let's you and me start on inside." Under the cover of the raised trunk, Daddy tells Barbra not to worry, Carter has been married and divorced three times, so even if he gets a bit enthusiastic, it doesn't mean anything.

"Too bad," Barbra says. She brushes through the gate and across the grass. Carter and Mother have stopped under a walnut tree. He has his arm around her shoulders and Mother is laughing and looking up at him with her head tilted back. He points towards the icehouse, and she reddens.

"Oh, get away with you," she says. "I did no such thing."

"No such thing as what?" Barbra asks.

"Never you mind," Mother says.

Barbra closes her eyes. "Can you hear it?" she says.

"Hear what?" Carter asks.

"The sound of peas hitting the bottom of a metal bowl. I remember a hundred times sitting here with Grandmother Dora and Aunt Florence, listening to that."

"I remember going barefoot," I say. "I could walk on anything then."

"You're not as tough now?" Carter asks.

"Tougher in some spots," I say. "Softer in others."

He laughs and takes Mother's arm. "Come on, let's get you people settled."

We start towards the house, across grass which is as soft and green as always. In the front hall the familiar cranberry lamp is hanging above the horsehair sofa. On the table freshly cut peonies spill out of a painted vase.

"D'ya remember?" Carter says. "Grandmother Dora always had them there."

"Of course." Barbra's face is pink. "And the glads came after."

"I hate gladiola - they remind me of funerals," Mother says. I see Carter make a mental note - no gladiola for Aunt Martha, unless and until. "But I'm happy to see the vase. Aunt Florence painted it. The Peaks of Otter."

"No, that's Aunt Virginia's vase," Daddy says.

"Are you sure?"

"As shootin'," he says. He nudges Carter in the ribs. "Gotta keep these women to the truth, otherwise there's no telling what they'll try."

"I'll keep that in mind," Carter says, and laughs, a bit awkwardly it seems to me. He starts up the stairs and Barbra and I follow, into the bedroom which we have always shared. Everything here is the same, too - the brass beds, the rose trellis wallpaper, the hooked rug, the picture of the horses over the mantel.

"I'll leave you to freshen up," he says.

"And then what?" I ask. "The grand tour?"

"That's it - the Eden special," he says, and winks.

Barbra digs her make-up bag out of her suitcase and disappears across the hall. I wander over to the window, picking up the bits and pieces I loved: the cut glass dish with the silver lid, the stereopticon, the matching brush and manicure set. I press my nose against the window. In the pasture closest to the house, the poplar tree which marked the limits of my world is still alive, but only barely. A crow perched on a branch at the top is preening in the sun. Beyond him the New River glints. I look again. Beyond the river there's a gouge in the earth. Where a forest used to be there are bare timbers, the frames of houses. I push up the window. A bulldozer is backing up, the warning beeps echoing between the hills. Trucks are hauling dirt and dumping stones. I shut my eyes. Why here?

The scent of roses drifts into the room and the sound of a door slamming. A woman with a basket over her arm is crossing the grass to Grandmother Dora's rose garden.

"Lovely afternoon," I call down.

"Sure is." She stops and pushes back her hat.

"I'm Virginia Paige. Carter's cousin."

"The one from Canada?" She's about my age, a handsome black-skinned woman with sleeked-back hair. "I'm Mr. Carter's housekeeper. There's anything you're missing, you let me know."

"Thank you, I will." A cat comes strolling around the corner and the crow on the poplar tree takes off, his wings slapping the air. "I'm sorry, I didn't get your name."

"Clio, ma'am. Clio Walker."

"Ma'am - goodness me. I don't hear that very often."

"Maybe not up north." She laughs. "Where're you from, if you don't mind my asking."

"I'm *from* Virginia. I live in Quebec."

"They speak French there, Mr. Carter says."

"Yes, most do."

She clips a deadhead and drops it in the basket. "It's been awhile since you've been here?"

"It doesn't feel like it - the place looks just like I remember. Almost like home, in fact."

"Mr. Carter'll be happy to hear that."

"You look after him, do you?" She clips again.

"You could say so."

Behind me a floorboard creaks - Barbra is back. I pull in my head. "Did you see the houses?"

"How could I help it?"

"Carter must be devastated."

"I'm sure he is." She has removed her make-up, or else redone it to make it look as if she has. Her hair is pulled back and fastened with a ribbon. Her arms are bare, with a hint of a tan, and her shirt is knotted like a teenage girl's, to show off a midriff disgustingly thin. She stretches, ready for a beach blanket bingo or for Gidget in the country, looking half of her age.

I nod at her bare middle. "Isn't that a bit obvious?"

She shrugs. "It's hot."

She begins to wander around the room like I did, examining familiar objects for signs of change. Over the mantle the horses race in the wind, straining forever to reach some point just out of sight. Mother sticks her head through the door. She and Daddy are ready, she says, and we shouldn't be much longer - Carter is waiting outside in the jeep.

"You worried he'll leave without us?" Barbra says.

"The light will be fading before long."

"Don't worry, Mother, it'll last," I say.

She looks at Barbra's shorts and knotted shirt, then back at me. "Did you see the subdivision going up?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Your father used to hay those fields."

"The land was Granddaddy's?" Barbra's hand stops mid-air.

Mother nods. "Carter'll take us to see the model home tomorrow if we want. It's almost finished."

"Is he the developer?" she asks.

"I think so."

I laugh. "And here I was feeling sorry for him."

"I wouldn't worry if I were you," Mother says. "Carter knows which side is up."

We drive alongside a stream which barely blinks in the sunlight, the water is so low. There's a muskrat Carter calls Sally who lives under the bank and comes out most afternoons to chew willow shoots. We stop to let her show herself but she isn't cooperating, although a red squirrel on a nearby branch chatters at being disturbed. We climb a hill through a field of milkweed to a halt at the top where he points out the new houses. He's calling the development Paradise West, and the lots are selling well. Yes, it's too bad about breaking up the property but he has to eat and besides, he always wanted to build houses.

"Do you have no shame?" Barbra asks.

"It depends." He chuckles and lets out the clutch. He has converted the old chickenhouse to a nursery and greenhouse. Would we like to see? We would. He drives up the hill and parks. As we walk along the aisles he names the plants, mentions the endangered species he hopes to naturalize. He wants the farm to be a showplace like it was when we were children, only better.

Back in the jeep Mother sits in the front and Daddy moves into the back between Barbra and me. We slow down at the foundations of the first house on the property. Ananias Dare built it before the Revolution, Carter says.

"Not that it was much. Just two small rooms and a loft above. But big enough for a wife and family."

"His son built the second one," Mother says. "His grandson added on and changed the front to look like it does now."

Daddy points to a hill across the way. "That's how your father and I went to school, Carter," he says. "With one horse for the three of us, Paul in front because he was smallest, Mother in the middle and me at the tail. Every gate we came to, I had to slide off and hold it open, then climb the rails to get back on. It worked fine as long as the horse stood still."

"And when it didn't?"

He rubs his rear. "The ground is mighty hard when it freezes."

Mother laughs. "It's stories like that, girls, that never get passed on the way they should. Just imagine the tales Ananias could tell. But we don't know anything about him."

"Except that he built the house," I say.

"We know more about the house than about him," Carter says. "We've got letters and records that go back to a survey done just after the Revolution. It is next to the site of the old Dare's Mill."

"His son abandoned it after he died," Mother says. "That was in 1782."

"So you know two things," I say.

Mother cocks her head and considers. "Yes, and I'm trying to think what else. I know the name of his wife and his children, the dates of their births and deaths, a bit about the property they owned - it's all in the book if you take the time to look. But before him there's a gap." She turns to Carter. "That's what I'm trying to fill in. There's an Ananias Dare who was born in Richmond in 1701 who was the grandson of Thomas Dare who was one of the early settlers at Jamestown. I'm hoping the two Ananiases are the same person."

"It would make sense," he says.

"What happened to the mill?" Barbra asks.

"It was where the icehouse is now," Carter says. He looks at Mother pointedly.

"Don't you start on that again," she says, and blushes.

He laughs and starts the engine. He may not always be reliable, but he remembers what he remembers; and on the day he saw her coming out of there, she looked like a cat in cream.

"I told you, not another word," Mother says.

Daddy's face goes crooked, as if Carter's joshing and Mother's red-faced denial remind him of some long suppressed memory. The couple in the garden flash into my mind. I know it wasn't Daddy that I saw. Was it Mother? I try to recall the moment, to see it again: the hallway at the camp, the grit on the floor, the moon going in and out of the clouds. The memory is there but it isn't itself anymore, it is overlaid with other moments, the dozens of times that I've called the scene to mind in the intervening years. Is it the same with Carter? He must have seen something, but what? Or is it simply his style to hint at wrong-doing?

Carter points across a fence. He was planning to plant alfalfa in that field next year; what does Victor think? Daddy straightens his face and nods. It might do fine, but Carter had better watch out, drainage was a problem.

And then we are beyond the poplar and into the forbidden woods. Carter hopes to show us a family of wild turkeys but they are shy and run at the slightest sound. Probably we will see deer - there are lots of those and the numbers are climbing. Mother shakes her head.

"The deer will take over if you don't watch out."

"I know what I'm doing," Carter says.

Which seems to be true. The woods are magnificent, silver-gray tree trunks towering over a forest floor dappled with sharply slanted light. We

park near a stream where the water ripples over stones. In front of us is a forest glade straight from Watteau, a vista of trees and shadows lacking only the nymph on the grass or the mythological figures departing for Cythera to be perfect. There are no dead limbs, no untidy underbrush, no signs of wildness. Only a squared-off stump shows the work that Carter has done.

Barbra coughs theatrically - she has to call attention to herself somehow. Carter holds up his hand. A doe is coming out from the trees. She lifts her head and stares in our direction, then continues towards the water. Her coat is silky, her legs firm and she moves with a grace which takes my breath away. She bends to drink and her neck forms a perfect arc. Ripples radiating from the tip of her nose catch the light and send it back to us, magnified. I sketch the scene in my mind, the deer, the stream, the trees; I erase a line and sketch again. Shall I put bodies on the bank - say, a shepherd and a woman in peasant clothes? No, too predictable. Carter's neck is a line at the edge of my field of vision. A businessman and a nymph? I change the angle so it mirrors the doe's legs, add the edge of the sketch pad, my fingers holding the pencil. The deer continues to drink. Does she feel us watching? I sketch her again, sketch Mother with her hand pressed to her cheek, Barbra with her mouth agape. They are objects waiting to be brought to life, and I am the one to do it.

I concentrate on Carter. He is intent on the scene which he thinks to be his, his arm stretched across the back of the seat, his index finger pointing at me like Adam's points to God on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. I focus on a spot by the edge of his nail and send the command towards him: move. He blinks. I send the command again. He shifts in his seat. His finger twitches. Mother coughs, Barbra sniffs, Daddy rubs his hand against his side. The deer

looks up, her ears pricked. She knows we are watching but she isn't afraid. Calmly she walks out of the water and into the trees.

"That was some show," Daddy says.

Carter smiles. Deer often come this time of day, sometimes two or three at a time. She's glad there was only one, Barbra says. More would be overkill.

"Do you think so?" I put my hand on Carter's arm. "I'd like a pair tomorrow, please. What time shall I be here?"

"What time do you want them?" Carter grins at me over his shoulder and the sketch comes clear. I'll make Carter a hunter in satyr's clothes. The deer will be me. Our legs will be spread and firmly rooted at the base, to form a triangle. And there I'll be again, at the apex, a goddess sitting cross-legged on a pink-tinged cloud, pulling the strings.

Carter is in the sunporch with a glass in his hand when we come down for dinner. He rises in a single move.

"What can I do you for?" he says. He's dressed in a loose white shirt and khaki trousers belted high. From a distance he smells like scotch, a smoky single malt like Laophraig which burns on your tongue.

"I don't mind," Barbra says in the breathy voice of a little girl. "Maybe a white wine?"

"White wine, it is. And you, Virginia?"

"I'll have Scotch," I say. "With a touch of water."

He laughs. "Is that how they drink it up your way?"

"When in Rome," I say.

"But we're in Eden."

I nod at his glass. "Does that make you the snake?"

"Oh, no," he says. "No snakes here."

"I saw a barn cat slinking around."

"Not the same thing at all. And that's no barn cat, that's Miss Lily. She's a real menace. Anything that moves, she's onto it."

"Do you remember the barn cats, Ginny? Every summer Mother promised that if you caught one, you could keep it." Barbra is lisping slightly and holding herself in a way which makes her impossible to ignore.

"Smart woman, Aunt Martha," Carter says. "She knew you never would."

"Never would what?" Mother asks. She comes in holding Daddy's arm.

"Catch a barn cat," Carter says. "Barbra was just saying how you told Virginia that if she could catch one, she could keep it."

"Did I?" Mother says. "I don't remember."

"We always had barn cats," Daddy says. "And dogs." He begins a tale about Soldier, the dog his grandfather acquired on his way home from Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg, who fought a running battle ever after with the mutt on the farm to the north. Mid-way through, Clio announces dinner.

Carter seats Mother on his right in the place of honor, Daddy at the end with his back to the wall.

"I'll sit here, shall I?" Barbra sways around the table to take the seat on Carter's left and all at once it hits me - she's Marilyn Monroe, soft curves and simulated innocence. But the part is wrong for the occasion. And for her - she's too bony, too hard, too knowing.

Over soup Carter questions Mother about her genealogical research. It's Clio we'll have to thank if we find Ananias Dare's gravestone, he says. She's the one who knew where the family graveyard was - her great-grandfather Henry showed her before he died.

"*Uncle Henry?*" Daddy asks.

Carter nods. "That's the one."

"Well, I'll be darned," he says. "Uncle Henry. I don't believe it."

Clio comes in to clear the soup bowls and he puts out his hand. "Now, just hold on," he says. "Carter here says you're Uncle Henry's kin."

"His great-granddaughter."

"Well, if that's not the darndest." He shakes his head. "Let me tell you something about him I bet you don't know." He begins the story which left John reeling the first time he heard it.

"If I was good enough to whop Miz Dora, I'm good enough to whop you." At the punchline, Clio interrupts and punches Daddy lightly on the shoulder.

"You've heard it?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Dare. That I have."

"And am I telling it right?"

"I couldn't say for sure. But you're telling it the same."

"Now, Clio. You don't mean I'm repeating myself, do you?" He furrows his brows and purses his lips. She shouldn't make fun of him, he says in his country voice. He's an old man; but she'll be old too one of these days and when she is, she'll start repeating herself, just wait and see. She picks up his bowl. That's as may be. If she does, she hopes the stories are true.

Daddy protests. *It is true*, he's heard the story all his life and why should anyone make it up? Mother pats the corner of her mouth. Some things bear repeating, she says. Uncle Henry made sure that his descendants knew where the graveyard was and it's a good thing he did, because tomorrow, if we're lucky, we'll find Ananias's grave and then we'll know exactly when he was born and where, and whether he's the man we're looking for. Carter nods. Families don't do enough of that anymore. He's as guilty as the next man. Why, how many years has it been since he's seen Barbra or me? He smiles the length of the table and I smile back. I feel easy, like I'm at home. He came up

to Canada for a fishing trip once, had a wonderful time, he says. But lately he's been reading some sad news. What do I think? Is Quebec going to secede?

"It isn't secession, it's separation," I say.

He takes a bite of Smithfield ham. Words hide a multitude of sins but he can't see the difference.

"It sounds to me like somebody's playing fast and loose with the truth," Mother says.

"They should say what they mean, and mean what they say. Isn't that right, Aunt Martha?"

Mother nods. That's it exactly. People should make their word their bond. They should think long and hard before they make a promise. If they did, the world would be a better place. Carter shakes his head. He'd be happy if he could only get Eden looking the way he remembers. Grandmother Dora's rose garden, for instance. He's been working on it all winter, but some of the old varieties are hard to find. He's heard there's a good nursery just outside New York. Does Barbra think a visit would be worth his while?

"Only if you come see my play," she says. "And stop in afterwards for a good, long visit." She bats her eyelashes and Carter laughs.

"What's so funny?" Mother looks up from her plate.

"Your daughters, Aunt Martha. They're almost as irresistible as you." He pats her hand and she tuts and says she doesn't know what the world is coming to, didn't anyone teach him not to make fun of people; and he chuckles and says not to worry, he isn't making fun, he's as serious as he can be. Daddy slaps his thigh. He'd better watch out then, because for all her high falutin' there's never been one like Mother.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she says.

We're leaning back in our chairs now with that sort of companionable fullness that comes after a good meal. We talk about plans for tomorrow. The graveyard is not far, just down Mud Pike past the grist mill and out the old Rough Road. Carter rolls the names in his mouth to give them the full weight of their history, and I smile with him at the taste. Yes, this *could* be home. It might take a while but I could fit in, I could live here, learn to paint, make something out of myself. He reaches behind him for a box, opens it to reveal a stash of unfiltered cigarettes. Wordlessly, with a raised eyebrow, he asks if anyone will join him. Daddy pats his pipe.

"No, it's time for your beauty sleep," Mother says.

Carter pulls out her chair; while he walks them to the door, I reach into the box. Trust Carter - the cigarettes are Gaulois. I roll one between my fingers and hold it under my nose. The smell is tempting. And familiar. I think of the café on St. Denis. I think of the bedroom with the narrow iron frame bed, scarcely wide enough for two. Are you sure you want to be doing this, he said when I slipped my hand inside his shirt. His skin was luscious. We were lying so close, scarcely touching at first. If only he had locked the door! His fingers would have started to move, back and forth, so gently I could have thought it was my imagination, then more strongly, stroking my body in places I didn't even know, over and over, until I was wild, sucking, my hair in his face, his tongue flicking until all of my breath disappeared, not able even to moan.

I have the chance now. I dampen the tip between my lips and taste the sting. I examine the tip. In a minute Carter will come back to the table; but before he sits down, if I look up with the cigarette poised, he will step towards me. Then, if I rest my fingers on his hand to steady the light, he will know. Or I can light it myself. I examine the tip and remember how I felt in the

mornings after John left, the sense of exhilaration that told me I could do as I chose.

I strike the match. The cigarette burns my throat, but I ignore the taste and inhale again. Carter is near the door, his hand on Mother's elbow. When he leans down to kiss her cheek, I catch his eye. Does he blink? Daddy says something about leaving the young people on their own and Mother clicks her tongue.

"Oh get on with you, Victor," she says, and takes his arm.

I refill my wine glass. My face is growing flushed, I can feel the warmth of it, and I know I look good when I'm flushed. The cigarette is tasting better the more I smoke and I'm feeling easier now, more loose in my skin. More like I used to be. At home.

"Damn it, I love family," Carter says. "Young people! Can you believe it?"

I moisten my lips and laugh.

He rests his hand on my shoulder and reaches over for a match. I cover his hand with my own. I press down to make him feel the shape of me, the round of my shoulder which fits the hollow of his palm, the dip by the collarbone.

"I can't believe how good it feels," I say, and laugh again.

Barbra looks around sharply. She holds up her glass to the light, so that her head presents Carter with the perfect profile, full lips, a Marilyn pout. "Some things improve with age," she says. "They become smoother. More subtle."

Subtle? Who does she think she's fooling?

Carter moves around the table to Mother's seat, midway between us. He taps his cigarette on the table and lights it with one eye half closed. "What I like is how things stay the same. For them we're children. We always will be."

"Do you think so?" I say, looking over with eyes half closed. I brush my hair into my face.

"Families don't change," Barbra says. "Mothers and fathers and sisters and husbands - they are always there, whether you want them or not."

"I don't feel like a child."

"You don't look like one, either," Barbra says.

Carter laughs. "We had lots of good times here," he says.

"Like when Ginny stole the cigarettes and blamed me when she was caught?" Barbra says.

"That's not how I remember it," I say.

"It's how it was."

"You think so?" I turn to Carter. "Don't worry, I sin quite happily now. And even take the blame if I need to."

"And here I thought you were perfect," he says.

"Far from it," I say. "And don't tell me that you're disappointed,"

I reach across the table and touch his hand, taking the chance while I dare. Because I'm not a sixth-grader anymore, convinced a boy loves her because he twists her arm. I'm not a gullible virgin who accepts protestations of love as the gospel truth. And this isn't about love.

Barbra pushes back in her chair. So what if she's beautiful?

"Are you off?" I say.

"Not just yet." She stands and her skirt brushes Carter's legs. "What's this?" She picks an invisible something from his arm.

"May I have a light?" Carter meets my eyes and the tingle in my stomach spreads up and out. His hands are large. The nails are blunt and on the index finger there's a piece of broken skin. How will it feel? Will it scrape and leave a mark?

By the window Barbra turns. "I was just wondering, Carter. Did you ever think of calling the development East of Eden?"

"There's this minor problem - did you notice where the sun set? But I did consider Paradise Lost."

"You were afraid people might get the wrong idea?" I ask.

"No, I wasn't afraid," he says. He rubs his thumb along the edge of his mouth. "Do you remember my first wife?"

I hesitate. Why in the world is he bringing up this? "Not really."

"She divorced me, I suppose you remember that. It was a minor indiscretion, not even worth calling home about, I said, didn't mean a thing. She didn't see it that way."

Barbra's laugh tinkles across the room. "That sounds like Mary."

"Yes, it does," Carter says.

"I remember the second one," Barbra says. "A tall, bony thing with straight brown hair."

"Libby."

"Short for Liberty, was it?"

"No, for Elizabeth, as you know perfectly well. But she took her share."

"Why not?" I say. "Sauce for the goose and all that."

"No, Mary was right." Carter drains his glass. "It's no good wondering what your husband's up to. Or your wife either."

My face stings like it's been slapped. He's turning me down. Flat. There's a silence and I see Barbra hiding a smile. This is mortifying. How can

I escape without making a fool of myself? Or a bigger fool than I already have?

I see myself on the iron frame bed, light coming in from the street, the door opening and that girl standing there, so thin that her shadow barely shows on the wall. Thank God she didn't watch while I dressed. And the next day, seeing him in class. No, it's all right, he said; she wasn't angry, I explained. I didn't ask what he said, I could imagine easily enough. Did they laugh? As long as he didn't feel pity.

By the window Barbra turns. "I think I'll get a breath of air. Take a look at the stars. Maybe catch a lightning bug or two. They're flashing their little hearts out, it's quite something."

"It's the season," Carter says. "Do you mind if I join you?"

"What about you, Ginny?"

Trust Barbra to rub it in. "If you'll excuse me, I'm off," I say. "It's been a long day."

I stagger the tiniest bit, so that tomorrow I can brush this off with a joke - have to watch the wine, I'll say. I start down the hall. There's a noise in the kitchen. Shall I stop? If I thank Clio for dinner, maybe we'll get to talking. I can ask her what it's like to live here where her great-grandfather lived, knowing everything about everyone, the marriages and divorces, who is pregnant, who beats his wife after church, who can be trusted never to tell. I can tell her how it sounds pretty familiar, that living in one village is much like living in another, that the details don't matter, only the friends you have at the end of the day.

"Clio?" I push my head through the door. There's a glow coming from the clock on the stove but the room is empty, the counters bare. I listen to the dishwasher rumble. Okay, so Clio is gone, I can't use her to talk myself around,

I'll have to do it on my own. I bit my lip and grope my way up the stairs, the dishwasher growing fainter behind me. In the bedroom I throw my clothes onto the floor and search in the dark for the nightgown I shoved under the pillow. First John, now Carter. What is left? From the room next door comes the sound of Mother and Daddy snoring, and the regularity of their noise makes me angry. What right do they have to be happily side by side when I am here alone?

I slip under the sheets, cold and rough, as if they've been blown dry on a stormy day. Over the mantle the horses are galloping in the rain. Through the window comes the bitter scent of roses and marigolds, and I see Grandmother Dora in the garden, her hands full of tiny black seeds.

"Remember," she says. "A seed is good for nothing unless you prepare the soil to receive it." She draws a furrow in the dirt, puts the seeds in my hand and watches, her head tilted, as I sprinkle them in a line and tamp down the earth. She pushes back the hat she is wearing - southern ladies never coarsen their skin with sun, she says - and inspects me, head to toe. I am ten or eleven and already thinking of boys.

I pull the covers up higher. You'll be fine, Mother said when I became pregnant - don't worry, we Lothrop women have easy births. And she was right. I wish all my patients were as easy, the doctor said - no mess, no fuss, just a straightforward delivery without all the screaming some women think they have to do. John smiled. Not my wife, he said. You'd never find her acting like that.

The bed beside me sags and a thin little body climbs in next to mine. Mummy, it says in a whisper, and I smile. What's wrong, Danielle, can't you sleep? Nails scratch against my back. They are sharp, filed to a point. Tell me

a story, I need a story. And then you'll go to sleep? She nods and I pull her close.

Once upon a time, I say, there was a little girl named Ginger. One day she was playing in her parents' bedroom, hanging upside down with her legs around the post of her mother's bed. It was time for her to be in bed and she was wearing a white nightgown with tiny polka dots so dark they looked like holes in velvet snow.

"Get down from there, you'll hurt yourself," her mother warned.

Ginger let herself swing down until her fingers brushed the grooves in the floor. Upside down, she saw her mother pat her upswept hair. She crossed her eyes and waited to be told to uncross them, that they would get stuck if she didn't.

In the mirror her mother bit her lips to make them rosy. She turned her head and adjusted the mirror to bring her profile more sharply into view. And that's when Ginger fell.

Blood from the cut in her head dripped onto the nightgown her Grandmother Lothrop had sent as a birthday present and stained it so badly that her mother gave it to the farmgirl to use as a rag. In the photographs they took the following week, her curls stood up in shock from the bandage wrapped around her head, which covered one eye like a pirate's patch. Afterwards, whenever she did something foolish or forgot what she was supposed to know, her father teased her and said it was no wonder, her brains had come out when she fell, he had the photos to prove it.

There is a scar on the back of Ginger's head where hair refused to grow. During tests at school, when she tried to remember an answer, she rubbed it gently, and sometimes it helped.

The child's fingers push through her mother's hair. "Where is it?" she demands. "I can't feel it. Has it gone now? Is it well?"

"No, it's still there," her mother says. "You have to keep searching."

The child's fingers scrape. "Don't stop, tell me another."

"And then you'll go to sleep?"

"I'll try," she says, and closes her eyes.

Up the street from where Ginger lived there was a Baptist church. Her friend Larry was the minister's son. One day when she was young, he threw a rock which hit her in the head, barely missing her eye.

His mother apologized profusely. He hadn't meant to do it, she said. Politely Ginger's mother asked how anyone could pick up a rock and throw it at someone without meaning to, particularly when that someone was a little girl who never hurt a soul.

"He might have put her eye out," she said.

Something must have provoked him, the other one said. What were the two of them doing?

Ginger's mother raised her chin and sniffed. "Perhaps Larry should stay at home for a while," she said.

The other woman nodded. Yes, that probably would be wise.

When her mother told her, Ginger was desolate. Who was she to play with if Larry couldn't come?

"Play by yourself," her Mother said. "It will do you good." Ginger sniffled and swallowed hard. "Now, go and wash your face," she said. "Oh, and Virginia" - she was browning meat on the stove at the time and the sound of the metal spoon scraping against the metal pot stopped for an instant - "what

were you and Larry doing? Generally he is such a nice boy." Ginger didn't answer. "Did you say something? Boys don't throw rocks for no reason."

"I told you," Ginger said. "We were playing."

The spoon began to stir. "Well, no matter," the mother said. "Whatever it was, you've said it now."

I still can't sleep.

Close your eyes. Keep very, very still. Before you know it you'll be asleep.

Do you promise?

Ginger was at the piano in the basement of her Grandfather Lothrop's house, spinning the stool with her toes. She must have been ten or so at the time because it was the middle of the Korean War. Most days on the way to school, she and her friend Missy had to wait before crossing Chamberlayne Avenue to let the convoys pass. They stood at the light and sang the marine hymn as loud as they could but the men never heard - the noise of the trucks drowned out their voices. So she never knew what a caisson was and what it looked like rolling along.

Perhaps it was the metal on the base of the stool that made her think of the idea. Perhaps it was the spinning, which reminded her of the globe in her grandfather's office upstairs. (She wasn't allowed to touch it.) Whatever it was, the idea she had was this: if everyone lived in one country, there would be no more war. She rushed upstairs to where her parents sat visiting with relatives. Aunt Catherine was speaking in a very loud voice and, excited as she was, Ginger didn't wait for her aunt to finish.

"Make the United Nations the government for the world," she said. "Then everyone will be the same and the war will stop." Uncle Harold screwed around in his chair to face her. "It's like a family," she said. "People in the same country don't fight each other because they have the same home. So if there was only one..."

"What in the name of heaven have you been teaching this child?" Harold turned to the girl's mother. "She'll be telling us to become Communists next. Or inviting niggers in to run things."

"Now, Harold," her Grandmother Lothrop said. "You know I don't like that word."

"Negroes then. Same difference."

Ginger waited for someone to tell her why her idea was wrong. Wasn't your country your home?

"Apologize to your Aunt Catherine for interrupting," her mother said.

She did as she was told. But she never did understand why.

FRIDAY

The sunlight is barely strong enough to wake me. I reach over to tell John what I've dreamed but I stop. I'm not at home, I'm here in my old bed at Grandmother Dora's, in Carter's excuse for paradise. The room is deathly quiet. The air smells of damp roses and musk, a combination at once pungent and nostalgic which makes me feel sick to my stomach. My God, how could I have been so dumb? Wasn't the first time lesson enough? Across the room the blankets on Barbra's bed are rumped but not really disturbed. Is she in the bathroom? I listen for the give-away sounds, creaking floorboards, running water, muffled voices. Nothing. I lie back with my eyes closed and try to pretend I'm at North Hatley, that the stream is slipping over the rock where Alice Merriman stood. It isn't wobbly now, it's steady, lodged solidly in the earth and buttressed with tree roots. There's no need to worry. John is lying beside me, breathing steadily, as reliably present as my pulse.

But he's not, of course. I press my fingers against my throat and concentrate on the regular throb. Okay, so what if I'm alone? He's alone too. The covers are mounded over his knees, the sheet kicked loose at the bottom. This early, there's a mist over the lake, but once the sun comes out, it will disappear with a whoosh, as if somewhere up in the sky, there's a giant gasping with surprise.

And now the silence pokes and prods. Where is Barbra? I glance at the empty bed and at the traces she's left - the strands of hair knotted in the brush, the crumpled kleenex with the smear of red, the lingering smell. My God, I don't believe it, she's with Carter.

I throw back the covers and hurry across the hall to the bathroom, the taste of stale tobacco filling my throat. I run a glass of water, then another

and another. My head is throbbing. My face is drained of color, my hair pushed up on the side where I've slept. I splash my face, comb my hair, hold the glass against my forehead. Daddy must be awake by now - old men don't need much sleep. I peer out through the walnut trees towards the barn. Is he outside? The mountains are hidden in gray cloud, the flowers on the ladyfinger vine closed tight. I ease the window open and sniff for a hint of his pipe.

Across the hall, Barbra's bed is silhouetted against the light. I slump onto the side of the tub. This is how it will be without John. No one to talk to. No one to blame, only myself. My throat tightens and I bite my lip to stop from crying. I'm a fool. Why did I tell him?

And what if he isn't alone? What if someone is with him, say, the client he spent so much time with in Montreal? I open the window and suck in great gulping mouthfuls of air. No, John isn't like that. He would never hurt me simply because I hurt him. I focus on my breathing. Inhale, exhale; inhale, exhale. Outside the light is growing stronger and the fields gaining color like a Polaroid developing. The branches of the poplar are outlined against the sky. I narrow my eyes. How long would it take me to walk to it and back? Fifteen minutes? Twenty? I glance at my watch. Almost six. Why not?

I button myself into yesterday's clothes which are heaped at the foot of the bed. I shake my head. You have to do better than this, Ginny. If you let things slide, you lose control. Better shape up.

I start down the stairs, the banister rail smooth in my hand. (Well, of course it is, Mother says, it's top quality walnut cut here on the farm before the Civil War and oiled and polished by hundreds of family hands, what do you expect?) I rub it for reassurance. We weren't meant to slide down the banister - Grandmother Dora promised dire consequences if we did - but of course we

ignored her threats and muffled our shrieks and giggles so we wouldn't be caught, and slid all the same. I press my cheek against it and inhale the scent of dry wood and lemon. Then I ease open the front door and step outside.

The grass in the pasture is cold and wet. Water spurts from the tip of my shoes, a rainbow which sparkles. I kick my feet and smile. On top of the fence posts birds are singing. There's a breeze which makes me stand up straighter. Why should I care if my clothes are wrinkled? I can look after myself. And what's wrong with being alone? You can go where you want to go, do what you want to do, with no one to say yea or nay. I laugh at the slurp my shoes make. Before long the grass will be dry; but now dew outlines every spider web which laces the lawn. In the center of one a spider is hiding. I hear John talk about tensile strength - what a miracle it is that a creature so weak can spin a web so strong - as if somehow he is responsible. Well, let him boast. For all its attempts at disguise, the spider looks pretty vulnerable to me.

When will you be back, I asked. He blinked and there was a look on his face I've never seen there before, not disdain or disgust or coldness but pain, sheer desperate pain. He stood by the car with his hands hanging limp, like an animal caught in a trap. He wanted me to pity him, to cry, to beg him to stay, but I'd had enough.

"Will you back for supper?" I said.

He swallowed and I could see the effort it took him to answer. "Don't push me, Virginia." His voice was raw. I'd hurt him. And that made me feel good.

I stick my finger in the web and immediately the spider is lost in the grass. She'll be back. She'll repair this web; and if I break it again, she'll weave another. John would find this admirable, an example like Aesop's ant of determination in the face of terrible odds, but I find it pitiful. It's true,

nothing stops her. She builds her web, positions herself at the center and the web does its work. But do I have to be the same?

Okay, I made a fool of myself. And right now, there's nothing I would like more than to be by the stream with John nearby, his binoculars and bird book at hand. Then, when something goes wrong, I can tell myself that he's to blame. But I'm finished with that. I'm going to have my own life. It's too bad if that means loneliness, but it's worth it. I want a self apart from his and this time I'm not giving up until I get it.

"Is that you, Ginny?" Barbra calls out when I open the door.

"You're up early."

She's at the kitchen table warming her hands around a cup of coffee.

"I scarcely went to bed. Carter and I talked almost all night."

"You could have fooled me."

"He's got so many plans for the farm, you can't imagine. He wants to open the house as a museum."

"Oh, yeah?"

"The county thinks he should gear it to the tourist trade but he wants to do something more educational. I had some ideas about using theatre - can you imagine how schoolchildren would get into that? They wouldn't even realize they were learning about the past." I stare at her, trusting that my scepticism shows. "I may end up working with him on it. Carter says he could use me as an advisor."

She is burbling. Her enthusiasm sounds real; yet I'm sure she's pretending. And pretending has to stop. I rub my ear the way Mother does and, with my head turned, push it towards her.

"What was that? You'll have to speak up. I can't hear. Did you say that the past doesn't matter?" Her eyes flicker and she shifts in her seat. "It was you who said that, wasn't it? Yesterday, I believe. And the day before. And the day before that."

"Clio will back in a minute, Ginny. She's in the other room changing into her uniform." There's a cautionary note in her voice which is so like Mother and so unlike her that I snort in disgust. She gives me a sunny smile and nods at the stove. "She made coffee. Help yourself."

Okay, so Barbra wants to pretend that last night never happened. Well, too bad. She's not getting away with it. I pour myself a cup and drink. It's strong and bitter, the way I like it.

"You're remarkably chipper for this time of the morning."

"It's such a nice day."

"I don't suppose that Carter is awake?"

"Clio says it's going to be hot again. But not as humid as it was in Richmond, which is a relief. I hate the humidity, don't you? In New York, it gets so stinky sometimes you can't even breathe." Off the kitchen a buzzer rings and a dryer stops its thumping. In the silence we look at each other.

"Clio wondered if she should fix us a country breakfast. Ham and eggs and scrapple and fried potatoes."

"An old-fashioned fry-up? What a treat."

"She makes biscuits and gravy with Uncle Henry's recipe."

"Well, in that case."

"Come on, Ginny. Clio would like to."

"Who am I to say no? Full speed ahead and damn the cholesterol."

"You don't have to eat it if you don't want."

I hold up my hand. "Let's talk about last night, Barbra, not about what we're going to have for breakfast."

"Why? There's no need."

"Yes, there is." I look straight at her. "I'm not proud of what happened but at least I admit it. So don't tell me that you and Carter spent the night talking about old times or about the future of Eden because I'm not that stupid. And I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't act like I am."

Barbra's eyes narrow. "I can't believe it, you're jealous."

"No, Barbra, I'm angry. Really pissed off, if you want to know. He's your cousin, for God's sake."

"Yes, and John is your husband."

"I said I wasn't proud of myself."

"And that makes it okay?" She takes a sip of coffee and shakes her head. What's going on here? She's the one in the wrong, not me.

"There's a call for you, Miz Paige." A door pushes open and Clio comes in holding a stack of laundry in her arms.

"Is it a man?"

She nods. "There's a phone in the sunporch if you want to be private."

I sink into my chair. I can't talk to him now, my throat is too dry. And it would be much too easy to pretend that everything is fine. Oh yes, we're having a good time. It's hot and Daddy keeps pushing us from one thing to the next, so by the end of the day everyone's temper is frayed and we say silly things we don't really mean; but apart from that, things are hunky-dory. And how are you? Have you been screwing that client in Montreal who couldn't leave you alone? Oh, and by the way, speaking of screwing, it wasn't true what I said, I didn't sleep with that guy in my class, and I'm sorry I said I did, but you know how I am, I get carried away sometimes in the heat of the moment. It's

all right, isn't it? You knew I wasn't telling the truth? I mean, after all these years of marriage, I couldn't fool you with a story like that, could I? I take a sip of coffee and hope that no one notices how shaky my hand is.

"Could you tell him, please, that I can't come to the phone right now?" I laugh and clear my throat to cover my embarrassment. Clio deposits the sheets on the ironing board in the corner, a limp heap smelling of peaches and artificially heated air. Her skin glows electric blue. "Say I'll call him back later."

"Yes, ma'am," she says. "Whatever you like."

The Dare burial ground is not shown on any map, yet this unmarked spot is where Mother hopes to find proof to link our family to the Ananias Dare who settled in Jamestown and, through him, to the Virginia whose name I bear. I haven't told her how much I would like to be related to this child, or to her grandfather who was governor of Roanoke Island, whose drawings are among the earliest records of life in the New World. I haven't told her how much it would please me to have an ancestor like him, someone who didn't walk through life with his eyes half closed, who wasn't a hidebound soul but an artist, an adventurer willing to leave the comforts of England for the perils of an unknown land. I haven't told anyone, because I'm realizing only now how much I want to believe that I have inherited these traits: if not the ability to excel, then at least the courage to try.

We are in a farmyard on Rough Road now, near the old burial site. By the barn a man with a grizzled beard is staring in our direction, a young dog frisking around his heels.

"He must think we're a bunch of idiots," Barbra says. "Tramping around the fields in search of old graves."

Daddy shakes his head. "You forget, Barbra, this is Virginia. A man like Grover understands. And you wait. If I know your mother, when she comes back she'll know everything there is to know about him. And he will be the same."

"I don't know why she's interested," I say. "She's not a Dare."

"No more than you're a Paige."

"In Quebec I'm not. Virginia Paige doesn't exist. I'm Virginia Dare on my driver's license and my medicare card and any other legal document you can name."

"That's strange," Barbra says.

"I like it. I'm thinking of using it all the time."

"Huh?" Daddy opens the door. "What's keeping them?"

Carter is scratching the dog's ears. The beard is indicating a direction: up and over the hill that-a-way. Mother asks a question, the beard answers and Carter ambles back in our direction. He is wearing designer jeans which fit him well and a shirt from L.L. Bean like one I gave John a few years ago. Nothing in his manner suggests embarrassment or that he wishes the ground would open up and take him away. This is a relief, of course. It makes the day bearable. But to a surprising degree it is also irritating - not mentioning last night may be a courtesy, but ignoring it entirely is a slap in the face.

"Better grab the picnic basket," he says. "Grover says it's a climb and we don't want to starve once we get there. And bring a towel if you've got one. There's a creek."

"Do we have to wade it?" Daddy asks.

"No, there are some stepping stones."

"Mother can't wade a creek, Carter. How can you suggest such a thing?"

Barbra tuts fondly. She knows Carter's foibles now, and knowing all, forgives,

like a mother who corrects her child in public to highlight the child's obedience. "The rest of you go ahead. I'll find a chair and Mother and I will sit in the shade until you get back."

"If you think your mother will let a bit of water stop her, you have another think coming," Daddy says. "She's halfway there already."

She strides across the farmyard. Her ankles are bulging over her Naturalizers like dough in a hot oven, but her back straight and her head erect. I shove the picnic basket at Barbra and start after her, across the yard and around the field by the fence. At the creek I stop.

"Take your mother's arm," Carter says. "And get those nice new sandals off unless you want to ruin them. Aunt Martha, you step on these stones and you'll be fine. Ginny and I won't let you fall."

He turns towards me and winks as if we share a secret which Mother isn't to know. He is half straddling the stream, one foot on the near bank and the other on a rock midway across. I unbuckle my shoes, step in and shiver. Despite the sunshine and heat of the last few days, the water is icy cold. And deeper than it looks. I can't see the bottom where I stand, only feel it, a soft, silky mud which squishes between my toes. I take hold of Mother's arm.

"Okay, are you ready?"

She steps from the bank onto the first rock, steps again. Midstream, a rock teeters and I tighten my grip.

"Don't jerk, Virginia," she says. "I can manage just fine."

"I don't want you to fall."

"I've waded more creeks than you can shake a stick at."

I loosen my grip and step onto a rock half buried in the mud; it jabs into the arch of my foot, the softest, most tender spot.

"Having fun?" Carter says. Behind us the dog from the farmyard is barking. He bounds across the field, an exuberant young husky who can't wait to join the fun.

"Last step, Martha." On the far bank, Daddy holds out his hand. As she steps away, the dog slides down the bank and splashes against me. I push him away, he pushes back. The rock I'm standing on wobbles and I step out to catch my balance, arms flailing. The dog jumps. His nails scratch against my arm and pull the chain on the medallion around my neck. I step back again, totter. And then I'm sitting in water, up to my waist.

Mother frowns down. "Are you all right?"

Before I can answer the dog is all over me, licking my face and barking. I push him away. "I haven't hurt myself, if that's what you mean." I begin to stand and he is there again, really excited now, his paws on my shoulder, his tail flicking water in my face. "Somebody get him off me, for Christ's sake."

Carter whistles and the dog frisks around to face him. He ruffles the dog's ears and puts his face down close and says something in a quiet voice, then picks up a stick from the bank and lobs it high in the air. Barking ecstatically, the dog chases after it, down the stream and over the bank.

"Oh, Ginny. Look. You've got mud all over." Mother puts her hands to her face. "Victor, help her."

"It's okay, Mother, I'm fine."

"I guess Grover should have tied him up," Carter says. He holds out his hand but I ignore it and clamber onto the bank by myself. My skirt is soaked, my arms streaked with dirt. My blouse is covered with muddy little dots and my neck hurts where he pulled on the chain.

"Help me across, Carter," Barbra says. "I intend to stay dry."

Mother brushes at the mud on my back. "Sit down and put your shoes on, Ginny. You'll dry off in a minute."

"I'll go back to the car and get you something to wear," Carter says.

"No, I'll go," Daddy says.

"I don't need anything, thank you, I'm fine." I rub my neck and try to disappear.

"You're sure?" Carter is swallowing and shifting from foot to foot.

"She doesn't want a fuss," Barbra says. Daddy and Carter look at each other, uncertain of what to do.

"Go on," Mother says. "She'll be fine. It's just water."

I sit on the ground to fasten my sandals and, while the others climb the hill, pick crumbly bits off my blouse.

"Spread your skirt out," Mother says. "It'll dry faster."

"I feel like an idiot."

"What happened?"

"The stupid dog made me lose my balance."

Her face changes slightly. "Don't blame everything on others, Ginny. If you watched what..."

"Thanks, Mother. I really need that."

She looks up to where Barbra and Carter are climbing. "What went on last night after your father and I went to bed?"

"Ask Barbra."

"She said to ask you."

"We sat around for a bit and talked. Then I went to bed."

She snorts. "I understand you had a phone call this morning."

"Some people should mind their own business."

"What's wrong with you and John? Is it anything serious?"

"Do you mind? I don't want to talk about it."

I stand and brush the dirt off my arms. My skirt is clinging to my legs but I pull it out and try to smile. "Ready?" Mother nods.

The hill is steep, the grass uneven. We watch our feet as we climb, not talking but saving our breath. Beads of sweat gather under my arms and trickle down inside my blouse; the chain of my medallion rubs. But the surroundings are beautiful. The higher we climb, the more the countryside spreads out before us, hills rolling to hills.

"See those mountains over there?" At a rise near the top, Mother stops. "That's where my mother was born, on the other side of that range. We went to visit every summer when I was growing up. The roads were so bad, it took the best part of two days to get there. Papa said two flats before noon, God didn't mean for us to go."

I make a sound of encouragement. This is a familiar story, and far better than questions I don't want to answer.

"Just before we got there, we'd stop at a stream to wash. Mama carried our dresses flat in the back of the car, and as soon as we were clean, we'd put them on. She said a lady should always look fresh as a daisy. Events should never disturb her, or if they did, she shouldn't let on."

"She obviously never fell in a stream," I say.

"On the contrary." She pauses as if to hear her Mother's voice and her mouth goes soft. "My favorite was a white eyelet dress with a yellow sash. Your aunt Catherine had one the same - Mama always dressed us alike. Which I hated since whatever we wore looked prettier on her. But I never said anything. And whether Mama would have listened, I don't know. Probably she'd have said it didn't matter, that pretty is as pretty does."

I see the photo on Mother's dresser of Barbra and me in matching plaid kilts and tams. Frowning slightly against the sun, Barbra is holding my hand like an older sister should. Her tam is black, mine is white, like coded hats in a cowboy movie.

"Catherine was Papa's favorite." Mother begins to climb again. "It's a shame, because it made her think she was better than everyone else and that she could say and do whatever she wanted and no one would mind."

I wait for her to draw the parallel or to ask one of her questions that leave no room to escape. Ahead, Carter and Barbra are looking down at a piece of rock just barely showing through the grass.

"What do you think the chances are we'll find Ananias?" I ask.

"I don't know."

"Clio says he is here."

"Maybe. We'll see."

"Is that a gravestone?" I shout.

"Part of one. Come on, Aunt Martha," Carter shouts. "We're waiting."

We hurry to the top. There's a large fenced area covered with grass and weeds. A maple tree is growing on one side and scattered around are yellowed stones, broken and angled like ill-tended teeth.

"What a shame." Mother frowns. "You'd think someone would keep the place tidy."

"They used to," Carter says. "Grover said it's too much work for him now that he's getting on."

"He's younger than I am," Mother says.

"They're not his ancestors. Why should he care?" Barbra is pushing around in the grass with her feet. "Do you really want to eat lunch here?"

"What's wrong with it?" Mother asks.

"It's the middle of a graveyard."

"I didn't realize you were so picky," Mother says.

Daddy points with his pipe. "Ginny, you and Carter start over there by the fence. Barbra, you go on this side with your mother."

"I want Carter with me," Mother says. "Barbra and Ginny can work together."

"What about you, Daddy? What are you going to do?"

"Boss us around," Mother says. "Same as always."

"No, I'm going to supervise." Daddy puffs out a cloud of smoke.

"Somebody has to."

"Didn't you say that Mother was in charge?"

"Come on, Ginny, what does it matter?" Barbra takes my arm and leads me across to the fence. The stones here, protruding at regular intervals, are as thin as the gray slate at Ives Cemetery, but more heavily weathered. The inscription on the first one I check is unreadable - I can scarcely tell whether the scratches on the stone are letters or the natural marks of time.

"Do you think we're going to find him?" Barbra asks.

"Do you think I care?"

She stares across the field. "Wouldn't it be wonderful if it's Carter who does?"

"I can't believe he didn't call off that dog."

"Don't make such a fuss. It doesn't matter."

"It's easy for you to say, you don't look like a fool." I move along a step or two. There are fewer verses here than at Ives and the comments are more direct. Polly "hath done what she could"; Rebecca "lies at rest." The stones seem to be sinking into the ground under their own weight and I scrutinize

the grass for signs of disturbance. Who knows? Maybe part of a stone that's buried will tell me something important.

"Hey, listen to this one, Ginny." Barbra begins to read.

Pause stranger as you pass and shed a tear

A mother and a babe lie buried here

They faded in their early hours

As fades at morn two lovely flowers.

They passed in silence to the realm of shades

She stops.

"Is that all? There's a line missing," I say.

"I know. It's hidden by the grass."

"And the meter's off."

"So?" She shrugs. "What do you think the last line was?"

"How should I know?"

"It has to rhyme with shades."

"Blades, grades, wades. *And through the muck forever wades.*"

She laughs. "I'll try it on the way back."

"Yeah, why don't you."

"Probably it's something to do with memory, you know. *They passed in silence to the realm of shades, where ghostly memory never fades.*"

"That's brilliant, Barbra."

"Come up with something better, then."

"Where they live together, two old maids."

"Not very likely." She laughs. "I'd like it if we find him. Ananias Dare - what a great name."

"Stop it, Barbra."

"Stop what?"

"You disowned these people. You said they didn't have anything to do with you."

"Yeah, and you said the trip was going to be fun."

I turn over a stone. My hands are filthy and, even though my skirt is practically dry, it's covered in grit which won't brush off. Sweat is trickling down my forehead and probably smearing mascara all over my face. And Barbra looks as good as she did last night, still beautiful and much younger than she should but almost motherly now, June Cleaver or June Lockhart or someone like that. I glance across the field. Carter is wiping his forehead with a large white pocket handkerchief and Mother and Daddy are watching.

"Finding anything?" I shout across the distance.

"Not yet," he shouts. "What about you?"

"Come here, Ginny." Barbra has her back to me and although her voice is low, there is excitement in it. I kneel. The stone she has found isn't gray but white. And hard, not slate but granite. At the top, inside a curlicued border, is the word "Dare."

"We're in the right place, at any rate."

"Did you think we weren't?" She rocks back on her heels.

"Carter could have brought us anyplace. Mother wouldn't have known."

"Why should he?"

"Why not?" I stand up and shout across the field. "Yeah, I think we have."

"Don't touch anything," Mother shouts. "I want to see." She starts across the field and Daddy follows, his right foot dragging through the grass.

"I found it," Barbra says.

"Dare," Mother reads. "Good. At least we're looking in the right place."

"What is it with you people?" Barbra says. "You're so suspicious."

"People tell you what they think you want to hear," Mother says. She begins to pull clumps of grass from around the stone, revealing letters one by one. I peer over her shoulder. "Don't stand in the light, Ginny. Old lettering is hard to read."

"The 'Dare' is clear enough," Daddy says.

"I can't make out the rest - there's too much dirt." She turns. "We need some water."

I grit my teeth. I don't want to tramp back down to that stream but if I object I'll sound like a whiner. "What am I going to carry it in?"

"Take the thermos," Barbra says. "It's too hot to drink coffee."

"No, I have something," Daddy says. He opens his camera case with a flourish and pulls out a tumbler. It's plastic, half a dozen bands of different colors, and no bigger than the drink cartons Danielle used to take to school in her lunchbox.

"It's too small, Daddy," I say.

"Oh, yeah? Watch this." He unscrews the ring at the top.

"Making it smaller, that's very helpful."

"Hold your horses." He unscrews another ring, a blue one, then a yellow, then a green. The tumbler is half its size now, about right for a baby, but he keeps on working. He unscrews the last two rings, a purple and a white, and puts them on the grass in a line with the others. "Pick a ring," he says. "Any ring."

"Get on with it, Victor," Mother says.

"Can't I have a little fun?" he says. He pushes non-existent sleeves out of the way. "See? Nothing up my sleeve." A little flap on the underside of his arm swings loose.

"Victor," Mother says.

"Okay, okay." He picks up the red ring, flourishes it like a magician. And all at once there's a full-sized glass.

"Well if that's not the darndest," Carter says. "Let me have a look."

"Not a bad trick for an old man, is it?" He gives the glass to Carter. "Just push it in and twist the other way."

"Let me try, Daddy," Barbra says.

"Every one of them is the same. So there's no problem bringing up enough water. And if we need a brush to get rid of the dirt, I've got that. And a small spade and paper and pencil to rub a tracing, a wide angle lens, a telephoto lens, a spare battery and extra film." He pats his camera case. "It's all in here."

"Stop your bragging, Victor, and hand me the brush."

"You travel with a bossy woman like your Mother, you come prepared."

She whisks back and forth across the letters. "See how I'm doing it, Ginny? You have to be careful. Even a stone this hard can be brittle. Too much pressure and you damage it."

I watch as she loosens the dirt and blows. This is it, Ananias's grave. I bite my lip as the picture appears, a stone book with the words 'Holy Bible' cut into the pages. Beneath there's a name. I lean into the light.

"Rachel? Who the hell is that?"

"It's not Ananias?" Barbra asks.

"I wasn't expecting it to be," Mother says. "It's the wrong kind of stone. His won't be granite - granite came much later." She looks over her shoulder and awkwardly pats my leg. "It could be his daughter, though. The dates fit. And that means we're close - spinster daughters were often buried with their

parents. Although strictly speaking, Rachel wasn't a spinster. She married young, if I remember correctly, and died in childbirth."

"It's a good thick stone." Daddy takes his eye away from the lens and straightens. "Did I ever tell you girls about how you judge the quality of farmland in an area? Thick gravestones mean the people have money to spend. Which means that the land is good. Thin stones mean the land is poor."

"Did I ever tell you that Granddaddy Dare's room at the university was next to Edgar Allen Poe's?" I ask.

"No," Carter says. "Is that right? Next door?"

"See? It doesn't hurt to repeat things," Barbra says. "People forget."

"What's that?" Mother says. She is exploring the ground around Rachel's grave with the care a mother gives the body of a new-born child, fingering every crevice, counting every finger and toe, not content with what her eyes can tell her but relying on her sense of touch to feel out the child's shape, the texture of the skin, the rhythm of the heart beneath.

"Shouldn't the baby's grave be here?" Barbra asks.

"Something is, I can feel the edge." Mother's voice is restrained, but with a note of excitement which makes my spine prick. "Come here and check, Victor. Am I right?"

He kneels beside her, his pipe tucked in the side of his mouth. A thread of saliva drips onto the ground where he is digging, his knobby index finger knuckle deep. "Give me the scoop from the camera bag, Ginny."

I rummage through the case, thankful to have something to do. Why did I make fun of him like that? He's an old man. So what if he repeats himself?

"I don't see it, Daddy. Are you sure it's here?"

"It's there," Mother says. "Keep looking."

I dig down, past the rolls of film, the wide angle lens, the telephoto. There's an old matchbook, a few bandaids, a set of keys and a roll of adhesive tape. And finally, a small metal scoop shaped like a spade. I hand it to him and he cuts into the sod, turns back layers of matted grass and shovels out the dirt, awkwardly spilling as much as he removes.

"Can I help?"

"Your father knows what he's doing, Ginny," Mother says. "Don't interfere."

I stand back and try not to fidget while, gradually, the edge of a stone appears. A gray one. It is short, a stubby rectangle rounded on the top, exactly the shape of my heelprint in the mud by the stream. The similarity makes me shiver, it seems so much like a sign. But of what? I close my eyes and whisper a prayer. I don't understand why, but it seems that finding Ananias's grave is suddenly the most important thing in my life. Line by line the pattern appears. I lean around to see more clearly. The Bible is there, its open pages inviting those who do truly and earnestly repent of their sins to draw near. And beneath is the name. Ananias Dare.

"Congratulations, Aunt Martha! You did it. You found him." Carter is almost dancing.

"Not so fast," Mother says.

"What's the matter?" Barbra is leaning over to read the stone. "Ananias Dare. Born February 23, 1707. Died June 16, 1782. Aged 75 yrs, 3 mos, 25 days."

"The dates are wrong." Mother stands up and brushes the dirt off her knees. "This is your father's ancestor, but it's not the Ananias I was hoping to find."

"How can you be sure?" I ask.

She lets out a sigh of disappointment. "I told you yesterday. Thomas's descendant was born in 1701. This says 1707."

"Couldn't there be a mistake? Maybe the seven is a one. Numbers are easy to mix up."

"No, it has to be a seven," Daddy says.

"Why?"

"Do the math, Ginny," Barbra says. "The man died in 1782 and he was seventy-five years old."

"Yeah, I suppose." I rub my neck and consider. "How can there be two men with the same name? It doesn't make sense."

"Names go in and out of style the same as anything else," Mother says.

"So we're not related to Virginia?"

"This doesn't rule it out." Mother pats me on the arm. "Now that I know when Ananias was born, I can start searching for the place. And you never know what will turn up if you look hard enough."

Daddy shudders. "You know what this means, don't you? Hours and hours twiddling my thumbs while she searches for another needle in the haystack."

"You love it, Victor, don't tell me you don't. So take your photographs and let's get on with it. And make sure at least one of them is in focus."

Mother turns to Carter. "To hear him, you'd think he was an expert but half the time he leaves the lens cover on and the pictures turn out pitch black."

"Don't pay attention, Carter. You know how women like to exaggerate."

"We also have a fine collection of thumbs."

Daddy rolls his eyes and complains that the light is too strong, the letters will be washed out whatever he does, so he's not to blame if the pictures are bad. Mother sniffs. Isn't it time for lunch? Over fried chicken and potato

salad, Daddy discusses the pros and cons of various routes with Carter, who knows next to nothing on the subject but plays along nicely, calculating the time each will take, then doubling it like Daddy does, to be on the safe side.

"At the rate you're going, Carter, we should have left hours ago," Barbra says.

Everyone laughs, even me, although I wish it were true, that we'd left before we found the grave, before I fell in the stream, before last night most of all. This afternoon we're visiting Peggy's parents, Mother's cousin Tom and his wife Rosie, and tonight we're staying at the camp where we went for the family reunion in 1961. What a silly girl I was then. I pull out my camera. In the excitement of the morning, I haven't taken a single shot.

"Okay, everybody, time for a photo."

I arrange the bodies as much as possible like Manet, a *dejeuner sur l'herbe* with everyone clothed. Mother objects to leaning on her elbow and spilling the picnic basket on its side but Barbra understands at once; happily stooping in the background, she pretends to wash in a non-existent stream. Carter looks directly at me. He is less talkative than he was last night, as if he is as anxious as I am for this awful day to be over. As soon as I snap my photo, he folds his napkin and begins to collect the plates.

"Hey, boy. Leave that to the women," Daddy says in his country voice. Carter keeps stacking.

"You mustn't say things like that, Daddy." Barbra wags her finger in his direction. "Carter, you tell him."

"Mustn't say them, or mustn't mean them?" Carter arches an eyebrow. "It's all in the tone of voice, Victor. That's what I've decided."

"Men!" Mother humphs. "Come on, Ginny. Let's us start back to the car."

"And leave Barbra to clean up all alone?"

"Barbra will be fine. Won't you, dear."

Carter shakes his head. "See what I mean? 'Won't you, dear.' Now you tell me, Victor, what man could ever give an order like that?"

Daddy laughs and starts on the story about Uncle Henry, giving every detail as if we've never heard it before. I give Mother a hand. She brushes the crumbs off her skirt, tells Barbra not to leave any trash behind and to wipe out the cups before putting them away, otherwise they get stuck. Barbra nods. She can clean up, she's done it before.

"Just don't forget anything," Mother says. We start down the hill and she takes my arm. "Do you remember that trip we took to New England, when you and Barbra were young?" she asks.

"Which one?"

"When we saw the Old Man of the Mountain."

Immediately the photo appears in my mind. I am wearing a plaid shirt and jeans rolled above my ankles. Barbra has a bandanna tied carelessly around her neck. Oblivious to the craggy Indian face which glowers down from high above us, we face the camera arm in arm, the best of friends.

"You told me you couldn't see him. You insisted the profile wasn't there."

"And Daddy got mad at me. We've come all this way, you'd better see it, he said. I remember."

"You and Barbra had such a good time on that trip."

"We were young."

"Even when you were arguing about space in the back seat."

"What do you want me to say, Mother? We're not little girls anymore."

"That doesn't mean you have to bicker."

"It's you and Daddy who bicker, not us."

Her mouth tightens. "What's wrong, Ginny? Is it John? He didn't sound like himself the other day."

"He make a joke, you mean?"

"You shouldn't make fun of your husband."

"Why not?" There's a silence.

"He won't put up with it, you know."

"Put up with what, Mother?"

"Whatever it is that you've done."

"I haven't done anything."

"Are you sure?"

"Is your hearing aid on? I said I haven't done a thing."

"Don't be rude, Ginny."

"Then don't keep on at me."

"And you don't have to shout, I'm not deaf." Her mouth clamps shut and she pulls her arm in by her side so that there's no chance of brushing against me. The view is closing in on us now, the mountains disappearing behind the hills. I feel a tiny stab of compunction - I don't mean to be short with her, she's old, after all, but her meddling is so irritating I can't help myself. We come to a steep spot and I offer my hand.

"What will you do now?" I ask. "Keep trying to find the other Ananias? Maybe they were cousins."

"Maybe."

"We'd still be one of the first families if they were, wouldn't we?"

"I thought you didn't care."

"I don't. But I know you do."

"No, Ginny, I keep telling you. I'm not interested in who we're related to. It's not the prestige, I just enjoy searching. It gives me something to occupy my time." She shakes her head like a teacher with a particularly slow pupil. "I know who I am, Ginny. I don't need a family tree to tell me. I'm sorry if you do."

"I know perfectly well who I am."

"Do you?"

She stops. We're at the stream now and she stares down at the water and at the car on the other side. I grit my teeth. I'm not going to make a fool of myself again, certainly not with something as easy as crossing a stream. I step onto a rock and test my footing. It seems stable enough; and there's another rock I can step on if this one gives way. I hold out my hand.

"Maybe we should wait for the others," Mother says.

"You'll be fine. Just take it one step at a time."

"I wasn't worrying about me."

"It was the dog, Mother." She clamps her lips together and steps out gingerly. The rock wobbles and I tighten my grip. "Keep moving," I say.

She steps quickly onto a smaller rock, steps again. Then she's safe on the other side.

"That wasn't so bad."

"I never thought it would be," she says, and starts across the field. Neat rows of green fuzz contour the land, some crop or other that I can't identify. From the garden beside the house comes the smell of roses in full bloom, overwhelmingly sweet. It's hot. We stand, uncomfortably close, in the narrow strip of shade cast by a tree near the car. She leans against the trunk, straightens, rubs her back. She checks her watch and sighs.

"You know, there's nothing wrong in relying on other people, Ginny. As long as they can rely on you."

"Thank you, Mother, I don't need a lecture."

"I'm not lecturing, I'm trying to help."

Barbra is crossing the barnyard now with Carter, her arm linked in his like a schoolgirl, Daddy stumbling along behind. At the sight of them I turn away. Of course I know who I am. Why should Mother say I don't?

"Victor! Are you all right?" Mother hurries across to take Daddy's arm. "Barbra, what are you thinking about? Look at your father, he's so tired he can hardly walk straight."

Daddy makes an effort to straighten. "Don't make such a fuss, Martha, I'm fine." He tightens his teeth on the stem of his pipe and sucks in the smoke with a slurp. "Come on, Ginny, let's get a move on. We're late."

"We're no such thing," Mother says.

"We are if you plan to be in Damascus by dinner. Rosie and Tom are expecting us."

"It's only just after two o'clock."

"Check the schedule, Martha. We were supposed to be gone by one thirty."

"What difference does it make," Barbra says. "We've got plenty of time."

"Not if we stand here all day jabbering."

Carter gives Mother a hug. "You be good now, y'hear? Next time, maybe we'll have better luck."

"Luck's got nothing to do with it," she says. "And don't smooth-talk me, Carter Dare. I know what you're up to."

"And what's that?"

"Never you mind."

I hold out my hand. "It was nice seeing you."

"We have to do better than that, cousin." Carter laughs and wraps his arms around me, squeezes and lets me go. "Come back soon now, y'hear?"

"Maybe next time won't be as long."

"It wasn't as bad as that, I hope."

I replay my words. "No, I didn't mean..."

"All right, that's enough." Daddy moves his fingers like a mouth. "Jabber, jabber. That's the trouble with these women, Carter. Sometimes you can't move them, other times you can't make them stop."

"Better watch yourself, Victor, it's three against one." Carter opens the door of the car and bows with a flourish. "Your servant, ma'am."

Mother snorts and settles herself in the seat, ankles crossed, Kleenex at hand. Daddy holds the car keys in midair. "One of you girls want to drive?"

I take the keys before Barbra has a chance, slip in behind the wheel, fasten my seat belt, adjust the mirrors. Beside his jeep, Carter tips his hand to his forehead in a mock salute. In the mirror Barbra presses her finger to her lips and blows a kiss almost too small to be seen. I tighten my lips. Enough is enough.

"Okay, let's get this show on the road," I say. I reverse towards the barn and start out the drive, sending a spray of gravel up behind. In half an hour we're on the interstate heading south, a hundred miles to go. We pass exits for places whose names I barely recall: Dublin, Austinville, Stony Fork. The miles disappear. In the back Daddy and Barbra are asleep, their heads nodding left and right. It's almost four now. I glance at my watch and see in my mind the schedule he typed. *Tom and Rosie Lothrop, Damascus, Virginia. Arrive 4:30 p.m., depart 8:00 p.m. (approx.: after dinner).* We skirt Wytheville and Marion. I speed up: the miles are disappearing but not fast enough.

"You're driving too fast," Mother says.

"Do you want to listen to Daddy talk about women always being late?"

She sniffs to show her disapproval. "What does it matter?" she says.

"He only does it to get a rise."

Love's Mill and Damascus. "This is the exit," she says. I signal the turn. At the end of the ramp, she looks up. The map is open on her lap and she's squinting into the sun. "There are two roads we can take. There's not much difference as far as I remember. It's slower to the left, but prettier."

"You're the navigator," I answer. "You tell me."

She turns part-way around. "Victor? What do you think?"

"Shush," Barbra says. "He's asleep."

I turn. Daddy's head is against the window. His eyes are closed, his mouth open, and heavy lines droop from the corner of his lips like lines on a ventriloquist's dummy.

"Here, give me the map, Mother, let me take a look." I fold it in half and follow the maze of lines.

In grade eight, in order to figure out what to do with our lives, students in Richmond were given standardized tests. The results, when they came back a month or two later, were no surprise. My verbal skills were in the highest range, my reasoning and logic as well. Only my ability to manipulate objects in space was poor. I read the paragraph of explanation. "Students with high scores in this area make excellent engineers and architects." I let out a sigh of relief. I had no intention of doing either.

"Let's just get there," I say. "We've save the sightseeing for another time."

The road is narrow. It curves up and around between high banks which block my view - we're at the foot of the mountains, the Appalachian Trail passes nearby. "Are you sure this is the fastest way?" I ask.

"Maybe I'm wrong," Mother says. "I don't know.

"I thought this was your old stomping ground."

"It's a while since I've been here," she says. The road curves and climbs and curves again. There's a flash out of the corner of my eye, sunlight hitting something metallic. Was it a truck?

"You've sent us on the wrong road, Mother."

"You were the one who came this way."

"Yes, because you said it was faster."

"Stop squabbling, you two. You're worse than children," Daddy says, waking up.

Mother frowns. "You can't expect me to remember everything."

"Why not? You expect me to."

She tightens her lips. We approach a crossroad. I glance left and right, accelerate. Why stop? There's nothing coming.

We're midway through the intersection when the truck strikes. In an instant the car is out of control. I stamp on the brake and the wheel pulls at my hands. Someone behind me shouts to let it go, to turn it the other way. I struggle to straighten it out but we're moving too fast. We spin, skid, slam to a halt.

"Martha! Are you all right?" Daddy's voice comes through as a blur of fear.

"Oh, my God. What happened?" My head is jammed against something hard - the steering wheel? I can't see - my head is too heavy to lift. I shiver.

Something sticky is trickling across my forehead, oozing into the corner of my eye. My hand wipes it off. Blood.

"See about Mother, Ginny. But don't move her. She may have hurt her back."

A smear runs from my wrist to the end of my hand. Cautiously I lift my head. Mother is crumpled in her seat, her body leaning towards me, her neck turned at a peculiar angle, like she is looking out the window to ask for advice. Glass dusts her lap and shoulders and sparkles in the sunlight. Beyond her is sunlight - the car is in the ditch pointing backwards, we've spun all the way around and are heading back the way we came.

"What do you mean? She's not hurt." I shake her arm. "Mother, wake up. Give me your handkerchief, Daddy. She's got a cut and she's bleeding onto her dress. She won't like that."

"Damn it, I can't get my seatbelt loose," Barbra says.

Behind me the door swings open and Daddy is on his knees in the ditch. Loose stones skitter away. He limps onto the road.

"Martha. Can you hear me? Are you all right?" He struggles with the door. "It's locked, Ginny."

"What?" I don't understand what he wants me to do.

"Unlock the door."

"I've got it, Daddy." Barbra reaches across and the lock clicks open.

"You people okay?" The truck driver hurries across the road, rubbing his forehead. His eyes flick over me and return to Mother, strapped into her seat and bleeding. "I called an ambulance. They'll be here in a few minutes." He puts his hand under Daddy's elbow. "Here, sir. Let me help you up."

"No, leave me. I've got to get something on her head to stop the bleeding." There's a groan. "Martha, are you okay?"

"She's banged her head pretty bad, sir."

"God damn it, I can't get this seatbelt unfastened." Barbra is crying and pulling at her waist. There's blood on the rear view mirror where it cut Mother's head and more on the floor by her feet, blood everywhere, on the dashboard, on my arms, trickling down my face.

"It wasn't my fault, Daddy, it was an accident. The truck came out of nowhere."

The man opens his mouth, then bites it shut. "Just hold still for a minute," he says and reaches through the broken window. There's a click and then Barbra's kneeling on the hump between the seats, pressing a wad of tissue against Mother's temple.

"Careful of the glass," the man says.

"Yeah, I see it," she answers.

He looks at me again, at Mother and Daddy. "Let me check on that ambulance," he says. "I'll make sure it's on its way."

At the hospital we sit on plastic chairs colored with baked-in pastels which make me sick to look at. Barbra is on a brownish pink one. Next to her is a mauve and beside it, a faded lime green. She is nursing coffee in a styrofoam cup and every now and then she glances at me out of the corner of her eye. She thinks I should have seen the truck. She thinks I should have stopped or sped up or spun the wheel the other way. And she's right. If I'd turned the other way, we wouldn't be here, we'd be at Rosie and Tom's drinking iced tea and reminiscing about the good old days, when black was black and white was white and a daughter knew her place, which wasn't in the driver's seat but in the back. Daddy would be telling stories about the family reunion and Mother would be correcting mistakes he hadn't made or hushing him

when he talked too long. And all the time I'd be wondering if it was Mother I had seen in the garden, secretly hoping that I had been right, that there was a mystery in her life for me to discover that I could use to enliven my own.

Barbra moves around on the seat and her legs make a wet slurping sound - the plastic sticks, I swear it's molded deliberately to be uncomfortable. Nobody asks about me, although I have to be worrying more than they are. What if Mother isn't okay? God, my head hurts! This bandage is tight, my head is pounding like a jackhammer. I rub my head and Barbra frowns, checks her watch, bites her lip. It's almost an hour since we got here and still no news. Daddy is pacing the corridor, his right foot dragging like the sole on his shoe is loose. Step, shush, step, shush. He could hardly stand when the ambulance came, he'd been kneeling so long. And all the time Mother bleeding and moaning and saying things that made no sense, her hands over her eyes. The men with the stretcher wore plastic gloves. They started an IV and strapped her to a board with big orange blocks on either side of her head. In the ambulance there was a sack of groceries in the back and a red padded chair like at the dentist's where Daddy sat. Mother's eyes were open and she was clutching his thumb the way Constance did. They drove off and then the police came. At first they talked to the truck driver who nodded over his shoulder and pointed up the hill. Then they came to me. I gave them my license and they said what's this, it's not in English, how do we know what it says; and when I started screaming, Barbra grabbed my arms so tight they hurt.

Daddy's biting his pipe. I swear the stem is going to crack, he wants to smoke so bad, but there are signs everywhere telling him not to. There's one by the door next to the state law that says concealed weapons are prohibited in this facility. When we came in I asked Barbra who in the hell would bring a

gun into an emergency room, a crazy man? She stared at me in the oddest way, and for a minute, when she went fumbling in her handbag, I thought she was going to pull out a gun herself. But she was crying and it was a kleenex she was looking for, the one she's using now to wipe the coffee ring off the table. Daddy is watching her. He was pacing when we came in. Sit down, I said, I'll find you something to read, a copy of *Time* or an old *Newsweek*, there's bound to be one, there always is. He shook his head. You need to rest, I said. Step, shush, step, shush. If he'd only sit down, I wouldn't feel so bad. There's a light over the door where he turns which flashes red when an ambulance arrives. There is a tv, mounted too high to reach, tuned to CNN. The Rio Summit on the Environment opens next week. There's fighting in Somalia. The man they found in the ice had three broken teeth. There are 283 acoustic tiles on the ceiling, eighteen and a half down and fifteen across. The corridor is four and a half tiles wide. Every tile is punched with holes. I've tried counting them but my eyes cross and I get a different number every time.

Daddy fumbles along the wall - step, shush, step, shush. Two girls in pink and white uniforms come out chattering and laughing. One has blond hair, the other has brown. A trolley clatters along the corridor behind the registration desk. The nurses there are too busy to answer questions. As soon as there's news we'll let you know, they said, although when Daddy was filling out their forms they were attentive enough. Why is it taking so long? They wheeled someone in a few minutes ago, the wheels on the gurney were squeaking like the brakes on the car. There's a keypad beside the door which separates us from the examination rooms and another stupid sign. *For patient privacy and smoothness in delivering quality emergency care, only one person may be present with a patient in the emergency area.* Don't get in the

way, they mean. Don't get upset. Don't disturb us with what you feel, we have a job to do.

Admit it, the truck didn't come out of nowhere, I was driving too fast. It was my fault. What difference did it make if we were on time or not, it was just a schedule on a piece of paper. So what if Daddy would have complained and fumed and stomped around like a spoiled brat? Better that than Mother cut and bleeding. Better that than everyone blaming me. Christ! Why can't I stop thinking about myself? It's Mother I should be thinking about. She's the one in there, not me. I'm fine, a few cuts and bruises that will heal soon enough. But I can't say how sorry I am, not more than I have said already, otherwise it's me they worry about, not Mother. Do they know how awful I feel, how terrified I am that she's going to die, that I'll have killed her, that it's all my fault, that – oh Christ! here I go again. Me, me, me. Daddy must know that I didn't mean to do it. He should know how upset I am. Why won't he look at me? Why does he have to keep walking back and forth?

"Mr. Dare?" A man who must be the doctor crosses towards us, his hand extended. "Mr. Dare?" he says again. "I'm Wesley Whitfield. I'm looking after your wife." Daddy stops.

"Is she all right?"

"She's had a bad bang on her head but she's going to be fine."

Daddy swallows and moves his hand in the air like he's brushing ash off his sleeve. "You're sure?"

"She cut the temporal artery and lost a lot of blood but she's in stable condition now." His eyes flick over at me and I become conscious of the stains on my blouse and the bandage on my head which, surely, they've tied too tight.

"Are you a relative?"

"I'm sorry, let me introduce you," Daddy says.

"That's okay, Mr. Dare, you have more important things on your mind."

"Virginia Paige," I say, the name coming despite my intention to change it.

"Barbra Dare," Barbra says, holding out her hand.

"Is that bandage too tight?" he says. "I can ask a nurse to loosen it."

"No, it's okay."

"You sure?"

I nod. He's wearing a badge with a photo encased in plastic - more security, I suppose. There's a tiny bubble in the plastic lamination which makes him look lopsided, like he's raising an eyebrow in permanent disbelief. Is he a doctor or just someone who happened to be on duty? He looks so young.

"Can we see her?" Daddy asks.

"In a minute. The nurse is getting her cleaned up. Let me warn you, though, she'll look a bit funny - we shaved her head to put in the stitches and she's hooked up to all sorts of bells and whistles. But I don't want that to bother you, it's nothing serious, just a precaution we take to keep an eye on her, to make sure there are no surprises." He stops and there's a moment when I can hear the nurses rustling past, their rubber soles squeaking on the high gloss floor, their stockings flashing iridescent white over black, black skin. He clears his throat.

"She's having difficulties speaking," he says.

Daddy's face goes white. "Difficulties? What sort of difficulties?"

He holds his hands in the air, fingers spread like he's holding a basketball. "Please, Mr. Dare, don't be alarmed. Most likely it's temporary. When someone takes a bang on the head, the brain can get scrambled and for a while the circuits don't work the way they should."

"But is she all right?" Daddy clutches his stomach as if he's feeling, like I do, the hole which suddenly is there.

"She's all right, Mr. Dare."

"Victor," Daddy says.

The man nods. "Let's sit down, I'll tell you what's going on." He presses Daddy into a seat and takes the one beside him. "It's mostly confusion. If you ask her, What's this?" -- he touches the pen in the pocket of his coat -- "she may not be able to come up with the name. She knows the word, she just can't remember it."

"She wasn't making sense in the ambulance," Daddy says.

"We've done a CAT scan and there's no fracture and no sign of a clot or any hemorrhaging. She took a bad bang and the brain is bruised."

"She hit her head on the rear view mirror," Barbra says.

"On the window, too, I'd guess. The more serious injury is on the right, just hear above her ear." He wets his lips. "Something must have hit pretty hard."

"It was a truck," Barbra says. "One of those big sixteen wheelers."

"You were driving?" Dr. Whitfield's eyes flick over at me and I nod.

"Was she wearing her seatbelt?" I nod again. He's wearing a wedding ring so he can't be quite as young as he looks, thirty-five, maybe thirty-six, old enough to know what he's doing, surely, so why does he look puzzled? "Is she left-handed by any chance?"

"No, right-handed," Daddy says. "Why? Does it make a difference?"

"The left side of the brain controls speech functions for right handers, but I'm surprised if the bruising there affects her speech, it doesn't seem sufficient." His eyes flick side to side like he's reading pages in a book.

reviewing the data, assessing possibilities. "She may have had a stroke, it's a possibility we can't rule out at her age."

"A stroke?" Daddy's face goes white again.

"Please, Mr. Dare, you mustn't worry. Physically, she's coming along fine. We'll keep her overnight to monitor her vital signs but I don't anticipate any worries on that score. She's disoriented still. She's not sure exactly what happened, and the uncertainty combined with the speech difficulties she's experiencing are upsetting her."

"They'll go away, though, won't they?" I ask. "If it's a bruise?"

"Yes, most likely. It could take a week, or it could take a month, or it could be tomorrow." He consults his watch. "Thelma should be finished with her now, if you want to come in." He helps Daddy to his feet and I follow them down the hall. He is wearing brown Hush Puppies like John used to wear, although he hasn't in years, with white ribbed socks which John would never do. His arm is under Daddy's elbow, and before they reach the turn in the corridor, Daddy is walking straighter, his shoes slipping across the floor more easily. He's smooth. He pushes open a door and there she is, on a thin metal bed exactly like the one I'd pictured. Her head is bandaged and her hair shooting above it is a cap of white. Blood drips through a tube into her arm and another tube, clear plastic, runs from her nose to a machine beside the bed. Her hands on top of the sheets are the color of nothing, a transparency marked with lines too narrow to follow.

I stand on the sill, afraid to enter, and wind my medallion around my finger until the chain is tight, press my finger into the dent on the side and hold on for all I'm worth. Her chest is barely moving. There's a mole on the underside of her chin that I've never noticed before, and seeing it, I wonder what other things I've never noticed, whether they are unimportant or as

vital as the pulse that's throbbing in my neck, threatening to pound through my skin. I think of standing at the door of the children's bedroom, watching them sleep, never wondering like other mothers did whether their breathing would stop, simply relieved that for the moment they were quiet and I was by myself and able to do whatever I wanted. Did Mother do the same?

Beside the bed Daddy is swallowing and grimacing and moving his mouth in a funny way. Dr. Whitfield takes his arm.

"It's okay, Victor," he says. "It's okay."

I squint into the light. Lines deeper than wrinkles cut from her nose down to her mouth and chin, accentuated by the light slanting in through the window. The room smells of antiseptic and air conditioning - legionnaire's disease pops into my mind. I think of Mother dying years from now, from an infection she contracts tonight while she's sleeping, or tomorrow before she's released, long after Danielle has graduated from Harvard and Michael and Ian have married and have had children, when this day is a snapshot stuck in an album I can't even find. A pain cuts through me, slicing me in half and in half again, until I have to gulp and bite my lips and turn my eyes away.

We should let her rest, Dr. Whitfield says. There's nothing more we can do tonight, far better to get some dinner and a good night's sleep. There's a motel up the street and a restaurant open twenty-four hours. In the meantime, if we could stop by the nurses' station on the way out? There are some forms to be signed.

"Aren't there always?" Daddy says, and laughs, trying his best to show Dr. Whitfield that he's no slouch, he knows what's what and that Dr. Whitfield doesn't need to worry, he's in control of himself, he's not going to faint or throw a fit or screw up the way I did. As for me, I don't know what to feel, everything is so tangled. Thank God, she's going to be all right, she's not

going to die, I haven't killed her. But she looks so old and frail and she shouldn't, she should know better, she's my mother, she should be straight-backed, her lips tight with disapproval. You were daydreaming, Virginia. Why can't you keep your mind on what's at hand?

I leave Barbra and Daddy at the desk and go outside. Any words I could say feel false, like I've copied them from a book. It is dusk and this throws me off-balance, I thought it was midnight, we've been here so long. The air is soft, with a sweet velvety smell which even the fumes from an idling ambulance don't cover completely. On the ramp which runs around the side of the building, up to the emergency entrance and down, there are pots of flowers, petunias and geraniums and some kind of vine which droops over the edge. The hospital is stucco with a ridged metal roof, like a Marriott resort hotel, a far finer building than any we have in Montreal or the townships, a spanking new facility which promises so much that I have to distrust it, have to fear that something isn't right, that this cheerful young man with his white ribbed socks and basketball hands has more on his mind than he wants to let on. I lean against the wall. Sunlight is slanting through trees that line the street. It's past nine o'clock - this far south, the days are long, and we're not even a week past the longest day of the year. Sounds drift up, cars passing, voices calling. Then the automatic door whooshes and Daddy and Barbra come out. They stop while he lights his pipe. Chin down, lighter flicked to the side, he puffs out smoke signals that rise and then stop, just above his head. Smoky shadows appear on the wall behind him and hang there, like the shadows of smoke on snow. Slowly they dissipate in the freshening breeze.

SATURDAY

Language is infinitely flexible. Consider what happens when we speak: we take a limited set of sounds and arrange them in tens of thousands of combinations which we link in a limitless number of ways. As children we hear these sounds. We hear the combinations used by those around us. Copying them, we begin to talk. We arrange the sounds in familiar patterns, and in new ones, too. And this is the miracle: each newly created sentence can be understood the first time it is spoken.

They are doing tests when we arrive in the morning. A nurse shows us a room where we can wait, off a corridor like the one Daddy was pacing last night. The chairs here are blue, graduated tones from baby to indigo. The same television is perched on a ledge, tuned now to a talk show too inane to ignore. Regis and Kathie Lee are promising that right after the break they'll show us a make-over on a young woman from Missouri who wrote in saying she had gained forty pounds during the last year, and before she went home for the summer, she needed help "redefining" herself, otherwise her mother would have a fit. Kathie Lee laughs. How could we resist, she says. Daddy fondles his pipe and jangles the lighter in his pocket. He's looking tired this morning but he's revved up much too high, talking non-stop, first to the couple who ran the motel, then to the nurse at the duty station, telling them everything there is to know about Barbra and me and the children, bragging about the ambulance staff like he'd hired them himself, particularly the driver, a skinny black gal "who really knew her stuff." And about the doctor. It seems that Dr. Whitfield is a good ole mountain boy, a Tar Heel from Jefferson, just over the state line in North Carolina. Somehow Daddy now knows that he has a four year-old boy and an eighteen-month-old girl named

Meghan, that he's a graduate of Johns Hopkins, which is where he met his wife who is from Baltimore and a basketball fan like he is, the Celtics are their team, and that he's been practicing for nine years, so must be older than he looks. But is he competent? That puzzled look he had on his face keeps coming back to me, that and a certain uneasiness about his character based on nothing I can lay my finger on, or nothing more than the fact that he wears white socks with brown shoes. But Daddy has no fears. Three times already this morning he has told me about Jefferson and about Mother's cousin who lives there, who was going to take us for dinner tonight to the place he and Mother had gone to once before with Aunt Catherine and Uncle Harold. In '73 or '74, he thinks it was, but he bets the menu hasn't changed since: baked ham with red eye gravy (which, he says, is ham fat with left-over coffee, as I should know if I don't), fried chicken and all the fixings, as much as you can eat, and all for only \$7.95; and even if the prices have gone up, it's worth it, the biscuits are the best he's ever eaten, better even than Clio's, or at least as good, with honey and grape jelly and raspberry jam, if you want it, although he leaves the raspberries alone these days - the seeds get caught in his dentures and he has the devil of a time getting them out.

I hear him telling the story now to the girl on the desk. I prefer Regis and Kathie Lee. They are showing stills from the transformation, before, during and after shots: a head and shoulders of puffy cheeks and sausage arms, a slimmer face in a track suit pumping weights, a towel-turbanned head, with plucked brows and a generous smile. They bring the girl out on stage and she blushes while the audience whistles and applauds. They're right, she looks better with the dough sliced away, although the brushed-on face is too innocent to believe. She's been well trained, though. She doesn't fiddle with her beads or wring her hands behind her back but relaxes and exposes to the

world the secret she couldn't bear her mother to know. Forty pounds! Kathie Lee exclaims at her courage and Regis bares his teeth.

"Hey, Barbra," I say. "Take a look. Does she remind you of anyone?"

She glances up from the cobalt blue chair she's chosen by the window. "Should she?"

"It's you in the Miss Teen Fashion Contest. See? The white blouse and navy skirt and the same smirky smile."

She lifts an eyebrow, not much, just enough to tell me what she thinks - which isn't much. She stands and stretches. "If Daddy asks, I've gone to phone Rosie and Tom."

"And if he doesn't?"

She doesn't answer, just starts down the hall and disappears. On television there's another commercial break, local ads for a furniture outlet, a used car dealer (Mad Man Henry - he's as good as giving them away) and something called Linsey-Woolsey Day, which is part of a heritage celebration which starts next week. I watch another segment of Regis and Kathie Lee. They're getting on my nerves now, with all their fake friendliness and cheer but there are no magazines here and no one to talk to except Daddy who, if I give him a chance, will tell me about Jefferson again, the same story, in the exact same words.

What sort of tests are they running, that's what I want to know. The girl at the desk hasn't a clue. It shouldn't be long, she said when we came in. It shouldn't be, but it is. And where has Daddy gone? She's chatting on the phone now, he's nowhere that I can see. Shall I ask?

I start down the hall, my back straightened, my stomach tucked in the way Mother taught me, gliding along smoothly enough to balance a book on my head. I count my steps: twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven. The girl is

twiddling a yellow #2 pencil now and when she sees me approaching, she begins scribbling notes like a student writing an exam.

"Do you know where my father is?" I ask.

"He was here just a minute ago," she says.

"Yes, I know. Do you know where he has gone?"

She shrugs. Why should she care?

"Tell him I'll be back in a few minutes," I say, and push through the double doors behind her. There's an arrow pointing to the cafeteria, I might as well get something to drink.

The hall is brightly lit. Nurses in starched uniforms and rubber-soled shoes pass, singly and in pairs, taking pulses and temperatures and filling in charts for bodies on the mend. I push through another set of double doors, pass the gift shop and a bank of telephones and enter the lobby by the main entrance. There is a semi-circular room, brightly lit, with windows going half-way around. There are ferns - real ones, not plastic - in waist-high planters dividing the room into separate areas, smoking and non-smoking. The non-smoking section is empty apart from a little girl perched on a chair too big for her, dangling her legs and making church steeples with her fingers, opening the door and passing time the way I am. A woman old enough to be her mother is slouched on the smoking side, sucking in lungfuls; two chairs down there's a raw-knuckled man in denims and a workshirt. He looks up as I pass, gives me half a smile which I return without thinking. Across the lobby the arrows continue, down the stairs and around a corner. The cooking odors grow stronger the nearer I come, cabbage and french fries and overcooked coffee. I fill a paper cup at the water fountain, drink it in a single gulp. There's a notice propped on the table.

Come One, Come All!

Celebrate our Pioneer Heritage!

Linsey-Woolsey Day

Saturday, June 27

The Old Fair Grounds

10 am until sunset

Prizes and fun galore!

Games for the whole family * Pioneer Crafts Display

The paper has a scratchy texture which I like, considering the name of the day. Pots and pans bang from the other room and the sound of people talking. What would it be like living here, knowing who the man in the workshirt was, who he was waiting for, whether the little girl was as sweet as she looked? I could - there is dual citizenship now, the rules have changed since I became Canadian. I could teach art in the high school, join the church, become chairman of the altar guild, a Sunday school teacher, a pillar of the community.

I tuck the notice in my pocket, buy a Diet Coke for Barbra from the drink machine, a Dr. Pepper for Daddy, a coffee for myself. I start up the stairs. There's a vacant-faced teenager in the smoking section of the lobby now, a Walkman deafening him to the world outside. The man in the workskirt is walking towards the door with a farmwoman who looks like Helen without her corsets, her sagging breasts belted in at the waist. She's walking with difficulty and her arm is in a cast. I consider hurrying after them to hold

open the door, striking up a conversation, offering to help - they look like they need it and I wouldn't mind having someone to talk to right now, someone who wouldn't judge but take me at face value. But what would I say? And would either give me the time of day?

Down the hall I pass the bank of telephones near the gift shop. I should stop now and call John. I should tell him that I won't be coming home when I planned, that I may be held up here for a day or two, maybe more. I glance at my watch. Eleven o'clock. Where will he be now? The soft drink cans clink. They're perspiring and the paper bag is getting damp, it'll break if I'm not careful. Later will be fine, this evening maybe, or tomorrow when I know what I'm going to do. I shift the bag to get a better grip. A man coming out of the gift shop gives me an enormous smile.

"It's a girl," he says, and lifts a bunch of roses in a teddy bear vase. He's not a young man, in his early forties, I'd say, old enough to be marrying for a second time.

"Congratulations!" I smile and continue walking. Then, for some reason I don't quite understand, I turn and call after him, exactly as Daddy would do. "You know your troubles are just beginning?"

"They surely are. And don't I love it," he says, and walks on with a grin as wide as the moon.

Daddy and Barbra are talking now to an elderly couple who must be Rosie and Tom - he has the distinctive Lothrop nose and Mother's high forehead - laughing and carrying on and wiping hysterical tears from their eyes. They see me and pull themselves together. Tom was recounting a prank he and Mother played on Aunt Catherine when they were young, Daddy says. Quickly Tom recaps and everyone laughs again, me included, although as he

tells it the prank is nothing special, a juvenile salt-in-the-sugar bowl sort of thing. But the story doesn't matter, it's only an excuse to help us act as if nothing is wrong, that we're sitting here because we want to and not because in some other room in this cold-hearted place, Mother is being poked and prodded by a man I don't want to trust.

We sit and smile. Tom tells me he is an English teacher. He has a lop-sided grin like Dr. Whitfield's and buck teeth with ears that stick out. It takes me a minute to recognize him - Alfred E. Neuman without the freckles. He's retired now, he says, after forty-two years at the same high school. No, he didn't find it boring, not at all - every year was different because the students were different - and, yes, by and large he liked them all. His voice is soft. The girl at the desk down the hall - did we meet her? I nod. The pencil twiddler. She's one of mine, he says, not one of the brightest but a good girl who'll make a good mother in due course. Rosie nods. She is a dimply little woman, short and squishy and softly pink, in a cotton doubleknit skirt and top which follow the bumpy contours of her body, with a smell as sweet and hands as sticky as a cinnamon bun. Yes, indeed, Holly will make a fine mother and, who knows, becoming a father may be exactly what that boy needs to straighten him out; although personally she wouldn't want a daughter of hers, or a granddaughter either, to start married life under such circumstances, it's so difficult for the both of them, although what with morals being the way they are these days and the divorce rate climbing - she holds up her hands and shakes her head in dismay - you just don't know what the world is coming to, nobody is willing to work at marriage anymore, the first little argument and one or the other of them is out the door. There's a clicking of tongues before Daddy starts in again, first about the marvelous Dr. Whitfield, then about the amazing ole black gal who drove the ambulance - skinny as a rail but strong! Why, you

wouldn't want to challenge her in arm wrestling, not if there was any money on it. He moves on to the motel where we stayed last night, the hard beds and the skimpy towels, Rosie punctuating his monologue with little exclamations - "Goodness gracious" and "Heavens to Betsy" and "You don't say." Until finally he runs down.

"I hope you girls are gonna convince your papa to pass the night with Tom and me," she says then, and the wattle under her chin jiggles. "The rooms are all made up ready. And I assure you, *my* towels aren't skimpy."

"You know we appreciate the offer, Rosie, but until Dr. Whitfield tells us what the situation is...." Daddy's words trail off into uncertainty.

I turn to Rosie. Where is Peggy these days? Does she have a family? What about her husband - what does he do for a living? (I note the assumptions I'm making but I carry on regardless.) With obvious relish Rosie catalogues her daughter's achievements and those of her husband and her children. She moves on to Peggy's brothers and sisters, their children, their children's children - yes, she beams, she's a great-grandmother, twice over. Daddy responds gallantly, as he's meant to do, saying he can't believe it, why to look at her he has a hard time believing she's even a grandmother; and Tom cautions him that flattery will do him no good, and Daddy says, what does he mean, flattery, it's nothing but the honest-to-God truth.

Barbra is back in her Loretta Young role, and the feeling of goodwill and harmony is so thick I can scarcely breathe. Is the sun in your face, Rosie? she asks. Here, let me adjust the blind. And Tom, take this cushion for your back, I noticed you rubbing it. Daddy has finished his Dr. Pepper and Barbra offers to run down to the cafeteria and pick up another; or if anyone would like a little bite to eat? Rosie says she wouldn't hear of it, she's ashamed of herself for not thinking of it sooner, we're to wait right here and she and Tom

will find us some lunch and not this awful ole hospital stuff either but food fit to put in your mouth; and when Barbra demurs, she insists. We're not to move an inch. They may bring Mother back to her room any minute now and we'll want to be here when they do.

"I'll stop by the garage to check on the car," Tom says.

"I don't want you going to any trouble on our behalf."

"Fiddlesticks, Victor," Rosie says. "It's no trouble. What else are families for?"

Barbra presses Rosie's hand and gives Tom a peck on the cheek, walks with them towards the door. Tom stops at the desk for a brief word with the pencil twiddler and then he and Rosie are gone. We collapse again into silence. An elderly woman with a walker inches her way down the hall. A gray-haired man puts his head around the corner and asks if we've seen a little girl about so high - he holds his hand just above his waist. We shake our heads. Barbra is worrying at her cuticles again and Daddy's eyes are glazing over. He looks so vulnerable now with his mouth hanging open, his flesh slack and his old man's thighs sprawling apart, more trouser than leg. His hand is cupping his genitals and from time to time his fingers twitch as if he is remembering old pleasures. In a painting his posture would be a statement, the heroism of the warrior who has battled and lost, the nobility of one who sacrifices his life for others. But here, in the reality of the Damascus General Hospital, it is exhaustion, not a pose but reality. Which is more than I care to see. Maybe more than I've ever cared to see.

Half an hour later, Dr. Whitfield bounces in, and despite my reservations about his age and abilities and my certainty that his desire to do good is linked directly to his own advancement, once we are seated in his

office, I find my shoulders relaxing, the fears I've been hiding slipping away like the young girl's unwanted pounds. Yes, we slept well, the people at the motel looked after us fine, and we managed to find something to eat, even if it wasn't as good as what they serve in Jefferson. Daddy tells his story again and I listen almost fondly, not feeling the impatience I normally do, content for the moment that he is as garrulous as ever. Young Wesley smiles. The restaurant is quite an institution, he hasn't been there in years, but he's glad to know it still exists. He grips the air with his hands. Maybe he should bring us up to date on the medical situation?

"Her vital signs are good," he says. "Blood pressure, pulse, cardiogram: everything is functioning normally. We did some blood work this morning to check her kidneys and there's no problem there. The second CAT scan is showing some ballooning on an artery, so we'll keep an eye on that, but considering her age, she's doing exceptionally well."

Daddy nods. Outwardly he's fine but his hand in his pocket is clutching his pipe. Dr. Whitfield looks him in the eye.

"The problem, Victor, is with her speech. I gave her a pencil and paper and asked her to write her name and then to read it. The printing was what you'd expect, great big capital letters neatly underlined - Martha Lothrop Dare. But what she said was" - he consults the file on his desk - "Martha Corrugated Dare. Only she didn't say corrugated the way most of us do, sort of lazy and blurred, but corrugated - like the 'u' was something to insist on."

"She doesn't like sloppy pronunciation," Daddy says, and sits straighter.

"Head injuries generally produce an exaggeration of personality. A person who is precise is apt to become more so."

I shudder. Pickier than before?

"In layman's terms, there's a wire crossed." Dr. Whitfield pauses for us to appreciate his common touch. "The part of her brain that should produce apples is giving us oranges. It's more than the odd word or two, it's like her brain has forgotten the rules. Let me show you her CAT scan." He pins a transparency to a light box on the wall. There are a dozen boxes, each with a circle of white enclosing masses of gray, photographs of different parts of her brain. He points to a round shape. This is the back of her eye, he says, and this is the optic nerve. He traces a line, then indicates a clear area near the edge. This is where she had a stroke a few years ago. Daddy nods. It wasn't serious but it gave them a scare. He starts throwing around technical terms, filling Dr. Whitfield in on the latest medical developments, until the doctor holds up his hands to make him stop.

"I think she's had another stroke, Victor," he says. "It doesn't show up on the scan, it won't for a few days yet, so I can't be sure. But it's all I can suggest to explain what's happening when she talks."

"What are you getting at?" Daddy says.

"If she's had another stroke, the damage could be permanent."

Instantly I am cold and my heart is pumping like I've run from lower Westmount up to the cross on top of the mountain. There's a dry prickle in my throat which threatens to block my breath. I swallow and attempt to focus on the furrow above the man's eyes, but my own are drawn back to the pictures of Mother's brain. The top one is an explosion of white. Beside it is a Medusa's head, vines snaking wildly. Another is a leaf. I trace the veins, bare and twisted like a winter oak. The lines divide and divide again, becoming finer and finer until they disappear into imagination.

In the distance somewhere Daddy is asking a question. Barbra's eyes are fixed, her mouth open slightly, as if this will enable the sense of his words to

penetrate her mind. He's not a specialist, Dr. Whitfield says, but he remembers one case when he was a student where a patient could write with no trouble and read aloud everything she had written, except verbs - those she couldn't read to save her soul, although if a verb, say like crack or slip, was used as a noun she could read it fine. All of which is to say that the brain is a complex organ and that scientists are far from understanding precisely how it works, even the specialists. He shakes his head in wonder.

"She's worried. And she's frustrated with herself. I've reassured her that she's going to be fine but she doesn't like fumbling around for words and saying the wrong thing."

"You can't blame her," Barbra says.

"I agree, it's completely understandable. No one likes to appear stupid and, unfortunately, people judge from appearances. Someone who can't say what they mean is at a real disadvantage." He smiles. "Luckily she's taking it with more humor than most. When I explained the situation, she gave me a little smile and asked why I was so sure she was the problem, maybe it was me, maybe I wasn't listening hard enough."

Daddy's chest plumps up like a turkey's, or like a parent on award night whose smart-alecky child is all at once star of the show. "That sounds like Martha," he says.

"If you don't watch out, everyone will be talking the way she does - or believing they're wrong if they don't," Barbra says.

Dr. Whitfield snorts, then straightens his face to solemnity. "We have some decisions to make, Victor. We can release her in a day or two, as soon as she's stronger - I have to be honest, as long as she continues the way she's going, there's nothing we can do for her here. Or we can get her to a bigger hospital with better facilities." He does the basketball thing with his hands

again and positions his feet like a player going for a free throw. "I'd like to do an MRI, it's more sensitive than the CAT scan. It's not urgent, it doesn't have to be done immediately, but I'd like to do it soon. I'd like to see an angiogram as well. It would give us a better idea of what's going on with the blood vessels."

"Let's do it then."

"We should check with Mother," Barbra says.

"I can recommend Johns Hopkins," Dr. Whitfield says. "I have a colleague there who is one of the best in the field. Plus he's a nice guy - I'm sure you and Martha would like him. The important thing, he's got the equipment we don't. All the latest. And I'm sure you want the best for Martha."

"Of course I do," Daddy says. "I told you yesterday. Money is no concern. Whatever she needs."

"Have you explained any of this to her?" I ask.

"Not yet," he says, and tidies the papers on his desk. "I wanted to discuss the situation with you people first. Make sure you understood. You say the word, Victor, I'll make the arrangements right now." His hand reaches for the telephone. "My friend is a busy man but I'm sure he'll be interested in a case like this."

"It's Martha's decision, not mine," Daddy says.

"Well, of course, I'm not suggesting otherwise." Dr. Whitfield's hand drops. He fears he's rimmed the shot, but until the ball lands he still has a chance. "Tell you what, Victor - why don't we go in for a visit and you can talk it over. Then either we sign her out and you start on your way home or we get her on up to Hopkins."

Daddy stands. His hand is in his pocket and he's clicking his lighter open and shut, revved up with the prospect of going to Baltimore where, with

luck, he'll be the center of attention - or close to it - explaining to all and sundry that his wife - trust her to be the one, he'll say in his eyerolling way - has a rare speech disorder, they've never seen anything like it before, had to bring in the top men from around the world to figure it out. But at the same time he is shaky with fear that Dr. Whitfield is holding something back. Why else would he be determined to put Mother under another doctor's care?

We start towards Mother's room. There's a gap of silence which none of us can disguise, a silence so pregnant that in it I see Mother, carrying a notebook and pencil for the rest of her life, scribbling her messages like a deaf mute who accosts you on the street, who gives you a note blessing you for your charity when, in truth, you realize that, more than charity, it is the desire to be rid of the sight which makes you give. Still, I link my arm in Daddy's on one side and in Barbra's on the other, and we move off together down the yellow-tiled hall, three hopeful pilgrims not quite in step, off to find the wizard who will send us home.

Mother is writing on a yellow legal pad when we enter. The bandage is still on her head, tied now like mine was when I fell off the bed post, but the IV and the tubes are gone. Her right eye is turning black and angry bruises mark her hands and face, but she looks cheerful despite herself. The back of the bed is cranked up and the blue hospital gown is making her eyes shine. Someone - a nurse? one of the candy stripe girls? - has brushed her hair and applied rouge to give her color, although without much skill - two red splotches jump out like warning lights.

Daddy crosses to the bed and gives her a careful kiss. "You gave us quite a scare," he says.

"Sorry," she writes.

"How are you feeling?"

"Not bad." She shakes her head and lowers her eyes. "Can't talk."

He takes her hand. "You're going to be fine."

She hesitates, then draws a large question mark on the page and underlines it so sharply that the pencil digs a hole in the pad.

"Yes, you will, you'll see." He glances out the corner of his eye. "Has Dr. Whitfield explained the situation?"

"Feel stupid," she writes.

"It's temporary, it'll clear up."

"The accident has affected the anterior section of your brain, Martha, the part that controls speech," Dr. Whitfield says. He's flexing his knees, limbering up for another shot. "Broca's area, it's called. The posterior section wasn't affected, which is why you can read and write without any trouble."

"Wesley thinks you should go to Baltimore to see a specialist at Johns Hopkins," Daddy says.

"Ted Glossbrenner. He and I were in med school together."

"They need to do some tests that they can't do here, they don't have the equipment," Daddy says.

Dr. Whitfield explains, fingers spread, bouncing the ball from one hand to the other, his eyes fixed on Mother's. He talks about angiograms and MRI's, about aphasia, Noam Chomsky and divergent theories on how the brain works. Mother looks confused. Daddy explains again, in words almost identical to Dr. Whitfield's, and I'm struck by his recall, so much clearer and more precise than my own.

"There's no guarantee that Dr. Glossbrenner can correct what is wrong with you," Dr. Whitfield says. "There's a possibility your condition may become worse. Or you may recover spontaneously, with or without treatment, as your

brain heals itself. Stranger things have been known to happen. But right now we have a choice to make." He explains the options again. From the other side of the bed, Barbra leans forward and puts her hand on Mother's arm.

"Whatever you decide, Mother, Daddy will need help. So I'll stay. Then you concentrate on getting well."

"I Baltimore," Mother says, and makes a running circle with her hand to fill the gap. And then she smiles. Her smile is broader than I've ever seen. It doesn't contort her face or pull up the corners of her mouth in a grimace but is genuinely cheerful, without any sting.

Dr. Whitfield closes his eyes, his head nodding like he is thanking his stars. "I'll go make the arrangements," he says, and starts for the door.

"Hold on, Wesley," Daddy says. "Tell me what happens next."

"I'll talk to Ted first, then I'll get an ambulance ready to move you up. It'll be a day or so, probably - there's no rush. But let me tell you, you've made the right choice."

"Where's my ..." Mother makes writing motions with her hand.

"Your pen?" Daddy asks.

She stops. There's a puzzled look on her face, as if she can't remember what it is she was trying to say.

"Your pen?" Daddy asks again.

She nods, pats the covers, holds it up in triumph. "My write thing," she says, and smiles. Why isn't she angry? If I were her, I would be shouting and banging my fists and railing against injustice. Her voice is gone - or might as well be. I stop. Is she happy because she no longer needs to make the effort? My shoulders relax, my face becomes smooth. This is what being silent can mean, never having to explain the jumble of emotions you feel, to yourself or anyone else, never searching fruitlessly for the words, never needing to.

It's a defect in memory, Dr. Whitfield said. Like when you learn another language. She recognizes the word, she just can't say it. But she can write. The legal pad is propped on her knees and the pen is moving freely, black on yellow. It buzzes across the page, line after line. She rips a sheet off the pad, hands it to Daddy.

"I want Barbra to..." He stops, scans the remaining lines, clears his throat the way he does when there is something he doesn't want to say. "Let me give you the gist," he says. "Your mother thinks it would be a good idea for both of you to go home. She says there's no point in your waiting around, Dr. Whitfield knows what he is doing and she'll be fine. So you might as well leave."

There's a sound from the bed and Daddy turns. For a long moment, they look at each other. It's an ordinary gesture, nothing special, but it roots me in place. There is no pretense in it, no mockery, no false insults to lighten the air. There's no need for words. They love each other. The realization is so banal I almost laugh.

Daddy stands up and his face is clear. "She says it will be easier for her when we're by ourselves. And you have lives of your own. She says it's time you got on with them." He is holding the paper she wrote on but he isn't reading now. The words aren't hers, or his. They belong to them both.

"I'll leave you to it," Dr. Whitfield says, and brushes his hands on the side of his pants - the free throw was good and all that's wanting now is the applause.

And suddenly - perversely - I am happy, preposterously happy, even while Mother's condition remains heavy in my mind, so happy that I feel that the happiness is going to split me open, to spill from every orifice onto the floor, to flood the halls and soak the ground until every atom of the earth is

heavy with the weight of it, saturated, fuller than it has the right to be. I don't know how to explain this feeling, or why it has come in such a rush. I only know that it is here, and that if I examine it, the feeling will disappear. A burly uniform comes in with lunch - something soft covered in brownish goo and spotted with paprika for color, with custard for dessert. When Mother picks up a spoon and begins to eat, I slip out. I hurry to the phone, check the number for U.S. Air. I can be in Montreal by ten, in North Hatley before midnight. If John is there.

I book the flight and dial. John answers on the second ring. I'm calling from the hospital, I say. There's been an accident. No, I'm all right. Mother was hurt, no one else. No, she wasn't hurt badly but - well, the situation is complicated. They're taking her to a specialist in Baltimore. When? I don't know, as soon as she's - what? Oh, the accident. It was yesterday. In the afternoon. No, it wasn't Daddy's fault, I was driving. Well, it's complicated to explain now, I'll do it tonight. Yes, I'm coming home. I booked a flight which gets in just before ten. If that's all right? There's a long pause.

"Shall I come to the airport to meet you?" he says.

"From North Hatley? It's too long, John."

"I was thinking about coming in."

"Because of that new project?"

"Sort of."

"Have you been at North Hatley all week, then?"

"Most of it," he says.

I make a mental note to ask why he can take time off when I'm away but has to work when I'm home. Beyond the windows at the end of the hall an ambulance comes whining to a stop. The back doors open and the attendants gently but rapidly manoeuvre a man on a stretcher towards the emergency

doors. He is bare chested, his body punctuated with plastic tubes. I close my eyes, thankful that yesterday I missed such a sight.

"Look, there's no point in your coming in just to turn around and drive back. I'll drive down in my car."

"You're sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. I've done it often enough."

"That's true."

"Don't wait up. You never know if these planes are going to be on time."

All right, he says. And that's it. I stare at the phone, listening to the silence, then start back down the hall.

Daddy is pacing the room when I return, once again the commander-in-chief. He looks pointedly at his watch and begins to lay out the battle plans. Tom has gone to get his car. He'll drive Barbra and me to Roanoke and we can catch a plane there. Daddy will stay with Rosie and Tom until they leave for Baltimore - here's the phone number in case we need it, and remember to keep it someplace safe. Now as for flights, he has made a booking for Barbra. He looks at me. The gal on the phone said mine was done already? I nod.

"Pretty quick off the mark, weren't you?"

"Just following orders, Daddy."

His mouth tightens a fraction, then relaxes. Rosie will be here in a minute with sandwiches for our lunch. We should eat, then Tom will take us to collect our suitcases at the motel. We need to get on the road right away - he checks his watch: it's twelve-thirty, we're cutting it fine as it is.

"You'll be all right if you don't dillydally," Mother writes. "Just keep your eyes on the...." She points to her wrist, to the watch that isn't there.

"We have to take a picture first," I say. I ring for the nurse and, when she arrives, I explain what we need.

"Sure," she says. "But show me what to do, I don't want to mess it up."

Time and light, the man said when he sold me the camera. Get those right and the rest will take care of itself. I put in a flash bulb, show her where to press, place her fingers on the ring with the milled edge.

"See how fuzzy it is? Turn this until the edges come together, then it's in focus."

She nods, adjusts the ring, nods again. We pose alongside the bed, Daddy perched on the edge next to Mother, Barbra and me on the other side. Sheets of yellow paper sit on the bedside table in neat little piles. I adjust the light to shine directly on them, hoping the reflection will impart a glow like firelight, suspecting it will do no such thing.

"Okay, is everybody ready?"

"Ready," I say.

"Say cheese."

"Cheese," I say.

She snaps, lowers the camera, smiles. "Do you want another one, just in case?"

"We don't have time," Daddy says.

"Of course we do, it'll only take a second," I say. "But let me wind it forward first, otherwise the pictures will be on top of each other."

"It's an old camera," Barbra says.

"Is that right?" the nurse says.

"It was her high school graduation present."

"There's no time to go into that," Daddy says. "You two have to get on the road."

"Do you mind?" I give the camera back to the nurse and she smiles. She's tiny, far too small to heft bodies around.

"No, it's fine," she says. "It'll give you something to remember."

"I'm tired," Mother says.

Barbra bites her lip. "Are you sure you don't want me to stay?"

"You know your mother better than that. Once she's made up her mind..." Daddy leaves the words hanging. His thumb is tapping against the bowl of his pipe; even muffled, the sound conveys his desire for haste. The nurse leaves. I lean over the bed and touch my cheek to Mother's. Up close the fine hairs covering her face are out of sight, and all but the tip of her pendulous ear lobe - a sign of wisdom, Grandmother Lothrop called it - is hidden by the bandage which circles her head. Is she prepared for the train of doctors she'll encounter in Baltimore? I see them clearly. One will bring her peppermints and roses, telling her jokes she'll pretend to enjoy. Another will study the binder she prepared for Barbra and me, question her for hours about herself and her family, hoping to discover a secret which I haven't found. Both will praise her as the ideal patient, and will leave no wiser than before.

"I love you, Mother," I whisper into the pillow. She pats me awkwardly on the shoulder and smiles when I straighten, ruefully it seems to me, as if the words have come too late.

In the lobby Rosie and Tom are waiting. "Don't worry," Rosie says. She hands Barbra a bag of sandwiches and me a bag of sweating drinks. "We'll look after your father. And your mother's in good hands."

"The best," Tom says.

We hurry out the door. At Tom's insistence I drive. Think of it as getting back on a horse, he says, and I do, although until we're on the interstate it's hard to relax. We retrace our route up the Valley, reversing yesterday's journey and paralleling the trail which the Lothrop's followed years ago. When we pass the exit for Christiansburg and the farm, I half expect Barbra to mention Carter and his plans; but she is dozing, or pretending to be: Tom and I are an unrewarding audience, I suppose, both of us caught up in our own silences. Blacksburg, Salem. The exits flash past until signs for the airport appear, not the silhouette of the plane that is used in most places but the words: ROANOKE FIELD.

A porter checks Barbra's bag at the curb. I have to go inside, he says - they need to check documents for an international flight.

We've cut it fine. Twenty minutes and we're taking off. The plane is a puddle-jumper. Barbra and I sit side by side, knees under our chins. Out the left side are the Blue Ridge Mountains and the Skyline Drive, the pilot says. Coming up in a minute are Lynchburg and Appomattox.

"Do you remember the picnics we used to have there?" Barbra asks.

"At Appomattox?" She nods. "I took the boys once. It's really changed."

"Oh, yeah?"

"There's an information center and all sorts of displays. They weren't too interested in the history but they loved the guns and the swords. Mother would have died - I kept telling them what a gentleman Lee was, but they liked Grant."

"He won."

"No, it was because he looked like a soldier."

"Lee didn't?" she asks.

"He dressed up for the surrender. His best uniform, the works. Grant went in his ordinary clothes."

She looks down the aisle, back at me. "People change and forget to tell each other," she says. "Lillian Hellman said that."

"So?"

"So nothing."

"You think I've changed?"

She shakes her head. "That's not even close, Ginny. Half the time I don't recognize you, you've changed so much."

"Half the time you don't like me, you mean."

"You're right, I don't."

"And the other half?"

She shrugs. "You're my sister but you make it hard."

"You're an actress, fake it."

"See? That's what I mean. That's nasty. You were never nasty before."

"Maybe I just never let on."

"You didn't brush people off, either."

"I can't deal with this now, Barbra, I'm tired."

"You think I'm not?"

"Why should you be? You slept the whole way up."

"No, I didn't."

"Oh, yeah? You could have fooled me."

"I did," she says, and closes her eyes. I push down the irritation her smugness makes me feel and look out the window. A bank of clouds covers whatever is beneath us, the houses at Appomattox, the stream where we spread our blanket for lunch - Missy and Mrs. Armstrong, Barbra and Mother, a curly-haired me with an open face, as easy to read as a fairytale. I rub my

head. Change the bandage tomorrow or Monday, they said. You'll be fine, although you may have a scar - older skin isn't as elastic, it doesn't heal as well.

I think of a summer, many years ago, lying on a beach waiting for the sun to rise. All around was the sound of water, the smell of the dark. The moon was barely above the horizon, strikingly red and so heavy it seemed to pull down the sky. I remember taking a mental picture of the scene and fixing it in my mind, so that in the future I could call it up at will. Which I have. I have pictured the moment often over the years. I've framed it with a nice lacy border, like a Valentine you send when you're young: the moon, the velvet summer sky, the sound of waves. And in the foreground was the slender young girl who was always happy, who believed that God was good and that everyone who deserved to, lived happily, forever after. Just like that.

Out the window of the plane a single cloud rises up like a pointing finger, fluffy white at the edges, darkening to gray. I shake my head. It's not the innocence I regret, that's a loss everyone expects. It's realizing how much work it takes to do it, how much genuine effort is required. It's realizing that even those who work may not succeed. It's questioning what makes a person deserve to.

"Okay, Barbra, go ahead, say what you have to say. I'm listening."

"I'm listening - oh, that's good. I like that."

"Keep it to yourself, then, I don't care."

She wags her finger in my face. "That's it, that's what you've been doing all week."

"What are you talking about?"

"That face - scrunching up your nose like you were wearing little glasses."

"Lorgnette or pince-nez?"

"Don't do that, Ginny, it really pisses me off. And don't look at me like I'm garbage either. I'm not some bit of blood and guts you come across on the side of the road."

"I never said you were."

"You didn't have to."

I focus on the seat in front of me and on the stewardess teetering down the aisle, a tray of drink boxes in her hand. She's wearing much too much make-up, her face unnaturally pink, her neck a normal skin tone, the line between them unmistakable.

"Look," I say, and point with my head. "See that line where her make-up stops? She's like that girl at Randolph-Macon you were talking about the other day. The Georgia peach."

"Marcie Eaton."

"Yeah, that's it. Do you think anybody ever told her how peculiar she looked?"

Barbra shrugs. "I don't know, but if you see her, Ginny, why don't you do it, I'm sure she'd love to know." She smiles up at the stewardess and shakes her head, no thanks. I take an apple juice, punch through the metal covering with the straw.

"My head hurts," I say.

"Do you want an aspirin? I've got some in my purse."

"No, it's okay." I take another sip and make a face. It tastes sweeter than it should. I put it on the tray. "I don't mean to look down my nose, Barbra."

"No, I don't think you do."

"I'm sorry if it comes across that way."

She shrugs. But a minute later she puts her hand on my arm and gives a tiny pat. It isn't much more than an ordinary gesture kindly meant, but it makes the tears well up. I shake my head.

"Don't be nice, for God's sake," I say, forcing them back. "You'll have me bawling all over you."

"You mean that?"

I smile and rub my nose with a flourish. "It must be menopause. I'm up and down all over the place."

She pulls a magazine out of the seat pocket. "Yeah, it's a nice excuse. Too bad you can't always use it."

I feel the anger grow. What does she know of my life? "At least I don't parade around making a fuss about everything."

"You think I make a fuss? What about you? I've never seen anything like that night at Carter's. And when you fell in the brook. My God, you'd think it was the end of the world."

"You try looking ridiculous, see how it makes you feel."

"What do you think I do when I go for an audition and some smart-ass director shouts 'next' before I've read the second line?"

"It's not the same. You do it because you want to."

"No, because I have to. Because I can't afford to live if I don't."

She glares and I clamp my mouth shut. I'm wearing the same dress I wore when I came, the green one that flashes in the light and I pinch a piece of the fabric, twist it this way and that way to watch the colors change. I drop my hand.

"You're not the only one who has to do things she doesn't like," I say.

"Oh, yeah? And what do you have to do?" I swallow. "You can't come up with anything, can you?"

"No, I'm trying to think how to explain."

"Just say it."

Can I? I take a breath.

"All right, it probably sounds petty, but I have to make sure there's milk in the fridge."

"You're right, it does."

"I have to remember to check to see how much there is, and then I have to remember to buy it. I have to make sure Danielle works on an essay as long as it takes and doesn't dash off something the night before. I have to make her think about her life. I have to run a house in the city and a cottage at the lake and make sure that when something breaks down, it gets fixed - not just taped together but fixed the way it should be."

"Jeez, Ginny, I'm going to cry, your life is so hard."

I hold up my hand. "Look, I know how lucky I am. I don't have to worry about paying the rent or whether I can afford a better apartment or two quarts of milk instead of one. That's why I don't like to say anything. But just because it's not hard doesn't make it easy." She shrugs and picks a magazine out of the seat pocket, opens the cover to something she doesn't really want to read. I try again. "It's the responsibility, Barbra. It's not *doing* the things, it's knowing what needs to be done. Day after day after day. What if I forget?"

"You don't have milk for breakfast. Big deal."

"But what about the important things? What if I forget them? Or what if I remember and then get them wrong? If I make a mistake, I screw things up for everybody."

"For John, you mean."

"No, not just for him." I pinch a piece of my dress and twist it around my finger in a loop, stare past it at the floor. "Did you see Mother and Daddy in the hospital, Barbra? Just after she told us to go home?"

"Yeah, so?"

"She and Daddy looked at each other and it was, I don't know, it was like they were having this long conversation, except that they weren't saying anything. He wasn't bullying her and she wasn't sniping back. And for a minute you could see how much they love each other."

She looks at me. "You're talking about John."

"It's weird, Barbra. He comes home and sits down while I make dinner and sometimes I get so angry because he doesn't help that I almost spit. Or he comes back from the store with a bag of chips and never thinks to buy any bread even though he was the one who ate the last piece. And I'm glad. Because what would there be for me if he did? You get so used to being responsible for other people, you can't stop. No, you can stop, but you're afraid to. Because if you don't run people's lives, what do you do?"

She looks at me like I'm a curiosity from some other age. "I don't believe you."

"It's true."

"That's not who you are."

"I wish you were right."

"Let go of them. Let them take care of themselves."

"And then what?"

She shakes her head. "I don't know. Run your own life. Do whatever you want."

"And have people like Mother patronize me? Isn't it nice that Ginny is keeping busy with her art, doing so well, too - nothing but straight A's last year. Like that's what matters."

"Do you really care what Mother thinks?"

"She isn't the only one. Christ, Barbra, what if I'm no good? What if I can only paint garbage or stuff that's so mediocre that it might as well be? What if I can't tell the difference? What if I find out I don't care that much about it? It's not like I've got all this time to play around with. Jesus, Barbra, I'm almost fifty. Most people my age are ready to quit."

She looks at me. "You remember Franklin's mother?"

"Not really."

"She was a terrible woman, screwed up Franklin like you wouldn't believe. But just after we separated, when we were still trying to work things out, she had me over one night for a drink. You admire what I'm doing, she said - she'd opened a hardware store a couple of years before, said she'd renovated five houses, she knew more about hardware than any man she'd ever met. And she was right. I did admire her. She was a businesswoman and she was successful. But don't forget, she said. I didn't start this business until I was past fifty. All the years you didn't know me, I was doing exactly what you're doing now."

The stewardess comes back along the aisle for our trash. I shove the juice box in the plastic bag she is holding, check my ticket for the gate number in Richmond.

"My flight leaves in twenty minutes, we'd better say good-bye now."

She gathers her things from the floor. "I don't know, Ginny, you make up your mind what you want to do, then you do it as well as you can. I don't know what else to say."

In Richmond, we exchange a quick kiss and I hurry to the gate. I check the number on my boarding pass. A thin faced woman is sitting by the aisle reading a book whose title I can't quite see. I climb over her knees, settle in to my seat. Outside, men in uniforms are loading luggage into the bay; a minute later the doors close.

I pull the book out of my shoulder bag. *Life Before Man*. There's a picture of a woman on the cover, wistfully beautiful in a seventies sort of way, with an enormous cloud of dark curls topped by what could be a hat but looks more like hair, shaped vaguely - and menacingly - like a mushroom cloud. There's a heavy chain running across the bottom of the cover, not attached to anything, a feature of the design more than a symbol. Another bit of chain floats in front of the woman's body, at shoulder height, circling like a bracelet the plant which is there, a thorny nettle, rooted in nothing but green all the same. Is this Elizabeth, the character who doesn't know how to live? I flip through the book, reading passages at random.

Elizabeth tightens the cardigan, around her shoulders, across her back. Her arms are crossed, the wool she's holding bunched into fists. Straitjacket.

I see her pose, feel the resentment pulling her tight. I turn the page. This is old stuff, too familiar to be a guide.

Elizabeth has taken off her shoes and is brushing her hair, standing in front of the bureau with its oak-framed mirror. The air is humid and unmoving, though the window is wide open. The soles of her feet feel tender and swollen. She hopes she will never get varicose veins.

This I can relate to. I rub my neck and wonder what the woman in the seat beside me does, whether she's single or married with a family who visit her for Sunday dinner and clean up afterwards without being asked. Her

freckles are faded from middle age. She's wearing half-glasses which give her a scholarly air belied by the black velvet band which holds back her hair, Alice-like. She turns a page and our eyes brush. For a moment I think she is going to speak. Instead she tugs at her ear. She's taking notes as she reads, frowning at the page like a teacher reading a student's careless essay. The punctuation, the spelling: these are nothing compared with the evasions and faulty logic. How could someone make such mistakes?

How can she be so certain, that's what I want to know. I look out the window for a while but there's nothing, fields, rivers, highways, cities: all hidden by the clouds. I try to read but I keep seeing her from the corner of my eye, reading, shaking her head with disapproval and noting errors in a neat little script, page after page. How can she be so sure?

Alice is an old woman now and often dozes in the afternoon. Amasa says she deserves it, she's worked hard, why not take a rest? Her joints creak as she walks towards the window. Outside the sun glares on the lake. She shades her eyes and squints. She can't see well anymore, but she thinks there's someone coming out from the woods. A man. She tilts her head this way and that, hoping the angle will help, but she can't make out the face. Even his walk is unfamiliar.

Yet a visitor is a visitor. He merits a cool drink and a chance to sit, whoever he is. And he'll know what's going on. She lets herself enjoy the prospect of catching up. She and Amasa don't go in to the village as often as they used to, it seems so much farther now, although the road is better, they'll tar it before long and then no more dust. She runs her hand across the table. They're on their own now most days and Amasa doesn't notice. Doesn't say much, either, but then he never has. And what does it matter, it's nice just to

sit, and her hearing isn't what it used to be, he could be talking all the time and she'd never know.

She pats her hair into place, tidies the linen cloth on the table, invites the visitor in. He's a preacher, he says, new to the community. He comes in with a shake of his hat and the ripe smell of summer. He's up from Stanstead with exciting news to share. Great tidings. Has she heard? Christ is on his way. He's coming again, soon, and she needs to prepare, for his second coming marks the end of the world.

Alice listens with a sceptical ear. Her mother believed in prophecies and second comings; but not her. She believes in what she can see, what she can touch, in the sanctity of a good night's sleep, a rarity now that aches and pains plague her. Amasa has faith and she envies him for it, wonders what her life would have been, had she been able. That's my curse, she thinks, not for the first time. Alice, the truthful one.

Coming in to Montreal, the lights blink like fireflies. John is waiting by the baggage claim. He takes my suitcase from the carousel, raises the same quizzical eyebrow Daddy raised when he hefted it in Richmond. I kiss his cheek and hook my arm in his.

"What a nice surprise. I didn't expect to see you."

"How's your mother? Is she all right?"

"Yes, I think so. But it's a long story. I'll tell you in the car." I put my arms around him. "It's good to be home, John. I missed you."

He swallows. "I'll get the car."

"I don't mind walking."

"No, wait here, I'll only be a minute."

He starts towards the parking garage through the fumes from idling taxis. The man who calls them up is doing his act, whistling and pointing and loading suitcases into trunks, sizing up the passengers and choosing French or English with an accuracy which makes me smile. It *is* good to be home. And there's no doubt that's what it is. Inside the terminal a woman is waiting with one of those shiny silver balloons, a little boy beside her swinging on the railing. She kneels, puts her arm around his shoulders and points. In a minute Daddy will come through that door, she's saying. A minute later he does. He picks up the boy and swings him around like John used to do, and the child throws his head back and laughs and laughs and laughs while the husband kisses his wife, neither caring who sees.

I check my watch. Ten thirty. Okay, so John's a bit stiff, but that's nothing new. And he's here. He drove an hour and a half to pick me up when, really, there was no need. We'll talk in the car and I'll tell him how sorry I am, convince him that it was all a mistake, that I didn't mean a word of it, that it never happened at all. He won't want to listen but he'll have to, there'll be no place to go. And given time, he'll come around. Because a marriage that has lasted as long as ours must be too good to lose.

I keep my eye on the cars pulling in. A family speaking Greek appears, an old lady in black and a crowd of children. Ten thirty-five. Even if there's no construction on the bridge, it'll be past midnight before we're at the cottage. We'll come in the drive, the headlights will sweep the lake, then the lawn, then the front of the house where the bedroom is. John will carry my suitcase inside and, while I unpack, he'll get ready for bed. He'll pick up the magazine he left on the bedside table, stretch out under the covers, his toes poking up. I'll brush my teeth and wash my face, come into the bedroom every minute or two to tell him something I've forgotten to say. He'll nod and

pretend to listen with half an ear, but he'll take in every word, anxious for me to join in. And if I'm too long, he'll kick the blankets loose and complain that I always tuck them in too tight; I'll tell him not to grumble, that if he doesn't like it, he can make the bed himself.

The taxis load up and drive away and the man calls for more to come. From the road to the right there's a honk - somehow John has driven past without my seeing. He honks again. Are you blind, I hear him saying, can't you see I'm here?

The lights over the cashiers' booths flash red, green, red as the cars stop, pay for their time and exit. We circle past them, past the gas station and the begonias spelling Dorval. At the light, he turns.

"Where are you going?" I ask.

"To get a coffee."

"I'll drive if you're tired."

"No, I want to talk."

"Let's do it on the way, why don't we. It's late."

"No, I want to talk now." He pulls in beside a small restaurant, slams the door and starts inside. I follow.

The restaurant is practically empty. John heads to a booth halfway back and a minute later, when the waitress comes with menus and a pitcher of water, he orders coffee for two. I run my finger around the lid on the sugar bowl. I start to tell him about Mother, about the accident, the hospital, Rosie and Tom.

"Let me know if I can get you anything else," the waitress says.

John sips his coffee and listens. He nods in the right places and asks the right questions but there's something he's waiting to say. I string out the story. Is there a detail I've omitted which will catch his imagination, divert

him from what he's meaning to do? I pat my mouth with the napkin and slide along the seat.

"Are you ready?" I ask.

"Not quite." His voice is quiet. There's a terrible prickling behind my eyes and a sense of desperation so real that I can't think what to say. I focus on the cup. It's restaurant china, thick and chip-resistant, but the design is unusual, sort of Aztec, with a border of teal and a zigzag of red. I trace the pattern with my thumb. Why would anyone pick china like this for a restaurant in Dorval?

Across the table John's hands are still. "It's been a long week, Ginny. I've done a lot of thinking."

I look up. The point at the end of his jaw is jutting out more than usual, as if his face has grown thinner. I search desperately. I don't want to hear what he has been thinking about. I don't want to know. On the Muzak Barbra Streisand is singing about people who need people. Can I make a joke about that, or is it too close to the bone? The waitress at the counter is talking to the cook. Behind her is a brick oven, and over it, an enormous pair of horns.

"What do you think they come from?" I point. "They're too big for a bull. And a water buffalo seems unlikely in Dorval, don't you think?"

"I'm not going out to the country, Ginny."

"Sure, that's fine, let's stay in town, I don't mind."

"No, I'm leaving."

I grip the handle on my cup. "For the new project?"

"Stop pretending, Virginia."

Of course I know exactly what he means.

"Don't go, John." I reach across the table but he lowers his hands to his lap, out of reach. "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry."

He tucks money under the sugar bowl and slides the car keys across the table. "There's plenty of gas. And the cottage is clean. Mrs. Beveridge came yesterday." He stands. His body is a straight line, his head tipped to neither side.

"Come out to the cottage, John, we can talk tomorrow, when we're..."

"There's nothing to talk about." His face is blank. He's turned me off. He's turned himself off, put up that shiny wall. I grab a piece of his trousers, but the cotton doesn't bunch into fists, it slips. I grab again.

"Let go," he says.

"You can't just leave."

He grips my wrist, throws it back at me.

"It wasn't true, what I said. About the man in my class. I didn't sleep with him. He wanted me to but I didn't."

"Don't lie to me, Virginia."

"I'm not."

"You expect me to believe you?"

"I swear, John. I would never do that to you."

"You did."

"I lied, yes, but I wasn't unfaithful."

He looks at me. I swallow. I don't know what to say. There's an emptiness where the words should be. Over by the counter the waitress is smoking a cigarette and trying not to eavesdrop, or to let on that she is. Behind the grill a man in a chef's hat is cleaning up for the night, metal scraping on metal.

"I read a book about Vietnam while you were gone," he says. "The war challenged one of the great assumptions of American society, it said, that no matter what the Americans did, the other side would lie down and accept it."

"I said I was sorry."

"That doesn't change the situation, Ginny."

"What else can I say?"

"That's for you to decide," he says, and starts towards the door. I call after him.

"Do you want me to get a pad and pencil? I can write it down if you want."

He stops, turns. "No, you're not your mother, Ginny. Too bad. She's much nicer."

The waitress is watching openly now, her cigarette halfway to her mouth. I press my lips together to stop from crying, stare at the table, green formica speckled with gold. Outside the window his hand is up, signaling for a taxi. I trace the zigzag on the cup, stare at the pattern on the seat of the booth, wide panels of squares and triangles which alternate with narrow bands of mountain and sky, in shades of ochre, teal and red. A fan in the middle of the ceiling is turning slowly and I watch it, like it will propel me to the door. I am frozen. My sweater is in the car. I'll get it, he'll see I mean it, then he'll have to stay.

Why can't I move? He's still there. The light is red but it's going to change in a minute, a taxi will come around and that will be it, he'll be gone.

"Can I get you something? We've got a nice strawberry pie." The waitress is standing by the table, the coffee pot in her hand. I shake my head. "You're sure?"

I look up. She is older than I thought, getting on for middle age. Her hair is the color of wet straw and badly needs cutting. Over her shoulder a car stops. The door opens, the light on top goes out.

"Maybe another coffee," I say. "Unless you are about to close?"

"No, we're open till midnight. Later, if people are..." Her voice trails off. She pours, drips a bit in the saucer, shakes her head.

"It's okay."

"No, I'll get you a clean one," she says, and moves away. The car is waiting for a break in traffic. The windshield wipers are going back and forth, smearing bugs to the side. The driver squirts a stream of washer fluid.

"Here you go," she says. She puts the clean saucer under my cup, puts the dirty one under John's. "Are you sure I can't get you something else?"

"No, it's all right," I say. I smile and wipe the corner of my eye. I know how she feels, or how I would feel if I were her - awkward, slightly embarrassed, wanting to help but not knowing how, like a friend at a funeral whose words are inadequate, however sincere. I'm so sorry, please tell me what I can do.

"He'll be back."

I bite my lip and nod.

"Believe me, this is nothing, my husband and I fight all the time, cats and dogs." She gives the table a wipe. "And you know what they say, don't you - the bigger the fight, the more fun it is to make up."

"Yeah, you're right, they do say that."

She stands there a minute, then carries the dishes back to the counter. The Muzak changes to a guitar tune I don't recognize and a man's voice starts, Dean Martin maybe. At the counter she is lighting another cigarette, leaning over to say something to the cook. He stops his scraping and stares. Dean, if that's who it is, begins to croon a sweet little number from the fifties. Love and marriage, love and marriage. I shudder. This is the garbage that got me here, I won't listen to it now. I take a final sip and grimace - the coffee is cold. I start towards the door, wave my thanks to the waitress.

"Don't worry, honey, it'll be all right," she says.

In the car I watch the stoplight change. It's after eleven, late to start down to the cottage. I imagine mail piled by the door, dirty dishes in the sink, that empty house smell. I pull onto the highway - anything is better than that.

They're working on the bridge as usual. The two left lanes are closed, men scraping and welding and patching what the winter will destroy. Les Etats Unis, Prochaine à droit, the sign says. I hesitate. The car ahead of me is turning, its license plate showing up in the flash of lights. CELABR 8. I blink back tears. LV TRUTH, NO YRSLF, MOM OV 3: all the short-hand truths I thought I could dismiss.

It's dark. Not even the lightning bugs are flashing. I am alone, too tired to think, too flattened to feel. The familiar landmarks slip past - the house with the green metal roof, the single elm, the gas stations at Granby. Bromont hulks in the distance, then Mt. Orford with the tower on the top, ski trails cutting like water through dust. The road begins to climb as I turn towards home. Below me lights from the village sparkle on the lake. The moon is hardly there, a sliver tipped to spill. It's dumb to stop, even dangerous perhaps, but I need to see the sky.

I pull over, close the car door softly and climb across the ditch. The fields are damp. Animals rustle somewhere close, and wind whispers in the trees. I tip back my head and let my eyes grow accustomed to the dark. Overhead are the stars, a scatter of lights. I sit in the grass cross-legged. Gradually my eyes grow accustomed to the dark. I start to see more: the trees by the edge of the field, the hills rising up, the Big Dipper, Orion's belt, a satellite blinking as it goes.

SUNDAY

I'm in the kitchen with a coffee when Danielle comes in. She's wearing pajamas, unnaturally cheerful.

"You were late last night," she says.

"Your father told you about the accident?"

She nods and pecks my cheek. "Grandmother's okay?"

"Not bad. She's taking it better than I am."

"Oh, yeah?" She disappears behind the refrigerator door, emerges a minute later with a carton of milk and a jar of jam. "There's not much bread. Do you mind if I finish it?"

"Go ahead, I've eaten." She sticks a couple of slices in the toaster while I sip my coffee and try to decide what John has told her. If anything.

"You were up early," she says.

"Hardly. It's after ten."

She looks pointedly at the mess of magazines covering the table and the mail I've been trying to read. I shrug. "A week with your grandfather, you can't sleep in."

She gives a half-laugh and butters her toast, not looking at me, not looking at anything, as far as I can tell. Her hair is hanging in her face and when she pushes it back, she looks so young I want to cry.

"I waited up," she says. "I thought you might want company."

"The plane was late." I keep sorting the mail - bills, things to read, trash.

"Oh, yeah?" She pushes her hair out of her face again and I glance up. Her eyes are red and there's a mark on her cheek like a waffle iron.

"What's this, Danielle?" I touch her face as lightly as I can.

"The sofa."

"You slept there?" She shrugs again and I drop my hand.

"I heard you moving around in the night," she says.

"I'm sorry, I tried to be quiet." I feel my face flush.

"You didn't see me when you came in?" I shake my head. "I was in the living room."

"I came in the other way."

She takes a bite of toast and chews deliberately. For some reason she has on flannel pajamas that were Michael's or Ian's, I can't remember which, and where she found them or why she is wearing them, I can't imagine - they only reach halfway down her arms.

"You're into cowboys and Indians now, are you?" I ask.

She rubs her hand on her sleeve. "They're soft. And they smell good."

"I don't see how they can, they must be filthy."

"I washed them," she says. "Last night while I was waiting."

I tap the stack of papers on the table to straighten the ends and try not to be mad. "I'm sorry, Danielle, but it wasn't my fault. I got here as soon as I could."

She looks me straight in the eye. "Are you doing anything today?"

"Not really. I'll probably pay some of these bills, tidy up a bit, nothing much. What about you?"

"A bunch of us were planning to go out on the lake, but I don't know, maybe I won't go." She stares out the window over the stream. It's overcast, and colder than usual for this time of year, not a great day for being on the water. "Maybe we could do something instead, I don't know, go for a walk?"

"You're not dressed."

"It'll only take me a minute."

I think of walks we've taken before and how we always end up talking about things we never say. I stand up. "Maybe later. I have to take my film in to be developed. I promised I'd do it right away."

"What's the rush?"

"Granddaddy thinks it'll make Grandmother feel better."

"Why?"

"I don't know, happy times and all that, I guess."

"Everything is closed."

"No, there's a place in Magog." I brush the front of my skirt to take out the wrinkles; mid-brush I realize I'm doing exactly what Mother does, or what she did. And will do again. I swallow. I shouldn't be using her as an excuse, I should be calling to see how she is. I check my watch. After ten. No wonder I'm stiff, I've been sitting here since six. "I'm going into the village. Is there anything you want?"

"Hm-m-m?" She's studying the back of the jam jar.

"I said, I'm going into the village." I stand with my hand on the screen door, hoping she won't ask why I'm going now, before anything opens, when all I can do is drive around and look at the outsides of houses and the lines of smoke rising out of chimneys.

"I can't think of anything," she says, and her face flickers.

"Right, I'll see you later, then." She spoons out a hunk of jam and I close the door behind me, relieved that she isn't forcing the issue. Because what would I say - your father and I are having some problems at the moment, but don't worry, we'll sort them out? I can't be certain if that is true. God, I hope he didn't tell her what I said, I'll never make her understand. I'm not sure I understand myself. Okay, so I'm responsible, I'm the one who made it happen; but I only wanted to shake things up, I sure as hell didn't want this.

I slam the car door and drive along the lake road, focusing on nothing but the need to move. The park in the village is empty, the bandstand forlorn without its normal contingent of loungers and bikers in stretchy black. The *Ouvert* sign is posted in the window of Earl's, but I know without stopping that it is closed, it never opens until eleven on Sundays. I keep driving, around the lake and up the road through the golf course. A long way down the fairway a solitary man in Bermuda shorts is poised over his ball. He raises his club and swings, not with the smooth follow-through which sends a ball arcing into the air but with a short, tight motion which sends it sputtering nowhere.

Like me. I drive aimlessly, my head full of words. That tree is awfully late leafing out, it must have been colder than usual this week. I wonder who painted that sign outside the B & B, I like the colors. Does "tourterelle" mean mourning dove? But why Les Tourterelles when there is only one bird on the sign? I swing past Earl's again. I need a book, a newspaper, anything to take my mind off John and the mess I've made, but it's half an hour still until it opens. What can I do? Go for a walk?

I pull in by the gas station, get out of the car. The day is brightening but it's chilly - I'd better walk someplace out of the wind, not down by the lake. I head along the Capelton Road, wishing I'd brought a sweater, moving briskly, counting the steps in my head. One, two, three, four; two, two, three, four. I'm a diagram in a book, skin peeled back to reveal the muscles, dark red strings which expand and contract, a drawing which doesn't bleed. I pass the restaurant, the neat cottages, the house painted Quebec blue and white which has its flag out today, and a string of banners like the ones in Katevale for St-Jean-Baptiste. One, two, three, four; two, two, three, four. I walk faster, trying to get warm. Across the street is the Catholic church, a cedar-shingled building, friendly looking, the door open onto the street. The service is

underway. I tiptoe up the steps, stand just inside. A man in the back pew hears me; eyebrows raised, he tips his head towards an empty seat, but I smile and shake my head. How can I intrude when I don't believe? I lean against the wall and listen. *Seigneur, avec toi* - the words emerge from responses sung by the faithful, full more of conviction than talent. Above the altar Jesus reaches out his hand: fear not, come unto me, I shall give you rest. He is holding something - is it a key? The key to heaven. Salvation through faith. The resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Take, eat, this is my body. The people file past, down from the balcony and up to the front. No one directs them, they go on their own. At the front they stand, and whatever words the priest utters are too low to hear.

I slip out and walk back. One, two, three, four; two, two, three, four. At Earl's the thin, dark-haired girl is opening the door. Yes, the papers are in. I grab the *Gazette*, a nice, hefty package. SUNDAY - the word leaps off the front page, larger than anything else. It's Carifête in Montreal. Two young girls in costume are eating popsicles while Mitterrand is off to Bosnia in a search for peace. A U.S. navy pilot is complaining about a convention in Las Vegas where she was molested in a corridor. And, of course, the unity talks go on. Mulroney has invited the premiers and aboriginal leaders to Ottawa for lunch tomorrow. If they can't reach an agreement, the federal government will act unilaterally. A few words are printed in bold: leaving things alone might have been better, some observers say. I snort. Isn't there some quote to describe this - how everything doth conspire?

I try to read the details but my eyes keep watering. Damn it. I see Mother and Daddy again, the way they said I love you without speaking a word. Why couldn't I do that? Why didn't I?

I start driving again, out towards the countryside this time, on a dirt road which someone will pave before long, although there's no reason to. Some things *are* better left alone. I pass neat little farmhouses with lace curtains on the door. In Hatley the church doors are closed, the service in full swing. St. James Anglican. Erected 1828. I hear them singing. *All creatures of our God and King, Lift up your voice and with us sing.* I continue around the common, leaving the Alleluias to those inside. The town will be full on Wednesday for the Canada Day parade, floats and banners and cheering crowds. A hundred and twenty-five years - that's not long for a country when you think about it. On the reviewing stand there's a man with a clipboard who looks familiar, maybe he's a colleague of John's here to make sure the structure is sound, so that when the high school band starts playing and thumping its feet in unison, the platform won't collapse. (*One Killed and Forty Injured at Hatley's Canada Day Parade*, the headline will say, and there'll be a photo of the disaster, a jumble of wood and the mayor holding a piece and looking dismayed.) I think of Mother with her bandaged head reading this and saying something wildly inappropriate, laughing maybe, as if it doesn't touch her at all. I should phone but I don't want to, even the thought makes me nervous. What if she asks about John? I'm not going to lie any more but I hate the thought of crying and making a fool of myself. And she and Daddy have enough on their minds, they don't need me to make things worse.

I circle though the countryside on wandering roads - up Brown's Hill to the high ground which overlooks Lake Memphremagog, along the shore across from Owl's Head. Maybe I should call Tom. He was terrific yesterday, never flinched or braked at intersections the way I would have done, and never spouted platitudes, either - how I shouldn't worry, Mother was going to be fine, it could have happened to anyone, it wasn't my fault. What a horrible

thing to say! Of course it was. I check my watch. Twelve-thirty, the store should be open by now.

I drive into Magog, never glancing at a road sign or pausing at a turn. I know these roads as well as I knew the streets in Ginter Park. Better - you never really know a place until you're old enough to drive, never really feel at home until you do. An hour, the girl tells me when I drop off the film. I wander along the main street. It looks as shabby as ever. Despite the gold-edged signs, it's still mutton dressed up like lamb, as Mother would say. I wander along, reading the plaques that mark the town's centennial, but they don't say much, just the names of the buildings that used to be here, with big, fuzzy pictures of how it looked. There are people out now, the sun is beginning to shine. I browse through antique shops stuffed with junk: old glass bottles and tobacco tins and speckled cookware, carved figures of men with pipes and grannies with head scarves, painted trays, stained linens, an American flag with forty-eight stars. On the lakefront children are cycling and roller blading. There's a line-up for ice cream and in the distance two sailboats are racing. Finally it's a normal June day.

I sit on a bench and wait. An hour, the girl said; but I don't want to seem eager. And I'm not sure that I want the pictures - I'm afraid they'll show more about me than anything else. It's lovely here, the sun on the waves, the children calling back and forth in that mix of French and English that you hear nowhere else. Why should I move? Why not sit here until it's dark, or pitch a tent and stay forever? Of course, it's Magog - somebody with a permit for a condominium or an apartment complex will come along. *Nouvelle qualité de vie*, they'll promise. *Une vue exceptionnelle*. And if I don't buy, they'll tell me to leave, that I don't belong here anyway and never did. I check my watch. An hour and twenty minutes. Okay, so maybe the pictures will show that I'm

not who I want to be. But it's time I started seeing things for what they are. Quickly I walk back to the store.

"I printed all of them," the girl says. "I didn't know if you were trying for a special effect."

I flip through. The pictures are typical vacation snaps, nothing more than an ordinary collection of ordinary faces doing ordinary things, all fuzzy except for the one the nurse took in the hospital room. It is in perfect focus; even the lines on the legal pad are sharp. So nothing has changed? I feel a sharp stab of disappointment. The one photo I wanted to be good, the one of the four of us which Mrs. Kerchner took before we left Richmond, is the biggest mess of all, a double exposure which makes me look like an Indian dancer, more arms than sense, my head in two places at once.

"Like I said, I didn't know if you were trying for an effect."

"No, it was a mistake. I forgot to tell her to wind the film."

"What kind of camera were you using?"

"An old one."

She nods. "Better get your light meter checked. I did the best I could but a couple are right off the scale."

"It's okay," I say. "They're not that important." I flip through again. I'm right, they're not.

"Do you need an album?"

I consider. I intended to get one before I began. The Martha Lothrop Dare Heritage Tour, I was going to label it. Mother and Daddy and Barbra were going to be there, sitting forever where I told them to sit, smiling at my command. I was going to write neat little captions with a spidery nib to give an air of nostalgia: see? this is me in 1992, when I was almost fifty; don't I look wonderful? It was to be my record, my vision, the world according to me. And

the first picture I took was to be the touchstone. Me in the mirror, the "Portrait of a Lady." I look at it and laugh. You can't see my face or the camera, only the reflection of the flashbulb, a big, bright glare. But off in the corner where I didn't see him is John. My art book is on his lap and his elbows are pressing against his ribs like they hurt. There's a slightly quizzical expression on his face, as if he doesn't understand what's going on.

I can make this photograph into anything. I can say that it speaks to the absence of the female, how she is erased when she holds the camera or the pen, so that a picture of her becomes a picture of him. I can position it in terms of temporality; how this light, too, shall fade. I can use it proudly, to illustrate a woman's refusal to let her appearance bear her meaning. I shove the pictures in the folder, shove the folder into my bag. None of these ideas tells the whole story. None really gets at what matters.

To know yourself, strip away the mental clothing. Expose the blemishes and sagging flesh. Examine and reflect on the image you reveal.

I get back into the car, start driving. Across the river, near the stop sign, there's a *dépanneur* with flats of bedding plants laid out in the sun. *Vente finale!* a banner screams. I pull in - we need bread, Danielle said we were almost out. There's cheerful music playing. I walk past a man watering the plants, pick up a loaf and start back to the car. The man smiles.

"Bonjour," he says and I answer as cheerfully as I can manage. He nods at the flowers. "Regardez. Je vais vous donner un bon prix sur les choses qui sont dehors." I hesitate. "Okay, allez-y."

I shrug. "Je ne pense pas que je vais acheter quelque chose."

He holds up his hand. "Pas de problème. Si vous décidez d'acheter de quoi, viens me voir, on discutera le prix."

I wander along the rows, avoiding the spray, stepping carefully around puddles which give off that just-after-rain smell, dust and freshness mixed. No wonder he wants to sell them - the flowers are way past their prime, leggy petunias, yellow-leafed impatiens, pansies going to seed. A woman in jeans is picking them over, choosing one and replacing it when she finds something better. Her little girl is pulling on her leg.

"Attends une minute," the woman says.

"Moi, je veux partir."

The woman frowns. In a minute or two, she is going to give the child a swat and start her howling - or else give her a candy or some chips as a bribe. I watch from the corner of my eye. The child gives a sudden yank and the mother steps back to catch her balance, almost crushing a plant behind her. Her mouth tightens. Okay, here it comes.

But it doesn't. She squats with the child between her legs, points to the flowers and begins to tell her their names and what they'll look like when they've had time to grow.

"Cela a des bourgeons, elle va être une fleur. Et regardes celle-là. Elle a déjà une fleur toute souriante." The child touches a leaf.

"Elle est douce," she says.

"Oui, elle est très douce." The mother puts her hand beside the girl's.

"Regardes, Francine. Tu veux-tu la jaune ou la rouge?"

A truck screeches to a stop at the sign, gives a long and angry honk at a car turning across the lanes. I walk along the aisles. There are herbs and vegetables. There are trees and shrubs in pots, and roses bagged in plastic. Set off to the side is a plant I don't recognize. It is tall and scraggly, nothing much to look at, but in the shade the leaves look dappled, a variegated green like my dress. I stoop and search for the label. Up close, I can see the

remnants of blossoms and smell a hint of spice. I pick it up, carry it over to the man with the hose.

"Qu'est-ce que c'est?" I ask.

"C'est Lunaria," he says.

"Je m'excuse, mais je ne connais pas ce nom."

He frowns for words. "Quand elle va fleurir, elle va regarder comme un trente sous." I shake my head. He rubs his fingers next to his ears. "Elle fait du bruit."

"Snapdragons?"

"Non, c'est pas ca," he says, and laughs. He makes a circle with his hand, his index finger bent to his thumb, puts the circle to his face and looks through it, one eye closed. "Ils sont transparent. Tu peux voir à travers."

I run the words through my mind, flip the pages in the gardening book. "Oh, yes. Honesty. How much?"

Danielle is on the porch when I get home. She slams the screen door, comes out to the car.

"Where have you been? I've been worried."

"I bought some plants," I say.

"Are you all right?"

I walk around and open the trunk. "Give me a hand, will you?"

She peers in. The trunk is jammed with flowers. There are flats of annuals, flats of perennials, two roses which are almost dead. And a single plant of honesty.

"Whoa, Mum, what are you going to do with these?"

"Plant them." She looks at me with an eyebrow cocked. "They were on sale. And they'll come back, all we have to do is pinch off the tops."

"I thought you didn't want a garden. It's too much trouble, isn't that what you said?"

I shrug. "These aren't a garden."

"You don't think so?" She stands with her hands on her hips, staring into the trunk. "Okay, now what?"

"I have to figure out where to plant them."

"There's that old tub in the boathouse. You could use it." She reaches into the trunk and lifts out a tray of geraniums, smiles at me across the foliage. "It's okay, Mum, don't worry, I'll give you a hand."

"You don't mind?"

She dips her head. "No, of course I don't."

We put the plants under the trees by the stream, near the sunny spot where it bends. Danielle does the digging, I pick out the stones. I show her how to thump the bottoms of the containers to get the plants loose, how to ease them out without tearing the roots, stringy white tangles which look much too thin to support the profusion of blossoms that I know will come.

"Grandmother Dora was a gardener," I say. "She had the most beautiful roses I've ever seen."

Danielle pats the earth a little smoother. "Oh, yeah?"

"I used to give them names. Misty breeze. Orange surprise. That sort of thing."

"Like Anne of Green Gables. Do you remember? The road with the apple trees was The Way of Heavenly Delight."

I smile, remembering when I read the book aloud. "There was a pond, too, wasn't there?"

"The Lake of Shining Waters."

"That's not very original."

"Maybe I've got it wrong."

"Or maybe old Lucy Maud couldn't think of anything better."

She rocks back on her heels and wipes a smear off her tennis shoes.

One of the laces is loose. "Are you going to tell me about your trip?"

I hesitate. "There's not much to tell."

"How did the photos turn out?"

"They're okay. There's one of Mother and Daddy which is pretty good - I'll show you later if you want."

She brushes at her hands. "Dad didn't come back with you last night."

I pick off a leaf. "No, he's got that new project he's working on."

"Don't give me that. I want to know what's wrong."

"Did he say something?"

"He didn't need to."

I clear my throat and busy myself with the empty containers, stacking them one inside the other. I look at the stream, gurgling along happily. Above the pool where the otter lives I can see right through to the pebbles on the bottom.

"Are you getting a divorce?"

I swallow. It's possible, it really is.

"Are you?"

I let the fear enter my mind and it sinks in an instant, from my head through my heart to the pit of my stomach, a big, black hole ready to swallow whatever I say. "I don't know, sweetheart. It's possible."

"You can't. I won't let you." She is stony-faced.

"I wish it was that easy."

She pulls her laces so tight I can feel the pain. "Do you still love each other?"

I stare at her feet. There's a mosquito bite on her ankle, at that tender spot just below the bone. It's red and oozing, she must have scratched it during the night.

"Well, do you?"

I take a breath. "I can't speak for your father."

"You can speak for yourself."

I push myself up to my knees. "Yes, I love him. But..."

She glares. "Don't give me that 'you're too young' business. I'll never forgive you if you mess this up. Dad either. There's no way."

My thumb rises to my medallion, rubs the dented curve, drops. My hands hang by my side, holding nothing. "I hope it won't come to that," I say. "I hope it won't." I mean it, too.

It's late afternoon. Danielle is out on the lake with her friends even though it is cool, more like an autumn day than early summer. I am sitting on the porch. Every now and then I hear a voice which could be hers, magnified by the water. I've read the mail, fixed soup for an army, rearranged the kitchen drawers. I stare at the empty room, at John's binoculars and bird guide. Then I put on hiking boots and set off.

The woods are quiet and smell of damp, but there's a freshness underneath which almost makes me glad. I walk quickly along the familiar path, through the open section with the towering trees, past the sugar camp and up the hill. On a rock overlooking the lake, I stop to watch the birds, circling overhead, swooping and gliding on the currents of air. The sky is a blue so deep it seems to go on forever, and although the sun is strong, it isn't hot. I climb higher and there they are, the words carved into the tree. Ici j'ai fait l'amour. There is no date, no initials to hint to others who pass, only the

words. Each letter is carefully cut, each apostrophe a perfect arc. This was not hastily done. Black against the white trunk of the birch, they are easy to spot if you know where to look.

Who carved them? A boy, I think, marking his first time making love. I can see him so easily, his hair falling over his forehead, young and boastful. He must have returned - it's hard to imagine any girl waiting and watching while he took the time to gouge them out. He didn't do it recently, either. The tree is big. I can reach my arms around it, but only just, and the bark has scabbed where he cut the point of the heart. Eventually the words will scab, too. Who knows how long it will take; but, given time, they will become unreadable. Then they will disappear. They'll leave a mark, of course, a sign that something was here - something and someone. But when the tree starts to die, and the woodpeckers begin to tap away, even that will go.

Ici j'ai fait l'amour. I trace the words. The boy and girl aren't the only ones who've been here, aren't the only ones to make love in this place and to love it because they have. Come on, he said, the snow is soft. And it's not that cold once you're used to it. He spread the arms of his jacket like angel's wings. My God, how we laughed. It's all down my back, I said. Lucky you, how do you think I feel?

I look into the woods. There are trillium blooming, I'll have to come back when they finish, move them nearer to the house. I mark the spot: here where the path curves, five or six feet below, near the fungus that looks like a tray.

I continue to climb, into woods that open and close with the sun. I walk for an hour or more and come back by the road, hot and sweaty. At the cottage, I put on my bathing suit and head down for a swim. There are dragonflies everywhere, hovering in pairs, their bodies glinting iridescent blue. I've

seen them flying with their bodies attached and always assumed they were mating.

But it seems I was wrong. Just as I'm about to dive in, a pair lands near me. As I watch, their bodies begin to curl. They bend slowly, up and around in a curve. It's too corny to believe, but there it is: the bodies form a heart. It isn't perfect, but the basic shape is unmistakable. It trembles, then stills. I ease myself to the ground. My heart pulses, contracts, expands. The female's legs, three per side, clutch a rough spot on the dock. Every now and then the rear-most pair moves frantically. Is she pushing him away or stroking the sides of his face to keep him attached? The colors shift, blue, green, silver, a touch of gold. In the water minnows dart and flash.

I lie on the dock, the wood warm under my back. The wind has come up, as if often does at this time of day, and there are sailboats scurrying up the lake; one disappears as I watch, around Black Point and into Baltimore Bay. I close my eyes. The wind is chilly, I have goosebumps everywhere, but I can't bring myself to move. It isn't disappearing that matters, everything disappears sooner or later. It's what you do while you are here, how you fill up the space with living and love. I squint into the light. Gradually the sun is moving behind the hill, blackening the water but brightening the cottages on the other side. Striking their windows, it makes them shine.

Up at the house, a telephone rings, insistent and clear. I pull on my robe and hurry up the lawn to answer.