

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: THE WATERMELON BABY AND OTHER STORIES

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The Watermelon Baby and Other Stories is a collection of folktales set in the fictional town of Lanham, Nebraska. The stories interweave supernatural elements with the mindsets and routines of small town Midwestern people to further an examination of the particular cultural niche that is the rural Midwest. The primary inquiries explored by the stories include the making of and adherence to moral decisions, the development of a social context for those decisions, and how the collection of moral decisions create the social context. Relationships between family members and the range of reactions they have to the making of moral decisions is the primary vehicle for exploration of this idea. Society as a governing moral body is also frequently included as a unique perspective on the behaviors of people in a town where “everyone knows everyone else”.

THE WATERMELON BABY AND OTHER STORIES

By

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## Prologue: The Road

Interstate Eighty runs the length of the state of Nebraska. It begins in Lincoln, where it is inherited from Iowa, and follows a nearly direct route to North Platte, just west of where it passes into Wyoming. In the summer, to people traveling along the road, Nebraska appears largely to be made up of alternating fields; corn, wheat, soybeans and grasses, growing quietly as the interstate plows its way across the state. As the season passes the fields darken to a thick green color before they crisp into a golden-yellow. It is a change imperceptible to those who only travel down the road. The road too changes in color, from the rich black asphalt of early spring, to a splattered brown and muddy stretch following the spring rains to finally a light dusty brown in the thickest part of the summer. When viewed from above the interstate seems only a flimsy strip of blacktop, rocked about by the waves of prairie that lap against its banks. In the winter the interstate appears a long black sore on an otherwise clean swept land. From inside the fields the road disappears, swallowed by the vegetation it cuts through.

Exit 35, Karnack Road, is located just before the interstate makes its most prominent digression and dips south towards Kearney. The exit is marked by one faded green and dusty sign marked Lanham, Nebraska (pop. 1,516). There are no markings to indicate available restaurants or hotels, no campgrounds, fishing or hiking, no highway patrol. There are neither tourist information centers nor are there any easily recognizable corporate logos representing popular fast food chains. There is one symbol on the exit

sign, a gas pump in blue on a square of white background, with the word 'Triplang's' underneath.

Upon taking the exit a traveler finds that the pavement quickly degenerates into a chalky gravel drive that winds eight miles northwest towards the town. A few buildings are passed along the way. The first is Triplang's gas station. It is an old building, the corrugated iron on the roof is rusted into a dark muddy red color, but the two pumps that stand out front are both polished and shined. During the daytime a pot-bellied man in overalls sits between the pumps in a green lawn chair, waiting to pump gas for his customers. Once it becomes night anyone wanting gas has to go fetch him from his house in town. Further on down Karnack road there are barns and farmhouses, tiny red oases in fields of green and brown. Tiny dirt roads peak out at odd angles, almost always invisible except at the moment they are being passed. Popping out from the gravel are patches of green. Clumps of grass and countless dandelions thrive on the slight ridges between tire tracks.

The approach to Lanham itself is due north and the town is revealed all in a moment. A dip in the road coupled with a sharp right turn brings the town into view. Once in town the roads become paved again, though the asphalt in the northern half of town is much cleaner and less cracked than the southern part. The streets south of the town are windy and join together at odd angles. There are no official markings on the pavement. Instead of white and yellow lines designating lanes, there are chalk pictures and hopscotch squares.

There are twenty-roads in Lanham, six of which lead to the town square, which is actually a narrow rectangle. The square is paved in brick that was taken from the fire of

nineteen-seventeen when half the square was burned to the ground. Residents can still identify which building each brick of the square originally belonged to. Dark red bricks came from the original Herman's general store. The softer red bricks with a habit of crumbling around the edges used to be part of the sheriff's office. Orange tinted bricks were used to build the foundations of the church while the bricks with scallop markings imprinted on them were part of Mr. and Mrs. Clive Lanham's two story house. Today the church and Herman's general store are rebuilt on the same property. The sheriff moved his office immediately after the fire to Baxter street, just off the square to the east and the Lanhams built a series of tiny shops and moved into their other house at the north edge of town.

The town square itself is a large bit of grassy space with trees and flowers planted at neatly spaced intervals. In the center of the square is an old well with a wide wooden bench that curves all the way around. The well was the first structure built in Lanham, in 1847 by Everett Lanham and his sons Luke and Alfred. The well still works, drawing up icy cold water at any time of the year. The rope and bucket have been replaced many times, but the hand crank is the original piece of metal and wood, worn so smooth by use that the surface feels like silk to the touch.

No other roads lead into Lanham. To get to Macon or Kearney or Lincoln, Karnack road is the only option. Few people travel down Karnack road that don't live in Lanham: the occasional highway motorist, the odd relative, very rarely someone from the highway patrol drives through. It is the tractors belonging to the nearby farms that are its most frequent occupants. Mostly, Karnack road is quiet.

## The Watermelon Baby

On August nineteenth Cassie Holms swallowed a watermelon seed. The ingestion occurred at one-thirty in the afternoon; during the after church picnic and ice cream social. Cassie and her sister Jane were spread out on their blue hound's-tooth-checked blanket underneath the sweet-gum tree nearest the pond. There the thick shade of the tree partially negated the navy two-pieces, with woolen tights, their mother had made them wear despite the heat. The girls were picking sweaty bits of fabric away from their skin when Mr. Dalton came around to offer them a slice of watermelon. They eagerly accepted the melon; the grainy pink surfaces glistened with the promise of juice. It was early in the season for watermelons, but the coolness of the melon on the tongue overcame the tartness of the fruit. They had chewed nearly to the rind when Jane elbowed her sister.

“Look Cassie, it’s Justin.”

Cassie gulped quickly, so as to avoid being seen with puffed cheeks. A watermelon seed, wedged carefully in the middle of that mouthful of pink flesh, slid easily down her gullet and burrowed into the lining of her stomach. The approaching thin-haired boy stopped at the edge of the blanket and tipped the brim of his hat.

“Hello Jane, hello Cassie.”



“Hello Justin.” Jane said as Cassie blushed and wiped a droplet of juice from the corner of her mouth.

“Do you mind if I sit?”

Jane rose from her spot and gestured with the watermelon rind, “You can have my place. I was going to go for a glass of lemonade.”

Justin settled down on the blanket as Jane strode over to the beverage table where her friends Ellen and Sarah were plaiting threads into friendship bracelets. On her way she passed Jenny Busdin who was in the midst of remarking to her best friend Mabel Asbury that Cassie’s skirt made her legs look fat. Since just before Christmas Jenny had tried to get Justin to notice her, but he never seemed to pay her any attention.

On the blanket Justin stretched himself out for a lie down while Cassie sat next to him, her own body curled. She watched as he settled himself, first removing his hat, then leaning against the tree trunk and finally crossing his ankles. Cassie looked down at the picnic blanket and counted the checks that separated them: six red checks and five white checks. They were only a few inches apart, and in front of the whole congregation. Cassie counted the squares that separated their bodies four times before shifting her weight. She put one arm down and leaned into it, decreasing the space that separated them.

“Would you like to go for a walk tomorrow evening after I get off work?” Justin spoke without lifting his head.

“Of course. I have to ask my father.”

“He’ll let you come. I’ll come by for you about six?”

“Sure.” She smiled, but Justin had closed his eyes.

Cassie's mother, Mrs. Holms, also noticed the encounter between her daughter and Justin Parks. She took the opportunity to point out to Peggy Barnes that Justin had a good position at the bank and that the Saturday before last he had taken Cassie to a drive-in movie over in Macon in his new Ford pickup. On the blanket Cassie flicked the hem of her skirt. Jenny turned away, muttering to Mabel that Cassie must be very loose to flirt so boldly in public. Mrs. Holms assumed that there must be ants.

The next evening Cassie waited in the living room for Justin to arrive. The room faced the street and Cassie periodically went to stand watch at the edge of the voluminous blue curtains. Jane waited with her taking turns peering out into the street and trying to distract Cassie with a game of checkers. At eight minutes past six Jane saw Justin's figure round the corner of Beech street and approach the house. She turned to Cassie, who was crossing and recrossing her legs as she perched on the edge of the couch.

"Why are you so nervous?"

"Donno. I just am."

"Well calm down. He's coming up the walk."

Cassie bounced from her seat and began brushing at the wrinkles her skirt had gathered from sitting.

"You look fine." Jane came away from the window and began brushing at Cassie's back. A knock sounded from the door. Cassie squealed.

"Shhh." Jane squeezed her sister. "You're too hyper. Let Dad answer the door."

Mr. Holms walked past the living room from the kitchen to open the front door. Jane leaned towards her sister's ear, cupping her hands. "Cassie, you're almost shaking. What's going on. Is he going to..."

Cassie clapped her hand over her sister's mouth. "Shhhh. Maybe. I don't know. He said yesterday that he had a surprise for me. He told me to wear this dress."

Jane sucked in breath then spat it back out in a giggle. "Have you said anything to Mom?"

Cassie shook her head. "No, no, and you can't tell her."

"I won't. I won't." Jane kissed her sister and steered her out towards the front hall.

A few minutes later Justin took Cassie's arm as she stepped off her parents' front porch. The night would not fully set in for more than an hour, but the street lamps had already been lit, their pale fire shining impotently into the still bright sky. Mosquitoes and fireflies buzzed lazily through the damp evening heat. The pair walked north, following Beech street until it intersected Cypress, then they crossed over to Ash and followed it north to the pond. Justin led Cassie to the sweet-gum tree and swept out his arm.

"I said I had a surprise." He grinned and bent down to kiss her cheek. Underneath the sweet-gum tree was a blanket and on the blanket was a navy blue knapsack. They knelt down on the blanket and Justin began unbuttoning the sack.

Cassie leaned closer as Justin pulled out a bottle of wine and two glasses, all wrapped in brown paper. He handed her the glasses.

“Be careful with the glasses, they’re my mother’s.”

“Oh. Ok.” Cassie set the glasses down and held the stems as Justin poured.

From the pond a bullfrog let out a long croak that was quickly answered and echoed in a dozen other frogs. A soft wind started up, flitting through the trees and bobbing the thick brown heads of the cattails. The wind was cool, but it did not chill her. Instead it lifted the hairs of her arms gently and brushed away the remnants of earlier sensations, leaving her skin tingling and receptive.

“Thanks for wearing that dress. It always makes you look so thin.” Cassie sucked in her stomach further and whispered a ‘thanks’. They lay down. Justin propped his head up against the base of the sweet-gum and Cassie propped hers against his shoulder. Blades of grass poked up against the blanket, itching their backs, but neither moved. They waited quietly as the sun set. From the angle her head was placed Cassie could see the underside of Justin’s chin. Fine brown hairs curled around his jaw line. She reached up her hand and stroked them. Justin took her hand and kissed it, then leaned down to kiss her lips. The hot smell of alcohol on his breath made Cassie hold her breath, but she kissed back.

When they pulled back for a moment it was quite dark. Cassie could no longer make out the features of Justin’s face, only the dark outline of his form against the night sky. Behind him she could see Leo rising in the western sky. Her lips were sore and felt puffy. Her back had grown damp from being pressed against the ground, but the hot thrill running against her skin was the only sensation she paid attention to. Justin leaned

forward again and this time his hand squeezed her breast. Cassie gasped and he leaned in further, snaking his other underneath her skirt to touch the perspiring flesh of her thigh.

“Justin.” She exhaled his name “Justin, no. I can’t.”

“It won’t hurt. I promise.” He moved his hand further underneath her skirt and she slapped down her own hand, preventing his from moving further.

“But, we’re not married.” Her voice stretched high and nervous. Justin sat back on his ankles, staring down at the dark form still lying on the blanket. Cassie pulled herself upright and began running her fingers through her hair. The movement over the blanket had put knots into it as well as wrinkling her clothing. Cricket chirps filled the space around them and Cassie felt the coolness of the night air seep through her raging skin. Justin shifted on his part of the blanket.

“All right.” He said. “Not just yet.” Justin leaned over again to kiss her; this time on the cheek. Cassie smiled in the dark.

“Thank you.”

On the second Thursday following the church picnic Cassie woke well before dawn to find her stomach in convulsions. She ran, trailing her bedsheets, from her bedroom and into the bathroom, and heaved repeatedly into the toilet. Jane heard the noise and stumbled out of bed to hold her sister’s hair back and fetch a cool washcloth. Cassie sat back on the bathroom floor, wiping her mouth and spitting into the toilet.

“Are you going to be all right?”

“I think so.” Jane helped Cassie to her feet and back to bed. Cassie stayed in bed all morning, sipping broth from a mug. Mrs. Holms took her daughter’s temperature regularly, but never found it to be high. At lunch Cassie sipped tea at the table with her mother and sister and by mid-afternoon she was walking in the back yard. Mrs. Holms thought it must have been something Cassie ate and made sure that her daughter went to bed early.

Early the next morning Cassie again found her self leaning over the toilet. Her retching awoke both her mother and sister who crowded into the bathroom and whispered nervously. By evening Cassie’s symptoms were again gone. Mrs. Holms made her stay in bed all day nibbling on saltine crackers. When Cassie’s early morning evacuations were repeated a third time Mrs. Holms made an appointment with Dr. Waters.

Dr. Waters’ office was on Watchia street. The office occupied a quarter of a large Victorian house that had been converted into shops; the doctor’s office, a tailor, a seamstress and an accountant. Dr. Waters was in the upper left hand corner of the house above the tailor. Mrs. Holms sat in the otherwise empty waiting room holding Cassie’s hand. They had arrived at eight minutes past one, but Nurse Braxton would not show them into the examination room until the time of their appointment came due at one-thirty.

The old doctor entered a moment later. His hair was frizzed behind his ears and he wore a stained lab coat.

“Hello Dr. Waters,” said Mrs. Holms, “doesn’t Cassie look pale and drawn. I was just saying she looks pale and drawn.”

Dr. Waters studied the girl. “Yes, she does look a bit off color. Good afternoon Cassie. How are you feeling?”

“I don’t feel so bad now, but I’ve been throwing up every morning.”

“Stomach trouble, hmmm?”

“Yes.” She nodded as well, doubly confirming her ailment.

“And you’re nineteen now, right?”

“Mmmm-hmmmm.”

“Well, come and sit up on this table.” Cassie climbed up and perched near the foot of the table. Dr. Waters turned to a side cabinet and pulled a stethoscope out of a drawer. “I saw Justin this morning. He looks very smart sitting behind a big desk.”

Cassie blushed and Mrs. Holms beamed. “Yes he does, doesn’t he. I hear he has a new suit that he’s been wearing too.”

“He was wearing a brown suit. It fit him very well.”

“Yes.” Mrs. Holms smiled. “That’s the one. He ordered it out of a catalogue. I hear it was quite expensive, even if he is working at the bank.”

“Deep breath Cassie.” Dr. Waters placed the stethoscope at her back. “All right, one more. Hmmm. Open your mouth and stick out your tongue.” He held down Cassie’s tongue with a tongue depressor while shining a small flashlight into her throat. Behind him Mrs. Holms stood on tiptoe, attempting to see what the problem might be.

“Hmmm.” Dr. Waters reached back into the cabinet and pulled out a small plastic cup. “Cassie, there is a bathroom through that door, would you go fill the cup.”

“Of course.” She blushed as she took the cup and left the room.

Dr. Waters took off his glasses and wiped the lenses with the corner of his lab coat. “Mrs. Holms?”

“Yes?”

“Has Cassie been eating normally?”

“Well, not in the morning, but she does get her appetite back quickly.”

“Hmmm.” Dr. Waters again removed his glasses to wipe them on his lab coat.

“Dr. Waters, is my Cassie real sick?”

“I’m not sure.”

“When will you know doctor?”

Dr. Waters gestured at the door Cassie had exited through. “Oh, it shouldn’t take more than a few minutes after she comes back. I wouldn’t worry too much.”

“I see.” Mrs. Holms turned to look through the curtains at Watchia street. “I couldn’t bear it if something were wrong with Cassie.”

“I know Mrs. Holms. I’m sure she’ll be fine.”

“Alright, alright.” On the street below Mrs. Lox was exiting the seamstress shop with a large brown-paper wrapped bundle. A boy on a bicycle rode past and turned left at the corner. She thought that it was perhaps William McDouglas, but it was always hard to tell which boy was which during the summer. They were always all dirty. The door to the waiting room opened and Cassie returned holding the cup full of warm yellow liquid out in front of her. She handed the cup to Dr. Waters who excused himself into the laboratory.

“Mom? You look worried.” Cassie stepped up to the window. “Did he say something while I was gone?”



Mrs. Holms put her arm around her daughter's shoulders. "I'm sure you're going to be all right." She returned to looking out the window.

Dr. Waters was gone for nearly ten minutes.

"Do you know what's wrong doctor?" Mrs. Holms turned suddenly from the window as the doctor re-entered.

"Yes, I do. Cassie?" He turned to the girl who had climbed back up on the examination table. "Cassie. There isn't a thing wrong with you. You're pregnant."

Cassie said nothing, only stared at a spot just below the doctor's chin, but there was no awkward silence.

"No." Mrs. Holms nearly shouted. "Dr. Waters, are you sure?"

"I'm quite sure. The tests are very clear." He looked Mrs. Holms in the eye as he spoke, but quickly returned his attention to Cassie. "Now, Cassie, you are going to have to take care of yourself. You want your baby to be healthy, don't you?"

"I suppose...I..."

"Of course she does." Mrs. Holms interrupted. "She wouldn't want to give Justin a sickly child."

"Good, good. Of course. Well Cassie, for now I want you to go home and rest. You're vomiting is due to morning sickness and there isn't much of a cure for it, just rest. But don't worry, it shouldn't last too much longer."

"I'll take good care of her doctor."

"I'll need to see you again in a month, just to check how you're doing."

"Thank you doctor." Mrs. Holms pulled her daughter down from the examination table.

The two women walked home in silence. Cassie stared at the sidewalk the entire way. Mrs. Holms stared at her daughter.

Mrs. Holms telephoned Justin at the bank to invite him for dinner as soon as she and Cassie returned home. Cassie went upstairs to her room where she found Jane waiting cross-legged on her bed. Jane patted the quilt folded at the end of the bed. Cassie sat, sinking into her self.

“So what’s wrong with you?”

“Dr. Waters says I’m pregnant.”

Jane let her mouth open wide to suck in air. “But, you told me that you didn’t…”

“I didn’t… I didn’t… I…” Cassie began to cry. Jane jumped up to fetch a tissue. Cassie dabbed at her eyes, then wadded the soft paper between her fingers.

“Did you tell Mom?”

Cassie flopped over onto her back and stared at the ceiling. “No. How could I tell her that. She wouldn’t believe me anyway.”

“She’s going to find out.”

“I know.” Cassie began crying again, this time in little bursts of sobbing followed by sniffing and sighs. Jane stood watching, but could not move towards her sister.

“Cassie?” Jane got no response but continued anyway. “Cassie, have you been with anyone else?”

“No.” The violence of Cassie’s statement jerked her upright to stare at her sister. “I haven’t been with anyone. Anyone at all.” Her face was red around the temples and she had begun to sweat. “I haven’t ever had sex. Not ever.”

Jane reached down to stroke Cassie’s shoulder. “But you must have been.”

“I haven’t.”

“Cassie, you had to. You can tell me.”

“I didn’t.” Jane stepped back, but narrowed her eyes at her sister.

“I didn’t. Not with anybody. Now go away.”

Jane closed the door softly and tiptoed to her room next door. She sat down on her bed and pulled a pillow up to her chest. Cassie’s sobs were muffled, but audible through the walls. Jane felt a knot forming in her chest and soon added her own tears to those of her sister’s.

Justin arrived a little after seven. Mr. Holms greeted him at the door and led him into the living room. Mrs. Holms offered him a drink and told him to make himself at home. Cassie and Jane were upstairs standing in the hall. Justin settled himself on the navy blue couch and looked up at the Holms’s.

“Thanks for inviting me over for dinner.”

“You’re welcome Justin. We like having you over.” Mrs. Holms said.

“Where’s Cassie?”

“She’s upstairs getting ready.” Mr. Holms sat down in an armchair facing the boy. Mrs. Holms stood behind him for a moment then sat down next to Justin on the couch. “We wanted to talk to you for a bit before dinner.”

“Sure.” Justin set his drink down on the coffee table in front of him. “Is there something I can help you with?”

Mr. Holms nodded. “We wanted to know what your intentions are about Cassie.”

“Oh. Well, I guess I knew you’d be asking me that.”

Mr. and Mrs. Holms exchanged a long look. “Really?” Mrs. Holms queried.

“We have been seeing each other a lot lately.” He scratched at the back of his head. “Well, to be honest, I really like Cassie. She’s sweet and the pretty.”

Mrs. Holms leaned closer. “Have you ever thought of marrying her?”

“Well, yeah.” Justin’s skin blossomed around his collar.

“I took Cassie to see Dr. Waters today?” Mrs. Holms pulled a handkerchief out of her dress pocket and twisted it in her lap.

“Is she all right?”

“She’s pregnant Justin.”

“Pregnant? She can’t be.”

Mr. Holms stood up. “I’m sure you took precautions, but she is pregnant.”

“I haven’t done anything with her.”

“Don’t deny this, son.” Mr. Holms took a step forward until all that separated the two men was the coffee table. Mr. Holms was taller, but Justin was broader. Mrs. Holms put her arm on Justin’s.

“There’s no shame in having a premature baby. You can marry Cassie in a few weeks. I’m sure we can help you find a place to live.”

“No.” Justin shook off Mrs. Holms’ arm. “Cassie’s baby isn’t mine.”

“God doesn’t save the soul of a liar, son.” Mr. Holms said sternly.

“But, I’m not lying. I’m not. Really…”

“But it has to be yours? Who else’s could it be?” Mrs. Holms replaced her hand on Justin’s back. “There’s no need to be scared. We think you’re a fine young man Justin. These things work themselves out.”

“Scared? I’m not scared. But if Cassie is pregnant it isn’t my fault.” He stepped around Mrs. Holms and towards the front door. He placed his hand on the knob, then turned back towards Mr. and Mrs. Holms.

“I’m sorry, but I have to leave now.” He opened the door and closed it behind him again, quietly, slowly. Upstairs Cassie fell into Jane’s arms. They sank to their knees together, sliding against the pale blue wallpaper. Mrs. Holms charged up the stairs, pulling Cassie to her feet.

“Is he the father?” she shouted into her daughters tearful and startled eyes. “Is he?”

“No. He’s not…”

“Who? Who is it?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? There’s more than one?”

“No.” Cassie wailed. “I don’t know because there isn’t anybody.”

“Isn’t anybody? No one? How can it be no one?”

“But, there isn’t.” Cassie had fallen again and pleaded up to her mother, but Mrs. Holms mind was set. She scrunched up her lips and spat on her daughter.

“Get out, you tramp.” She grabbed Cassie by the arm and pulled her down the stairs and out to the front hall, knocking two small paintings off the wall. “I can’t believe I have a daughter like you.” Mrs. Holms yanked open the door. “Get out. Get out now.” She thrust Cassie, staggering, through the door. “I don’t want to see you.” And slammed the door shut.

Cassie collapsed again on the front porch. Her sorrows pooled up beneath her cheek as she lay trembling. The stillness of the night made a riotous contrast with her mind and her body heaved itself long after she had drained herself of tears.

Eventually Cassie went to the shed that stood in the far left corner of the back yard. She had tried the front and back doors and found both to be locked. The shed was cluttered with leftovers. A lawnmower, whose only fault was a broken sparkplug, sat covered underneath empty sacks that read “Ronald’s Premium Seed.” A rake with three spines bent stood watch with a rusted hoe next to the door. Less distinguishable items lay in heaps in the corners, waiting for someone to put them back together. It was the home of objects that could no longer be used, but yet items that Mrs. Holms couldn’t bring herself to throw away.

The shed wasn’t very big, perhaps ten feet wide and twelve feet long. It had one window on its eastern side that looked out onto Mrs. Holms’ tomato plants. The floor was as cluttered as the walls and covered in leaves and spilled liquids. Cassie picked up a

rake and scratched out a space alongside the western wall. Then she pulled the sacks off the lawnmower and spread them in cleared space.

Cassie lay down on the sacks and stared up at the shed's ceiling. It was pointed and an old bicycle hung from some chains at one end. The shed was full of night noises. Squeaks and rattles that came from the corners. Soft scratching sounds that echoed around the walls. Every time she rolled over the rough sacks scraped across the floor, coughing up dust and spreading the smells of grass seed and lawnmower oil. The heat of her distress had dissipated, leaving her to shiver in the night air. It took a long time for Cassie to fall asleep.

The next morning Cassie arose to the sound of her sister Jane creeping into the shed. Jane was carrying a small basket which she set on top of the lawnmower before bending down to check on her sister.

“Are you all right?”

“I guess. What time is it?”

“Ten-thirty.”

“Oh.” Cassie sat up and brushed leaves off her skirt. “I shouldn't have slept so long.”

“You didn't get sick up in the night?”

“No. I feel ok now too. I'm hungry though.”

“Well that's some good news.” Jane tried to smile. “Mom went to the grocers. She told me not to let you inside.”

“Not ever? But I need a bath?”

“Well you can’t go now. She’ll be back soon.”

“But, what am I supposed to do?”

“Take one later. She can’t keep you out here forever. I brought you something to eat.” Jane grabbed the basket and set it before her sister. Cassie peered in; there were two apples, half a sleeve of crackers, a small round of cheese and a bottle of milk. She opened the bottle of milk and took a long drink.

“Thanks.”

“I’ve got to go back inside. If I haven’t finished the breakfast dishes by the time she gets back she might throw me out here too.” Jane laughed as she spoke, but it was a dying laugh. “I’m sorry Cassie. It’ll be ok.”

“Yeah.” Cassie bit into an apple. “I’ll be fine.”

Mrs. Holms returned home not long after Jane left Cassie. Cassie could hear her stomping around the house, especially on the stairs. Jane occasionally looked out one of the windows on the back of the house, but did not come outside again before noon. Eventually Cassie grew stiff from crouching on the feed sacks and left the shed. She passed the first day of her exile wandering about town. She stepped into shops and sat near the well in the town square. She managed to straighten her dress enough to let it pass for clean and sat on a bench watching the bank. At five the door opened and Justin stepped outside. His face was puckered as if he were whistling. Cassie stood up from the



bench and he looked in her direction; his attention caught by the movement. Then his face dropped and he turned quickly and walked in the direction of his mother's home.

Cassie sat back down on the bench. The summer sun would light up the town for hours yet, but Cassie felt as if she could barely see. Her vision blurred, but not so much in front of her eyes as in her mind. The pictures Cassie had developed of her life were all now drenched in vinegar and the colors ran together. She wanted to cry again, but couldn't. There were too many people passing through the square.

Mrs. Holms wouldn't speak to Cassie anymore, but she rarely stopped speaking about her daughter. And all the neighbors listened closely, when they came over to the Holms' house on weekend evenings. Mr. Holms was always careful to be away during these events, or at least sick upstairs with a headache. The guests sipped coffee in the parlor as Mrs. Holms described for them every detail of her trouble with Cassie; and after her mother had worked so hard to provide her with a good education and a love of God. The neighbors all nodded at just the right moments and reached for another cinnamon cookie.

"How could I speak to a child like that?" She implored of Dana Fosters as she poured cream into her coffee.

"Your own child, she must be such a disappointment." Dana replied.

Mrs. Frisk chimed in. "And it seemed as if she was coming along so well. I can't imagine that I could speak to her if she were my daughter."

"Neither can I," added Elsa Petersen. "A woman of your standing with a child like that."

“It is tragic.”

“I just don’t know what to do with her.”

“Have you talked to Minister Lawrence?”

“Of course, but there’s no undoing what Cassie’s done.”

“It’s a pity. It’s a true pity.”

“I can’t imagine how you’ve been coping.”

“Such a wicked child.”

“Yes, yes, you’ve been very brave.”

Mrs. Holms nodded solemnly and then bent over the sugar bowl to examine the lumps. She did not want any of the ladies to see her smile.

A month went by. For Mrs. Holms the time seemed as if it barely existed. For Cassie every minute announced its arrival and its passing. Jane returned to school, and the fits and sighs of the tenth grade, leaving Cassie completely on her own from eight in the morning until four in the afternoon. By the beginning of October the baby had puffed up Cassie’s belly to the point where no amount of clothing could hide the swell. She tried to avoid being seen, but had to go out for food sometimes so she limited her excursions. She walked down to the grocers every Thursday for supplies. Jane had smuggled her own penny bank to Cassie during the first week of her sentence and had from then on supplied her with her own pocket-money. Mr. Holms had raised her allowance unexpectedly and it more than covered Cassie’s basic needs. The residents of Lanham noted her routine and many made a point of looking out their windows at the

appropriate times. Many pointed at her as she walked past their homes, raising their eyebrows and lowering their voices.

On the third Thursday of October she passed Mrs. Frisk and her daughter Laura sitting on their front porch shelling peas. Mrs. Frisk set down her bowl and said loudly to her daughter,

“Now don’t you be running around like Cassie Holms. You see where it got her.” as Cassie passed them on her way to the square. Mrs. Frisk then wiped her hands vigorously over her aprons and told her daughter to go inside and do the dishes. “Keep your hands busy and your mind clean.” She shouted at Cassie’s passing form. “That’ll keep you a good girl.”

Autumn had firmly taken hold of Nebraska. Every corner of the world seemed covered with the ripened colors of gold and red and brown. Day by day the wheat fields morphed from softly waving oceans to stretches of stubble and bare earth. And within the mild winds that swirled up from the plains lurked the occasional chill.

On a Tuesday afternoon just after the first of November Mr. Holms sat in the living room staring at the checkers board that was lying out on the coffee table. He had bought the board for Cassie on her eighth birthday and they had played checkers almost every night since. Sometimes spending half an evening moving pieces over the board; sometimes it was just a quick game before going off to bed. He closed his eyes and tried to picture his little girl. It was always his little girl; his awareness of her was stuck in some long gone moment. They used to go fishing together on long summer afternoons. Mr. Holms would get back from his job at the First National Bank to find her waiting on

the front porch a tackle box in one hand and a cloth covered dinner-basket in the other. She would run to meet him, feet bare and hair tangled and they would wander out to the fishing hole north of town.

The wind shook against the windows, rousing Mr. Holms. Though the room was well insulated the sound brought a chill through the frame of his body. He stood and went to the attic, pulling out a box marked bed linens and fished through it for some heavy blankets. When he got to the shed he found Cassie sitting on a bale of hay letting out the seams of a dress. She stood quickly and thrust the dress behind her back.

“I’ve brought you some blankets.” He dropped the bundle on the hay where Cassie had been sitting. She looked down at it, and then ran her hand over the top blanket.

“Thanks.” She looked up again at her father. They moved their eyes gently, each trying to read the other while avoiding a direct contact.

“I’ll get on then.” Said Mr. Holms and he walked back out the door.

Mrs. Holms caught him coming back from the shed. She stood on the small square of concrete that made up the back stoop and demanded. “What are you doing?”

“I just went to see Cassie.”

“You’ve given her something, haven’t you?”

“No.”

“You have. I thought we had agreed about Cassie.”

“But it’s so cold.”

“The better to put the fear of God into her.” She marched out to her daughter’s cell, hips swinging and threw open the door. She saw the blankets immediately and

pulled them off the straw bale and tossed them into the bare spot in the yard where she grew vegetables in the summer. Then she fetched a stick from the fireplace, already burning. She held it out before her with a pair of tongs and a metal dish held underneath to catch the sparks. Mr. Holms stood in quiet surprise as his wife threw the burning wood onto the blankets. Smoke billowed up over the house for nearly an hour as the blankets charred and twisted in on themselves. Mrs. Frisk came over to see what the commotion was and was quickly joined by the neighbors on all sides of the house. Cassie in the shed huddled and shivered as she peered out of the window at the gathered crowd.

November's end brought a cold wind howling over the great plains, forcing everyone indoors to huddle in front of their fireplaces. Cassie had managed to steal two new blankets undetected and had used an old lawn chair cover to patch over the hole in the shed's one window. When the red line on the thermometer outside the Holms' kitchen window dropped below forty Mrs. Holms began to look the other way when Jane began ferrying bowls of hot soup and thick socks to the backyard. She even made allowances for the extension cord that ran through the doggie door and out to the shed to power Cassie's electric blanket.

Still the wind sliced through under the door and kept Cassie's teeth chattering all night. She had lost weight, even though her belly now endangered the seams of all her dresses, her arms had become spindly and her once blushing cheeks now possessed a distinct tinge of yellow. Frequently she was feverish and in her deluded nightmares she

called out to the rake, the hoe, the lawnmower and all shadows that moved upon her walls. The conspicuous solitude she was forced to endure was taking its toll on her mind.

Late one night in November Mrs. Holms woke to a sound borne by the wind to her ear. It was the sound of sobbing and wild frantic cries. Mrs. Holms sat up and walked to the window of her bedroom. The shed out back was a dark shape in the winter night. No snow lay on the ground to reflect the weak light of the stars and brighten the back yard. A cry came again from the shed and Mrs. Holms put on her housecoat, then her winter coat and went out the back door.

The night air slipped easily underneath Mrs. Holm's housecoat, wrapping coldly around her legs. She strode quickly towards the barn, nearly pushing herself through the thin door of the shed. But, as her hand rose to the latch and felt the cold metal she stopped. Pressed against the door she turned her head to the side to look at the other houses that surrounded hers. A light was on in the kitchen of Mary Haskin's house, though Mrs. Holms could not see any figures moving inside. It had only been this morning that Mary had confronted her as Mrs. Holms took in the laundry. Mary had pitied her again; her eyes had gestured towards the shed as she posed as a sympathetic figure, daring Cassie to come out and reveal her swollen belly to the world. Mrs. Holms felt a rush of heat as the shame of her daughter filled her again.

Yet another cry came and Mrs. Holms was washed through with cold once more. She couldn't make out her daughter's words, though the rhythm of the sounds convinced her that Cassie spoke in her dreams. Mrs. Holms rushed back to the house and fetched a glass from the kitchen. Back at the shed she pressed the glass to the door and her ear to the glass. A sharp whistle of wind snuck into the glass from a crack in the door and Mrs.

Holms moved the glass to a flatter section of wood. Her daughter's voice came to her, muffled but understandable.

“Please, I can't...I can't...” Cassie cried out.

“You can't what?” Mrs. Holm's whispered.

“Please, I...I...”

“What?”

“Oh, don't go...I...” A scream came from inside the shed, followed by a thump and then the sharp crash of breaking glass on the pavement as Mrs. Holms released her cup. She stood outside a moment longer, willing herself to see through the closed door. Then Mrs. Holms opened the door to see Cassie lying coverless on the floor. The rush of warmth that she had expected to feel as she entered the shed was absent and Mrs. Holms realized that the air inside the shed was as packed with ice as the air outside. Cassie had fallen so that her hair spread out over her face, catching on the thick saliva that dripped from her open mouth. Mrs. Holms bent down beside her daughter, but Cassie did not stir.

The girl's arm was bent backwards at an unnatural angle, but Cassie didn't appear to notice. Panicked, Mrs. Holms placed her cheek just a centimeter away from Cassie's open mouth, willing her to breathe. The breath came, tinged with the sour smell of an empty stomach. Mrs. Holms gagged on the smell. She felt her eyes tearing up as she sat on the floor of the shed. Beside her on the ground she sensed a movement, not from Cassie, but from the child within her. A soft rise in Cassie's midsection marked where the baby pushed against her. Mrs. Holms cried out, repelling herself from the shame made flesh inside her daughter.

“Mom?” Cassie whispered from the floor. Mrs. Holms looked back at her daughter. Her eyes were wide and staring, though they were fixed on the ceiling rather than her mother. Cassie rolled her head and Mrs. Holms saw a deep shiver run through her body. It was echoed a moment later by a shiver in Mrs. Holms own body and it moved her to her feet. Carefully she scooped up her daughter and laid her back down on the bed of torn sheets and bales of hay. She covered the girl with the blankets that had fallen on the floor, tucking them firmly in around Cassie’s figure. Then she sat on the corner of the bed to watch the rise and fall of Cassie’s breast. Cassie had closed her eye soon after being put back to bed and did not open them again that night. She slept soundly, despite the cold and the sharp and itchy straw of the bales that made her bed. Mrs. Holms shifted all night, picking away bits of straw.

Mrs. Holms sat by her daughter until the light of false dawn, but Cassie never gave any sign that she recognized her mother’s presence. Mrs. Holms retreated to the house about six that morning. As she crossed her backyard she glanced over at Mary Haskin’s house. The light in the window had moved from the kitchen to the living room and she was sure there was a figure leaning against the window frame. Blushing with rage and shame for being caught Mrs. Holms ran the rest of the way through the yard and slammed her kitchen door behind her. Inside she shook her head at how silly she was. She removed her coat and slippers and went back to bed.

At six-thirty Mr. Holms woke to hear his wife sobbing in the bed next to him. He rolled over and placed a hand on her head only to find that her hair was cold.

“Abby?” He whispered. “Abby, are you all right?” He received no answer, but the sobbing stopped and the quivering form next to him stilled.



Cassie recovered from her sickness after a week and resumed the quiet routines of her life. On one of her trips to the grocer Cassie bumped into Justin as he exited the store she was about to enter. Justin wasn't alone, but Jenny Busdin was clinging tightly to his arm. Justin stopped when he saw Cassie. She was wearing the same dress she had been wearing when he saw her sitting in the town square. It looked ragged now and the seams along the sides were clearly not straight, though that could have been a symptom of her now protruding belly.

Jenny crowed as she saw Cassie. "Look who it is Justin. Cassie looks so matronly now, doesn't she? You were lucky you found out about her when you did."

Cassie didn't hear if Justin replied. She fled in the direction she was already pointed. She ran past the grocers and towards the other side of the square where she tripped on the curb in front of Mrs. Delasos's clothing shop. She landed heavily on her stomach and her hair splayed out across the sidewalk. Cassie pushed herself upright and coughed.

. The cough began as a mild tickle in her throat, but quickly spread into a deep wracking cough that shook all her limbs. Peggy Barnes who was in Mrs. Delasos's shop at the time saw the girl retching on the street and ran for Dr. Waters. He came quickly and scooped up Cassie in his arms and carried her back to his office where he lay her down on the examination table. Mrs. Holms was telephoned by Nurse Braxton and was coaxed into coming to her daughter's side.

Cassie's coughs grew steadily more violent, her entire body pitching and writhing with each exhalation. Dr. Waters placed a cool cloth on her forehead and told her to breathe. Mrs. Holms and Jane entered the room as Cassie spat blood onto the front of her dress. Jane ran to her side as Mrs. Holms moved to occupy the chair in the corner of the room. She sat quietly watching her daughter with suspicious repugnance.

It wasn't long before, in one great heave, the baby was thrust out and spat into a yellow blanket that Dr. Waters held out before Cassie. It screamed immediately, a pale whine that wormed into Mrs. Holms' ears as she stared at the shape of her grandson. In all dimensions he appeared healthy and was waving his arms and legs wildly. But it was his complexion that caused Mrs. Holms and Jane to rub at their eyes. The boy was pale green all over with light white stripes running from head to toe. His hair as well was green though darker and thick with tiny leaves.

"A watermelon baby." Dr. Waters pronounced as he rubbed down the wriggling child and wrapped it in a fresh blanket. "I haven't seen one in nearly forty years."

"A watermelon baby?" Mrs. Holms and Jane asked together.

"Yes, that's what he is, a watermelon baby."

Cassie had collapsed back onto the bed and was panting like an exhausted mule. Dr. Waters handed the baby to his grandmother so he could attend to the mother. Mrs. Holms had tried to wave the baby away, but Dr. Waters nearly tossed the boy into her lap. Looking down at him she noticed that his eyes were the darkest and loveliest she had ever seen. The bawling continued and Mrs. Holms found herself gently rocking the child. He was her grandson. It wasn't his fault that his mother was disrespectable. In less than a breath Mrs. Holms revised her opinion of the child and realized that she could

never abandon him to the world. Cassie had made the choice to abandon decent society, but she had no right to choose for Mrs. Holms' grandson.

Jane stood at the end of Cassie's bed watching Dr. Waters. Cassie's eyes were red and runny and she was murmuring. Dr. Waters lifted her arm to give her an injection and Cassie sunk back into sleep. Jane reached down to pat Cassie's leg.

"Is she going to be ok?"

"She'll be fine. And so will her baby." He said turning around to glance at the newborn.

"Well, he's certainly healthy enough, I'm taking David home." Mrs. Holms announced. She stood quickly and left the room. Dr. Waters watched until the door to the exam room was shut again before turning back to Cassie's bedside.

"Dr. Waters?"

"Yes, Jane?"

"Why is it a watermelon baby?"

"Hmmm...?" He turned his attention from Cassie to Jane, who had leaned forward in her chair and was now staring up at him. "Oh, Jane, you see, this baby was created when Cassie swallowed the seed of a watermelon."

"A seed?" Jane jumped from her chair excited. "She swallowed a seed? Then she's innocent. She can come back to the house."

Dr. Waters put a hand on Jane's shoulder and placed her back on her seat. "I'm sorry Jane, but that isn't going to happen."

"Why not? Why can't we just tell everybody that it isn't her fault?"

“Jane, it doesn’t matter whether or not it’s Cassie’s fault.”

“But, it...”

“Jane listen to me. The sin ascribed to Cassie is currently the sin of her own actions. Everyone will believe the baby is a watermelon baby because Cassie has sinned. They can understand that. They can accept that, and maybe they can accept the baby. You don’t want the baby to get thrown into the shed too, do you?”

“No, but...”

“Jane.” Dr. Water’s knelt before her. “What do you think Minister Lawrence would do if he knew that the baby was the result of a watermelon seed?”

“I don’t know.”

“He’d call it evil. He’d tell everyone in town it was a demon’s child. You’re mother couldn’t bear that Jane. She’d have to get rid of the baby, too.”

“What about Cassie?” The both looked back over towards the bed, where Cassie was resting peacefully now.

“I’m sorry about Cassie, Jane, but there isn’t anything I can do.” He turned away from Jane and walked to the door. He stood in front of it for a long moment before turning back.

“This way is best Jane.” He tried to smile at the girl. “I know.” Then he left the room.

The room that had once belonged to Cassie was quickly morphed into a nursery. Blue bunnies dangled above a new white crib. Cassie could see them from the door of

the shed. It was unlikely Mrs. Holms would notice anything Cassie did unless she tried to enter the house. On the third day Cassie begged Jane, who had come to give Cassie a turkey sandwich, to let her see her baby. Her voice had turned hoarse from the birth, the cold and the unquenchable sorrow, but it was when she looked up at Jane from where she sat cross legged on the sagging bales of straw that Jane noticed how pale Cassie had become. It was not only the complexion, there was something empty in Cassie's eyes that made Jane step back. Her eyes no longer projected a sense of helplessness, but had taken on a wild nearly frantic aspect. Jane set the sandwich on top of the lawnmower and backed out of the shed.

That night Cassie went to peer inside the nursery window. She had done so the previous two nights, just for a few minutes before the cold caught her too deeply. But tonight the right side of curtain in David's bedroom was pulled back further than normal and she could see clearly the darkened inside of the room. There was the crib, the new dresser, the rocking chair, the shelf of stuffed toys that used to hold Cassie's books. Inside the crib David was just visible through the bars, a small delicate, pale green body in a dark green pajama suit. Cassie pressed her forehead against the frigid glass, soaking in her child. She could see the tiny lids of his eyes flutter as he breathed. Snow began to fall around two in the morning. David shifted his head so that Cassie could see him in profile, his tiny rounded nose and the few leafy wisps of hair. A heavy wind joined in at half past three, but Cassie stayed where she was. Her legs began to feel heavy first, then her arms and finally her head and torso could not have been moved if she had tried.

## Pretty Little Houses

Elsa Petersen's living room was a cluttered, yet dustless place. Heavy cherry-wood furniture snuggled against the four walls, shrinking the room. A large credenza jutted out from the wall, partitioning off further the small area of carpet in the middle. Two full sized couches faced each other in the center of the room with a wide coffee table set between them. Five small end tables were wedged into available corners each bearing a lamp or a vase or a statuette. But the most impressive piece of furniture in the room was the curio cabinet on the east wall. It was a massive construction of wood and glass, polished and varnished so that the deep red wood reflected images as well as a mirror. It was the contents of this curio cabinet which, on a particular Sunday afternoon in March, attracted the attention two young children.

Kirsten and Dustin Lawrence, aged eleven and nine, were visiting their aunt Elsa as they did every Sunday after church. This Sunday, like many other days in March, was both rainy and cold, and the children were kept inside. They had been given toys to hold their attention while the adults of the family talked in the kitchen, but Kirsten was bored with her book and Dustin was losing interest in building blocks. They found themselves, around two-thirty in the afternoon, staring, as they had stared before, at the contents of the curio cabinet.

The cabinet, in fact, was the home of their aunt Elsa's collection of miniature houses, people, trees, bushes, sidewalks, roads, street signs and lawn geese. She owned one hundred and sixty-two houses in addition to thousands of smaller pieces though the children never bothered to count. To them it merely seemed a whole world in miniature spread out before them. Kirsten loved to stare at the tiny people, some painted, some carved, some sewn, but all crafted with immaculate attention to detail so that lace shifts peeked out from underneath women's skirts and tiny handkerchiefs appeared folded at the top of men's breast pockets. Everyone in the town appeared dressed for church, except for a few boys in jeans and overalls who were lying in the grass. Dustin had no interest in the details of clothes, but was fascinated by the rigged up electrical system that allowed the lights in the houses and the streetlamps to be turned on and off, the fountains that ran with real water and the bells in the church that could ring *Hallelujah*.

The top part of the curio cabinet was composed of nine shelves behind glass panels, each lighted by a tiny light that was affixed to the top of the above shelf. There was a wide splashboard in the center and six drawers beneath. Elsa had arranged her houses to represent the layout of Lanham. The top nine shelves were designated Maple, Beech, Ash, Oak, Pine, Dogwood (her own), Sycamore, Cypress and Holly to correspond with the streets of north Lanham. The splashboard represented the town square while the drawers of the cabinet pulled out to reveal more houses, spaced out inside the drawers to correspond with the southern half of Lanham, where the streets were not laid out in such clean order.

Normally Kirsten and Dustin were not allowed in the living room without an adult to supervise them, but today both their parents and aunt Elsa were in the kitchen, chatting

away without paying any attention to the children. They stared at the figures in the cabinet for a long time, hands held behind their backs, because they had been told many times not to touch other people's breakables. Mostly they studied the figures on the splashboard, the upper shelves were too high for them to reach and neither child was bold enough to pull out one of the lower drawers.

"Hey," Kirsten whispered to her brother. "That little boy looks like you."

"Where?"

"That one right there." Kirsten stretched her finger out so that it nearly touched the porcelain child.

"Wow." Dustin breathed. "It does look like me." He picked up the figure and cupped it in his hand. "Look. Those are my good shoes."

"Dustiiiiin... We're not supposed to touch those." She wrung her hands as she spoke, a gesture of her mother's. Dustin shrugged.

"I ain't going to break it. I'll put it back in a minute."

"Put it back now."

"In a minute. I just wanna see it. Don't you want to see yourself?"

"What?"

"That little girl there. That looks like you."

Kirsten looked to where he was pointing, only a few inches away from where his figurine had been. A little girl, with brown pigtails and a navy hound's tooth checked dress was standing under a maple tree.

"That does look like me." She reached over and picked up the little girl.

"See." Said Dustin. "That's the dress you're wearing now."



Kirsten looked down at herself and then at the girl in her hand. “Do you think aunt Elsa knew what I’d be wearing today.”

“No, stupid.” Dustin tried to smack his sister, but she ducked. “You wear that every Sunday.”

“Not every Sunday.”

“Well, most.” Dustin set his figurine back near where it had been. “I wonder were Mom and Dad are.”

“Oh, here, over by the church.” Kirsten put down her statuette and picked up the one of her father. She turned it over in her hand before setting it down to examine her mother. Dustin picked up a streetlamp and looked at the tiny wiring coming from its base. They stayed in the living room for a long time, looking at all the people they knew standing still in their aunt’s living room.

“Haha. Look, Kris, it’s Ryan.” He picked up another figure and showed it to Kirsten. “He’s wearing that bow tie he hates.”

Kirsten giggled.

“What are you two doing in here?” Mrs. Lawrence hissed at them from the living room door. “You know you’re not supposed to play with your aunt Elsa’s things.”

They quickly set down the figures they were holding. “We’re sorry.”

“You didn’t break anything did you?” Mrs. Lawrence walked over to inspect the little town. “Aunt Elsa would be very upset if you broke something you weren’t supposed to be playing with.”

“No, Mom. We didn’t break anything.”

“Well, come on into the kitchen then. It’s time to eat.”

Later in the evening when her brother and his family left Elsa went into the living room. She looked over towards the curio cabinet, frowned and then walked over to begin the process of returning all the figurines to their proper places. As she inspected the disturbed pieces she noticed that many of them had tiny sticky fingerprints. She fetched her dusting gloves and her cloths and feather duster from the kitchen and began cleaning. Dust caused paint to erode and chip and cloth to loose its texture. Normally she dusted her entire collection twice a week with a long brown feather duster that she had made herself from mallard feathers collected out by the pond. Once on Wednesday afternoons so that she could be seen handling them as her bridge group arrived at eight; and also on Sunday mornings, before church, so they would look their best when her brother Alan, the town minister, his family, and anyone he was succoring as part of his ministerial duties arrived for afternoon tea.

Elsa was very proud of her collection and spoke often of it to her friends. It was very nearly all she spoke of, not having the normal family duties to concern herself with. None of her friends begrudged her, they were mostly happy she had a hobby to occupy so much of her time. Elsa lived alone. Her husband had died of the cough four years ago leaving Elsa with a moderate savings account and no children. Since then Elsa had pre-occupied herself by assisting her brother when she could and expanding her house collection. At the time of her husband's death she had only owned seventeen houses, which were then displayed on a long table in the front hall, but after the boredom of widowhood set in she began to spend more time with the miniatures. It was almost as if

she had reverted to the state in childhood where she would spend all her time in the company of her dolls, dressing them, arranging their hair and their homes. She used to spend hours crafting shoeboxes into rooms. Now that effort was redirected into the creation of the town that grew inside her curio cabinet.

Elsa's favorite house was a porcelain Victorian with lavender drapes painted in the windows. It sat near the center of the top center shelf with two carved oak trees standing watch on either side. She had always been annoyed that her house did not sit exactly in the middle of her street and as a result the Victorian must always be slightly to the left of center on the shelf. The model house had an elaborate roof with actual shingles instead of just a painted representation. And the front door opened on a tiny hinge to reveal a front hall that was painted the same as Elsa's. After being given the house as a present for Christmas two years previously Elsa had her own blue drapes replaced with lavender and the outside of her house painted a very pale shade of yellow to match the figurine.

Her second favorite house was a wood-carving of a traditional English parish church and it marked her brother's home. It was not painted, but the detail of the carving showed a series of stained glass windows on all four sides of the church. It looked nothing like her brother's actual home, but the ecclesiastical connection was strong enough in her mind to take precedence to something more realistic. A small farmhouse with a tiny orange cat sitting on its stoop was Elsa's next favorite. It represented the house of Betty Updike, her closest friend who also happened to own an orange tom cat named Whiskers. Many other houses also resembled the homes in Lanham, though none of them matched as perfectly as Elsa's. She spent a lot of time locating houses that

matched the dwellings of Lanham, but there were just too few good matches in the shops and catalogues she browsed. So Elsa learned how to sculpt and paint and thereafter all the houses that were added to the town were as close to the originals as possible.

Elsa spent many hours in the living room gazing down at her little municipality. The state of youngwidowhood kept her from many of the pastimes and occupations she had thought would fill these years of her life. She was also excluded from many of the bonds of friendship that spring up between young mothers and couples just starting their lives together. But the solitude of her life never fully dawned on Elsa. She crafted and birthed a world in her living room, and devoted to its rearing all the time and attention she would have given to her own children. She studied to memorization the way each corner of each house appeared and the location of every tiny tree, bush, flower and stone. She always knew instantly if something had been moved, even across the room she could sense a centimeters shift in the position of even one house, just a mother instinctively knows there is something wrong with their child.

But just as a baby grows the town did as well. Elsa often rearranged the order of her town, switching one house for another in accordance to the feelings of order and propriety that Elsa felt as she judged the new layout. She allowed the shifting organization of miniatures to reflect the developments she saw and heard about in town. Repaved roads, additions to houses, the new clock on the church tower and dozens of new swing sets, rose bushes and children were added as the town developed. The layout of the town was also altered for reasons other than a better fit to reality. Elsa honored her friends with representation by houses that were carefully painted to match what Elsa thought their houses should look like. There were numerous examples of houses that

strayed from perfect representation because of Elsa's preferences. Most recently, Peggy Barnes's house had been repainted and a bed of tulips was added underneath her front windows, even though Peggy planted no flowers in her yard. The improvements were added after Peggy brought Elsa dinner one night in March after Elsa had cut her hand slicing potatoes. Elsa had been pleased later that Peggy had recognized the gesture and planted tulips in her front yard.

As the time following the death of her husband stretched from the awkward period of conscious widowhood to the more sedate rest of her life Elsa spent more and more of her time in the living room. She had a small monthly income, but it was not large enough keep her entirely in the style she desired, so Elsa made do. She did not have the money to decorate an entire house in the style of her living room. So Elsa decorated carefully. In addition to the living room Elsa delicately furnished the front hall, the guest bathroom and the half of the kitchen that could be seen by someone standing in either the living room or the front hall. Elsa's bedroom was almost barren, with just a queen-sized bed and one wardrobe up against the north wall. Her dining room was just as empty. It housed only a folding chair, a card table and a small wooden shelf full of paints and brushes. Often clay houses were lined up on newspaper along the edge of the floor: some with just a base coat of paint, some with tiny shingles drying. Except for Wednesdays and Sundays Elsa rarely brought guests over. It was too much trouble to keep them from wandering back towards the kitchen or other parts of the house which were decorated only in white paint and little furniture. So Elsa sat alone in her living room at night most nights and even in the afternoons when she had no errands. Over time Elsa progressed from merely reflecting what she saw and heard in the town in her curio cabinet to

imagining events that took place in the little houses of Lanham. She imagined her brother and his wife reading to their children as they were put to bed. She thought of how Abby Holms must be trying to decide how to raise that new baby. She thought how Jenny Busdin must be punishing herself for allowing the Parks boy to get away; Elsa thought she'd probably be starving herself. She thought so much about how the world was inside her curio cabinet that she began to lose track of the outer world, and sometimes forgot what she had invented and what was real. But Elsa didn't notice much of a problem, she'd always considered herself a good judge of character and an intuitive discoverer of what people did when they thought they were alone.

On a Wednesday night in April Elsa and Betty sat across from each other in Elsa's living room. Abby Holms and Dara Edlson sat to their sides, all four women were engrossed in the cards they held. Betty and Elsa were winning the bridge game, though not by very many points. Elsa had bid two hearts and taken them during the last hand and the two diamonds bid that Betty had just won looked as if it was going to carry.

Betty set down her cards and took a sip of tea. "I'm going to bake some peach cobbler for the charity dance on Friday. I just got some peaches from the Anderson's farm, they've just gone ripe."

Elsa fanned out her cards and tapped them on the side of the table. "I thought you were going to bake brownies."

Betty looked up and dropped her head to the side as she spoke. "I was, but then I started craving peaches." She shrugged her shoulders.

“But I was going to bring peach pies.”

“You never said.”

“I always bring peach pie.”

Dara cut in while laying down the eight of clubs. “Oh, don’t worry. Everyone likes peaches.” Elsa and Betty looked at Dara and back towards their cards. Dara, as the youngest woman present, bit her lower lip and looked back down at her cards. Betty played the queen of clubs, Abby followed with the king and Elsa played the four of diamonds. Betty collected the cards as Elsa laid down the jack of hearts.

“We still aren’t going to want two desserts made with peaches. You’ll just have to make brownies like you said you were going to.” Dara threw off the four of hearts, Betty played the six and Abby laid down the queen. Elsa frowned at Betty.

“I’ve already got four pounds of peaches in my kitchen. Have you got your peaches already?”

“No, but that’s not the point. I had planned on getting them and you had planned on making brownies.”

“Elsa play a card.” Abby interjected. Elsa played the six of spades to Abby’s ace, Dara threw off the two and Betty played the five. Abby led again with the king of spades.

“I’m not making brownies.”

“You have to.”

“I do not.” Betty set down the nine of diamonds to trump Dara’s high jack of hearts. Abby over-trumped her with the ten and took the trick and won the hand. Elsa sighed, a sharp sigh. Abby and Dara stood.

“I need to get home to check on David.” Said Abby. “Thank you for the game.”

“Yes.” Agreed Dara. “Nice game. Thanks for the tea.”

Elsa rose and showed them out, then returned to the living room where Betty was collecting the cards.

“You can’t make peach cobbler.”

“I make good cobbler. Why don’t you make brownies.”

“Because I always make pie.”

“Well then make pie, but I’m making cobbler.”

“That’s not the way it’s done.” Elsa snatched the cards from Betty’s hands and threw them back down on the coffee table. They sprayed over the table and half of them fell to the floor. Elsa looked at the cards lying on her carpet and growled. “You are making brownies.”

Betty picked up her jacket from the back of her chair and swung it around her shoulders. “Elsa, I am making peach cobbler for Friday. Now quit acting like a child.” She left the house closing the door quietly behind her. Elsa had been prepared to wince at the slam, but now felt a longing for the missed noise. She looked up at the clock on the credenza and found it to only read seven-thirty. Usually the games went to nine. Elsa took off her reading glasses and rubbed her eyes.

She bent down and began picking up the cards, but a twinge in her back made her sit down on the floor and rub the spot at the base of her spine. Elsa abandoned the cards and walked over to her curio cabinet. She ran her eyes over the rows of houses and settled on the farmhouse with the orange cat. Betty’s house had a large walnut tree in its front yard, it was the largest miniature tree that Elsa owned. She had bought it to match



the tree in Betty's own yard. Elsa took in a breath and let it out again slowly, the tiny felt leaves on the tree swayed in the breeze of her breath. How could Betty think that she could make cobbler. Elsa was the minister's sister and in charge of the preparations for the dance. Betty should have consulted her first, should have respected her decision. She took the tree and moved it to the town square, behind the large ivory church. Elsa studied the new look of the house. It didn't look so grand without the tree. The vacant space in the front yard resonated with a feeling of emptiness; too much emptiness. Elsa put the tree back, and studied the house. She wasn't that angry with Betty, she just wanted her to feel...something. Humiliation? Perhaps, maybe shame. Elsa decided she would call up her brother, just to let him know how the preparations were going. She would tell him about who had volunteered to do what. That Betty was going to bring brownies. Then she would tell Betty. Elsa smiled and went to get ready for bed.

The next morning Elsa woke very early. The light in the sky was only a milky grey and the streetlights were all still on. It had rained during the night and the air smelled fresh. She decided to go for a walk before going to buy peaches for her pies. It did not take her long to put on her walking shoes and she left the house before the clock had rung five. Elsa walked up Dogwood street and then turned onto Holly. She let her eyes close halfway as she sucked in the new air. She turned right onto Cypress street and began walking towards the Updike house.

As she approached Betty's house she saw something peculiar in the front yard. Elsa hurried to the yard and stopped at the edge when she could make out the shape of the

object. It was a corn cob. It had been shucked and eaten clean leaving only the yellow cob fringed with white kernel casings. Elsa clicked her tongue to herself wondering at how Betty could be so slovenly. She would have to mention it on Friday. Then Elsa spotted another corn cob, and another, more and more until she had counted over fifty cobs in Betty's yard. Elsa shivered with amusement. It certainly served Betty up as she deserved to be clobbered. She turned and ran back to her own house, the exertion and the rising laughter nearly taking her breath away.

Elsa went straight to her living room and stared at the farmhouse with the orange cat. It didn't look any differently then it had before, but Elsa could feel a subtle twist to the texture of the house. A ghostly force that made the house stand out to her eyes and conveyed a sense of fulfillment and revenge. Elsa laughed again and went to her shower.

When Elsa arrived at the church on Friday Betty was already in the church basement tidying up. She had a dressing gown tied over her dress and was bending over to stick the bristles of the broom as far behind the piano as she could get them. She didn't seem to notice Elsa come in. On the card table next to the door, besides a currently empty punch bowl and rows of plastic glasses, sat two glass baking pans covered in tinfoil. Elsa sat her own pie tins carefully in front of Betty's dishes before lifting the tinfoil. It was peach cobbler. She checked the other pan, but it was the same.

"You were supposed to make brownies." Elsa called out while keeping her back towards Betty. "Why didn't you make brownies?"

Betty called back from the piano. “I told you I was making cobbler. I’ve finished getting all the tables and chairs out of the storage room, so why don’t you get a rag and dust off those windows?” She gestured with her broom towards the half windows that ran along the top of the wall. The windows didn’t actually let much light into the basement, since there were honeysuckle bushes planted in front of them, but they always collected mud around the base after it rained.

“I told you that I told my brother that you were making brownies.”

“I know, but I’d already bought the ingredients for cobbler. Now are you going to help?” She gestured again towards the windows.

Elsa turned around and leaned against the dessert table, placing the palms of her hands along the edge. “Why don’t you do the windows and I’ll get the corners of the ceiling with the broom.”

“I’m already doing that Elsa.”

“But you’re too short to get all the way up to the ceiling.” Elsa began walking over towards Betty who stepped a few paces and grabbed a stool with her free hand.

“I can stand on this.”

“It doesn’t look sturdy enough.”

“It’s a step stool.”

“Still, I wouldn’t want you to fall.” Elsa reached out to snatch the broom from Betty’s hands, but Betty stepped back and thrust the handle towards Elsa, thumping her once on the chest before snaking the whole broom around her back.

“I said I’m already doing the ceiling.”

“I know you said, but you won’t do it properly.”

Minister Alan Lawrence pushed himself between the women from no where. Both stepped back, startled at his sudden presence.

“What is the matter?” He looked from his sister to Betty and back to his sister. He kept his voice quiet and shifted his weight to make them step further away from each other.

Betty spoke first. “I’ve no problems. I’ve just been trying to get rid of the cobwebs in the corner.” She gestured towards the ceiling with the broom.

Minister Lawrence looked towards the ceiling and nodded. Elsa stepped in front of him. “And we all appreciate your effort Betty, but you’re just too short to reach.”

Minister Lawrence looked down, noting the object in Betty’s hand. “She has a stool.”

Betty smiled. “Yes, I just found it.” She walked over to the nearest corner and set it down. Looking over towards Elsa she stepped up and began thrusting the broom bristles at the corner. Elsa turned and walked back to the dessert table. Her brother followed her over and said. “Elsa, if you want to lend a hand you could clean off the windows.”

“Of course.” She smiled at her brother. “Let me go find a bucket.”

The dance was a long and dragging affair. Elsa mostly sat on a foldout chair near the dessert table where she watched Betty’s cobbler be consumed just as fast as her pie. Edgar Harkins called out moves for the square dance as thirty couples wound their way around the room. Elsa kept trying to sit with her legs stretched out, but every time she

tried a parading set of dancers would stomp by and force her to tuck them under her chair. At ten-thirty she left.

Once at home Elsa stretched out on the couch in the living room, letting the muscles in her back and arms relax. Betty had been such a bitch. The aggravation twisted the space behind Elsa's eyes, giving her a headache. Betty must still have been mad about the bridge game, but she didn't need to make such a fuss that Alan would have to get involved. Betty must have known that Alan wouldn't want to make a volunteer feel unappreciated. She knew that Elsa hated cleaning windows. The grit and dirt got under her fingernails and the windows in the church basement always smelled mold. Elsa felt an acidic burn rising in the back of her throat. She walked to the curio cabinet and opened up the left hand cabinet where Betty's street was kept. Elsa picked up the farmhouse and took it into the dining room.

With great care she folded out some newspaper on her painting table and set the house near the middle. Then she studied the shelves of paint, picking out colors; a brown and a red to mix together for the hair; a cream color with just a little peach for the skin; her darkest shade of blue for the eyes. Elsa sat at her table and flipped the house on its side, gently pushing a piece of foam board underneath the side so that the bottom was held upright at an angle. Unpainted clay, dark grey and ugly was all that could be seen on the bottom of the house. She began to paint. Slowly the image of Betty formed. Her short auburn hair was reflected with all of its curl. The long birthmark at the nape of her neck was carefully applied. Elsa saved the eyes for the very last. She had a special brush for painting eyes, fingernails and all the fine features of a person that were difficult to paint while using a thicker brush. The brush she used for such details was an ordinary

toothpick with a half dozen of her own hairs glued to the end. She had gotten the idea for the brush from a magazine. Some painter, from Rhode Island she thought, painted whole canvasses with brushes made with a single hair. She picked up the brush and dipped it in paint, touching blue dots of paint to the face, making them ever staring. The only imperfection in the image was that Elsa had run out of room to paint in Betty's feet.

Around eleven o'clock Elsa finished the picture of Betty and let it dry for an hour. She made herself a cup of coffee and sipped it while looking at the painted image. It was a reasonable likeness and the expression on the face was the confident sneer that Elsa imagined Betty to have as she left the charity dance. Elsa turned the house upright. The house was one of her favorites and she didn't want to ruin the cosmetics of Cypress Street. Finally she drew three thin lines with brown paint on the chimney and set the house down to finish drying.

"Now that's a fit place for you." Elsa mumbled to herself as she left the paint to dry. She went to bed with a knot in her stomach. The rage she felt towards Betty grappled with her mind and kept her from sleep for several long hours. As she lay in the dark, eyes closed but without nearing sleep she went over the picture of Betty on the bottom of the house. Did she use the right colors? Did the hair look curly or was it just a mess of paint? Did the birthmark come out as just a blob? Near three a.m. she rose from her bed to go and check on the house. She picked it up carefully so as to get as little paint as possible on her fingers and looked at the bottom. There a perfect replica of Betty stared up at her. Elsa nearly dropped the house, but caught it again and placed it on the newspaper. She went to sleep immediately after returning to her bed.

Elsa slept very late on Saturday. It was not until she heard the bells of the church ringing for noon that she stretched and rose. As she sat up she clutched at her head. She was very dizzy and the headache from last night had not diminished in any way. Elsa walked into the kitchen and put on a pot of water. Then she checked the house in her dining room.

The picture on the bottom of the house had finished drying. Betty's face looked up at Elsa more calmly than the night before, and Elsa stared back down at it. There was something the matter with the picture and it took her several minutes to discover the discrepancy. On Betty's left cheek a tiny blue dot resembling a tear clung just underneath her left eye. She hadn't remembered painting a tear on Betty's face. Perhaps it was just a drop of blue paint from the eyes. Elsa sniffed and picked up the house. An electric shock popped her fingertips as they closed around the house. Elsa started but did not let go. She returned the house to its new place on Cypress Street, then went to have her breakfast tea and toast. She took a long time at breakfast, reading through the newspaper and then dressing calmly for the day. Many times she looked over at the telephone thinking that it would be Betty, but it never rang.

Later that afternoon Elsa was feeling restless and went down to Mr. Herman's general store for some paint thinner. She was standing in aisle four comparing a bottle of

TrueThin to a bottle of Wilson's Paint Thinner when the bell over the door rang and someone entered. She heard Mr. Herman's voice greet the customer.

"Goodness, what happened to you?" Elsa hadn't yet moved into position to see who the newcomer was before she heard Betty's voice.

"I tripped down the front step this morning. Dr. Waters says that I broke it." Elsa ducked back and moved over to aisle five where she could get a view of Betty from behind. She was wearing an old denim dress and leaning on a set of crutches. Her left leg was wrapped tightly in bandages.

"My goodness Betty, what happened?" Betty turned her head to see Elsa standing at the end of the aisle. Elsa smiled and glanced down at Betty's foot. "You should be more careful." Elsa stepped up to the counter and said to Mr. Herman. "I'll take this one." She handed over the bottle of TrueThin. As Mr. Herman was making change she looked over again at Betty. "I hope you didn't damage your ankles last night from standing on that old stool."

"I'm sure I didn't"

Mr. Herman handed Elsa a brown bag and her change. "Good-day, Mrs. Petersen."

"Good day Mr. Herman. Have a good day Betty."

She opened the door, and then paused to fiddle with her change as she heard Mr. Herman speak again.

"So what can I do for you Mrs. Updike?"

"Well, I need you to order me some brick."

"Brick, eh? Are you building something?"



“No, my chimney collapsed last night.”

Elsa froze and leaned back on the door. It let out a low creak and both Mr. Herman and Betty looked her way. She kept her eyes on the change in her hands and they both looked away again. Mr. Herman spoke again, confusion in his voice.

“Collapsed? There wasn’t any storm.”

“I know but when I woke this morning there were bricks lying all around the side of the house and the chimney had collapsed.”

Elsa shook her head and let the door close behind her. Betty turned her head and frowned at the closing door, but Elsa didn’t notice. The chimney collapsing was weird. Elsa felt shivery inside. Betty was getting what was hers, but it was so strange. A wedge of guilt began poking up through her chest, constricting her breath. The image of the farmhouse flashed in her mind, the tiny painted cracks in the chimney nearly glowing with a sense of shame. She shook her head; the headache began pounding again, sharper against her temples and the backs of her eyes. Putting her hand to her forehead she felt a thin sweat and heat. She sat down on a bench on the square. She felt bad for Betty, but it wasn’t her fault the chimney collapsed. She shifted off the bench and kneeled, clasping her hands into a prayer. She sat calmly for a minute, allowing her mind to settle. Then she offered up a sentiment, not words, but the focus of her mind. Gratitude poured from her mind, settling upon her concept of the All-mighty. When she rose again she felt better. The sun was bright in the afternoon sky and she almost skipped home.

At home again Elsa placed her new bottle of paint thinner on the shelf in the dining room and then picked up a new unpainted house. She had ordered it out of a catalogue months ago and hadn't yet found time to begin painting it. It was a very large house, with a back porch and a greenhouse on the second story. It would fit very nicely as Walter Kingsley's house over on Oak Street. He had a lovely greenhouse, the only one in town and she planned on painting all the flowers in the windows just as they could be seen from the street. She had just put on a base coat of paint when a knock came at the door. Elsa took off her painting smock and went to answer. Betty thrust her crutches through the door before Elsa had even registered who had come to visit.

"I hope you don't mind my coming by to see you." Betty hopped up into the front hall and smiled at Elsa. "You always said I could come over any time."

"Of course, Betty, make yourself comfortable. I'm sorry about your ankle."

"Thanks." Betty hobbled over to the curio cabinet and began studying the houses. "Elsa, what was it that was so amusing earlier?"

"Amusing? When?" Betty picked up a Cape Cod house and put it back down again.

"At Mr. Herman's store. You seemed to find something there amusing?"

"I was just buying paint thinner." Elsa stepped closer, trying to peer over Betty's shoulder into the cabinet.

"No, there was something else. Mr. Herman noticed it too." Betty picked up another house, this time Elsa's own Victorian. Elsa's chest tightened.

"I don't know why you think that." Her words came out almost at a squeak. Betty put the house back down and Elsa closed her eyes.

“I think you were laughing at me? Enjoying my new broken ankle?”

“Oh Betty, I’d never...”

“Elsa. Stop being such a bitch.” Betty reached into the cabinet and snatched out a house. It was her own little farmhouse. For a minute Elsa thought she would look at the picture on the bottom, but then Betty threw the house to the floor. The ceramic house cracked easily. Flakes of clay scattered across the carpet

Betty swung herself over the ruined house. “I’ll see you at church tomorrow.” She crossed to the front door and looked back at Elsa who was still staring at the carpet. “Don’t worry; I’m not hurt so much that I can’t let myself out.”

Elsa heard the bang of her front door as a distant riot. Alone she sank to her knees. She reached out her hand to touch the bits of the green house. She rubbed her hand over them, feeling them bite into her skin. As she rubbed she flipped over one of the larger flakes. Betty’s eyes stared up at her from the grey chip. Elsa felt her own eyes well up as she suddenly realized that her headache had returned.

She stood slowly and walked over to the cabinet. The houses stood there, but with a silenced and finalized dullness. The paint seemed to fade all in a moment and the essence of the town had fled. Elsa looked carefully, spotting discrepancies and imperfections wherever she looked. Even her own house no longer retained any verisimilitude. The spirits of the curio cabinet had evaporated, leaving static images without life. She turned away from the houses and left the room. The living room had become icy, intolerable.

## The Spider Curse

On November 27<sup>th</sup> Mrs. Dalton killed a spider. It was a common garden spider, brown with green stripes, and its whole body could have fit underneath a quarter. Most arachnids snuck indoors in late autumn as their thin limbs began to stiffen from cold and their webs became brittle from the cold and wind, unable to snare flies. This particular spider had chosen to set up her new web between the side of a cabinet and the wall above Mrs. Dalton's stove. It was an understandable mistake. The site was easily the most tempting spot in the kitchen to a spider. It was warm and there was an ant colony under the stove that provided more food than most barns did during the summer. The ants had been attracted there by the sandwich crumbs the Dalton's eight-year-old daughter Violet habitually brushed into the gap between the stove and the cabinet. It was a very comfortable spot for a spider. It was also easily noticed by Mrs. Dalton.

The death occurred in the evening. Mrs. Dalton had just begun to boil a pot of potatoes for dinner when she reached up to open the vent and noticed the spider. She didn't scream. She disliked spiders on principle as creatures of filth. And so she reached under the sink for a long-handled dust mop and jabbed at the web until the spider fell off and into the boiling pot. She studied the corpse briefly as it floated among white chunks of starch before tossing the contents of the pot onto the compost pile in the back yard. What really irked Mrs. Dalton about the situation was not that the spider had been in her

kitchen, but that when she had finished disposing of it she realized that she didn't have any more potatoes for dinner.

Later that evening Dara Edlson came over for evening coffee. Mrs. Dalton was recounting for her the appearance of the spider, the spider's demise and then lingered over the problems created due to insufficient potatoes. Dara's eyes flipped towards the spot above the stove, but Mrs. Dalton had removed all traces of the web. Mrs. Dalton pressed on about the potatoes; she was forced to substitute shelled peas into her dinner menu, neither her husband and daughter liked shelled peas and so both had danced the little green balls around on their plates until they could safely get up to clear the dishes.

"Did you just throw the spider on the compost heap?" Dara interrupted.

"Why of course. Now I've got a new catalogue to order flowers with." She said picking up her newest issue of Garden Center magazine from where it rested on the table.

"You just tossed it on the heap?"

"Yes. There are some beautiful tulips here, don't you think?"

"Aren't you nervous?" Dara asked, setting her coffee cup gently in the hand-painted saucer.

"Why would I be nervous?" Mrs. Dalton looked up from the gardening magazine.

"Bad luck to kill a spider."

"Dara, honey, I don't need luck from a spider. I can manage myself." She reached over to pat Dara's arm, comforting the younger woman.

"Bad luck doesn't go away just because you think you can manage."

“Well, what would you do about it then?” Mrs. Dalton set her magazine on the table and leaned over to study Dara.

“I’d at least say a prayer for it.”

“It’s just a spider.” Mrs. Dalton laughed.

“Yes, but they catch flies.” Dara’s face deepened as she furrowed her brow.

“So does flypaper.” Mrs. Dalton laughed harder.

“And mosquitoes.”

“Dara, love, it’s only a bug.” She picked up the catalogue again and thrust it towards Dara. “Now what do you think of these Rembrandt Tulips.”

Dara left Mrs. Dalton still laughing that night, but Dara felt uneasy. After leaving the Dalton house she snuck around back to glance at the compost heap next to the kitchen door. A green and brown corpse lay on top, stuck to a chunk of potato. Dara clicked her tongue twice and mumbled the Lord’s Prayer before she went home.

The next day Jane Holms was standing at the counter of Herman’s general store when Mrs. Dalton entered. She had taken her baby nephew David out for a new pair of shoes and he currently sat perched on the edge of the counter, his socked only feet kicking into the air. Peggy Barnes had also just ducked inside to keep the sharp November wind from mussing her hairstyle. Seeing the baby, she walked over to tussle his thick green hair before coming up to Mrs. Dalton with her fingers crossed.

“Cora, I heard you killed a spider yesterday.”

Mrs. Dalton shook her head. “Yes, I didn’t realize that was such news.”

Jane sucked through her teeth at the news and thought she tasted an unusual bitterness in the air. “Bad luck can be contagious.”

“Dara kept going on about bad luck last night.” Mrs. Dalton chuckled to herself. “You’re all very silly sometimes. It’s just a dead spider.” She walked up to the counter with a bolt of fabric. “I’d like two yards.”

Mr. Herman nodded. “Of course.” He pulled out his scissors and began to cut the fabric. Mrs. Dalton stepped over towards Jane and David. “You’re getting big, aren’t you?” She reached out to rub his cheek when the baby started to cry. Jane quickly twirled him away from Mrs. Dalton.

“Yup, you’ve definitely got bad luck. David can always tell.”

“Oh, he’s probably teething.”

“Yeah, but he still can tell bad luck. You should sprinkle some salt in your hair when you get home.”

“And some over the spider.” Peggy added. “Maybe some over your threshold.”

“You’re all being ridiculous.” Mrs. Dalton said, looking slowly from Jane and David to Peggy to Mr. Herman. “It’s just a spider.” She shook her head as she paid for the cloth and left the store.

Once gone Elsa Petersen emerged from rummaging through a bin of fabric scraps. “Terrible thing to kill that spider.” She said as she approached the counter. “Terrible thing to have done.”

“Yes.” Jane agreed “But she doesn’t seem bothered by it. That’s probably why she’s attracted the bad luck.”

“All she needs is to show a little humility.”

“That’s likely; do you remember when she was in charge of the school’s trip to Lincoln?”

“Yeah, I went on that trip.”

“Someone ought to say something to her.”

“Someone should.”

“Well why not you.”

“Me? She lives nearer to you.”

“Its only two streets.”

“You’re still closer.”

“Maybe we should wait until Sunday, catch her in a more religious mood.”

“That’s four days, might be too long.” The conversation continued throughout the afternoon, changing in voice but not in tone as customers came and left again. By two o’clock a crowd had developed around Mr. Herman’s counter creating an air in the store that was heavy with the smells of sweat and stale breath accumulating in too small a space. The gossiping stretched throughout the afternoon and Mr. Herman sold four sodas, two yards of fabric, eighteen nails, one pair of shoes, a teakettle, a notebook, two pens, three gallons of milk, a half dozen eggs, a jar of peanut butter and a tube of eye ointment. It was three hours later when Jane departed with the new pair of shoes, spurred homewards only because it was David’s naptime.

Mrs. Dalton awoke that night to a soft tickle on her right hip. She opened her eyes and blinked a few times, becoming slowly conscious of the problem. Reaching



down to scratch she encountered a small lump which turned from fuzzy to sticky as she pressed upon it. Slowly she pulled her hand from under the covers and held it above her where she could catch a patch of moonlight. In the half-light she couldn't make out the colors, but three thin limbs still twitched from where the body was impaled on Mrs. Dalton's index fingernail. She flicked her wrist and sent the smooshed insect flying across the bedroom to strike a large oaken chest of drawers simultaneously waking up her husband with her scream.

“Cora what's wrong.”

“There was, there was...” And she began to laugh.

“Cora? What is it?” Mr. Dalton put his arm around his wife, who laughed harder.

“It was just a spider. Let me wash my hands.”

The yellow light from the nightstand calmed Mrs. Dalton, but she still tripped in the covers as she got out of bed. She could see now that in the sky Orion's belt had just sunk below the tree line. Mrs. Dalton washed her hands in the sink and then found the remains of the spider near the foot of her dresser. She picked it up carefully with a tissue and took it down to the compost heap where she tossed it next to its cousin.

When she awoke only three hours later Mrs. Dalton walked downstairs to the kitchen to be welcomed by swarms of spiders. Garden spiders mingled about the stove while small brown recluses scurried near the trashcan. Tiny white spiders floated off the top of the refrigerator on balloons made of silk. Several brown and yellow ones were weaving amongst the legs of the table and chairs, while a couple dozen bright green

arachnids kept the countertops seething with motion. An echoing yell awoke the other two members of the household who came rushing downstairs, but after noting the infested kitchen and the large bucket of soap and water Mrs. Dalton was hauling from the sink, they looked at each other once and attempted to retreat to their bedrooms. Mrs. Dalton stopped them with a shout.

“This is all your fault.” Mr. Dalton and Violet tried to shrink into the hallway. “You two left dirty dishes in the sink last night and now look.”

“I’m sorry Mama.” Violet flushed and bowed her head. “Can I get ready for school now?” Mrs. Dalton nodded and Violet ran to her room. Mr. Dalton scratched his head, still looking at the kitchen. The spiders seemed to be emerging from the sink, crawling under the door, dropping from the light fixtures.

“Do you really think all these spiders came after a couple of ice-cream dishes?”

“What else, Kevin? What else?”

“I suppose. I suppose you’re right. I’ve got to go to work.” He turned to go upstairs. Mrs. Dalton scowled at his back, and then the empty hall where his back had been before returning to the kitchen. Mr. Dalton and Violet snuck out of the house a half an hour later without trying to get any breakfast. Mr. Dalton handed Violet some money for lunch at school and then arrived at his office an hour earlier than normal. Violet arrived at school before the janitor unlocked the doors in the morning; she shivered as she waited by the door, but never thought of going back home.

Soap infused water had seeped into all the cracks in the kitchen linoleum and the floor started to warp, but Mrs. Dalton kept after the spiders with an unrelenting energy that left hundreds floating dead in a mop bucket before Mrs. Dalton stopped for a break. Since the smell of disinfectant was making her slightly dizzy, she stepped out onto the back porch and leaned against the side of the house, breathing in the cold and clean November air. Glancing down she saw the compost pile to her left with the little pile of discarded potatoes on top. The spider's body was still stuck to one chunk of vegetable, though its limbs were now obscured by the slight tinge of frost that clung to the earth. She spit towards it then returned inside.

Violet came home crying just after noon. Mrs. Dalton could hear her daughter's wail six houses away and had come outside to scold the girl for leaving school, but the sight of the girl running home with half her body muddy and her face red from wind and tears pulled Mrs. Dalton to her knees and let Violet run into outstretched arms. The girl fell against her mother's body, nose running from the exertion outside in the cold.

"What's the matter sweetie?" She asked as she smoothed back her daughter's hair. "Why are you all muddy?"

"They threw mud at me." She whined.

"Who?" Violet wiped her left forearm underneath her nose leaving a shiny clear streak along the arm of her coat.

“Nick and Tyler and Mindy. They said I’m cursed. They said spiders are gonna crawl in my bed.” She started sobbing again and sank to her knees on the sidewalk.

“There aren’t going to be any spiders in your bed.” Violet raised her head, hopeful, but confused. Mrs. Dalton continued. “Nick and Tyler and Mindy are all just superstitious. Don’t listen to them.”

“But what about all the spiders in the kitchen?”

“You and Daddy left dirty dishes in the sink remember?”

“But there were hundreds.”

“Spiders get cold in the winter and want to go inside.” Mrs. Dalton glanced back towards the house as she stood. “Anything else is nonsense Violet, look at me, it’s all nonsense. Now go take a bath.” She grabbed Violet’s hand and led inside through the front door, taking a sharp right turn so Violet couldn’t see into the kitchen. They went upstairs to the tub where she started some water before peeling off her child’s soiled clothing. She waited until Violet had gotten some soap on a washcloth before resuming her battle downstairs.

At the precise middle of mid-afternoon Mrs. Dalton declared victory against the presence of the spiders and changed out of the nightgown and housecoat that had become soaked with water and which was now decorated with dozens of black and orange stains. She surveyed her kitchen proudly, ignoring the squishing sound the floor made when stepped upon. Discovering herself thirsty, she walked over to the stove to pick up the teakettle. As she extended her arm a small shape fell from the sleeve of her dress. A small garden spider hit the floor and crawled lamely underneath the stove.

Jerking backwards caused her arms to swing upwards, releasing a dozen more arachnids from the folds of her clothing. She screamed and whirled about launching more spiders into the air. She became aware of the tickling against her skin which rapidly grew into a severe itch. Violet heard her mother, and ran naked down the stairs to the kitchen. Mrs. Dalton began shedding. First she yanked off her dress, then pulled off her shoes and socks and finally, after a half-conscious check to see that none of the neighbors could see into the kitchen, tugged off her underpants and bra. It did no good. The spiders were seeping from her skin. Their legs taking form first and blending in with the short brown hairs on Mrs. Dalton's arms and legs, before pulling a body into existence from the thin pale flesh. Violet yelled and ran towards her mother, trying to brush the spiders away, but they kept coming. Mrs. Dalton smacked at her body leaving squished forms and red marks all over.

Mr. Dalton found his wife lying on the kitchen floor, naked and staring at the ceiling fan. Violet was a few feet away, still naked, perched on the kitchen table shrieking at every spider that came near her. He lifted his wife from the floor and laid her out on the couch in the living room, covering her with a quilt. Then he came back for his daughter and rested her on the loveseat and wrapped her in a towel. Once Mrs. Dalton had been removed from the kitchen the spiders vanished from the room, though more still appeared on Mrs. Dalton and the living room was quickly inundated.

Mr. Dalton called Dr. Waters as soon as he made his wife and daughter comfortable. Dr. Waters arrived only a few minutes later and was shown into the living room. He looked at Violet first, lifting her arm and then feeling her forehead.

“Violet will be fine; just don’t let her see any spiders. Why don’t you take her upstairs?” Mr. Dalton nodded and picked up his daughter. When he returned Dr. Waters was crouching next to his wife, shining a small flashlight at her eyes.

“Is she going to be all right?”

“I’m not sure?” Dr. Waters looked back at Mr. Dalton. “I heard she killed a spider the other day. Did she?”

“Yes, but you don’t really think all this is because of a spider, do you?”

“It looks that way.”

“But you’re a doctor; you have your science...” He trailed off as Dr. Waters pulled out a pair of tweezers and caught a spider by one of its legs as it emerged from Mrs. Dalton’s cheek. He watched it squirm for a moment before setting it gently on the ground.

“Can you look at that and tell me you still doubt?” He looked up at Mr. Dalton who had perched himself on the arm of the sofa and was holding his wife’s hand and shook his head.

“No.” Mr. Dalton whispered. “No.”

Dr. Waters returned to shining the flashlight in Mrs. Dalton’s eyes. “I think that she can be cured.”

“How?”

“All that is needed is for her to apologize to the spider.”

“Apologize?”

“Apologize?” Mrs. Dalton’s voice came lazy but incredulous.

“Yes,” said Dr. Waters as he bent over her. “You have to apologize to the spider.”

“I’m not..” she breathed. “I’m not apologizing to an insect.” A spider crawled out from underneath her eyelid and she began to cry. “I won’t.”

Mr. Dalton picked up his wife and held her. His own tears dripping into her face. Dr. Waters looked at the pair. “Make her apologize, there’s nothing else I can do for her.” And he left them alone.

In late December Jane encountered Mrs. Dalton walking an uneasy circuit around the town square. It had snowed all week and the accumulated drifts climbed fifteen inches up the walls of buildings, burying park benches up to their seats. Mrs. Dalton was wearing a loose cotton dress and no coat. She walked slowly, but swung her arms rapidly as she moved. Spiders fell from her clothing leaving a trail of tiny frozen bodies to mark her path. More dropped from her hair that now appeared grey from the masses of web spun around her dark brown locks. She was obviously freezing. Not only her lips, but the tips of her fingers and the loose skin around her eyes had turned blue. Jane stopped as Mrs. Dalton approached and stepped off the partially plowed path and into an embankment of shoveled snow. A clot of snow fell into the back of her boot, but Jane ignored it, more intent on the figure ahead. She called out a greeting as Mrs. Dalton shambled nearer, but there was no response. She leaned forwards to look closer at the

woman and realized that Mrs. Dalton's eyes were glazed over. Whatever animation still resided in Mrs. Dalton had become diluted from constant irritation, but as Jane stared she realized that underneath Mrs. Dalton still struggled against the spiders, her spirit unchanged in its convictions.



## Sticks and Stones

In the time following the incident no one ever said that Kirsten Lawrence shouldn't have been climbing trees in her church shoes. When Kirsten's parents, the Minister and Mrs. Lawrence, spoke afterwards to Mr. and Mrs. Maeves they never mentioned how the dark brown leather was easily scratched by bark and branches, while the soles were thin and had only tiny raised lines of rubber for treads. When Elsa Petersen half shouted – half whispered the news Jane Holms the next day neither woman considered that any imbalance of Kirsten's weight as she moved through the tree could have led to a fall. No one voiced the opinion that Kirsten should not have been climbing trees in her best blue dress. But for months following the incident the adult residents of Lanham would twist their conversation towards the ruined dress whenever Tom Maeves was seen walking by. Tom heard plenty about that dress, mostly how expensive it was. The amount was nearly a year's worth of his allowance. Every Friday evening for forty-nine weeks after the incident he watched as his older brother Matt received his weekly allowance after supper from their father, while their mother clinked her fork on her plate and told Tom to clear the table. Mr. Maeves did not speak to anyone about the incident after the day it happened, relegating his shame to the basement of his mind. Mrs. Maeves initially took refuge in the pity of her neighbors. She wept on occasion that she had done

everything she could for Tom. Almost nobody believed her. It had only been fifteen years since she had given birth four months after she was married.

Late spring in Lanham was marked by a soft, dry warmth. It penetrated every body it encountered, shifting and awakening the sleeping life within. Spring heat was a dry heat, not yet pregnant with the stickiness of the summer. The widened landscape that surrounded the town put up no resistance to any wind, allowing passage any breeze that blew through. The winds tumbled over the countryside, picking up the scents of wild grasses and spreading them to every spot on the earth. The residents of Lanham always left their front doors open in the spring, even if there was a rain, allowing screen doors to keep out the bugs while the wind dusted the winter' mildew from their lives.

For the children of Lanham spring was an itch. The moment the morning sun slid through their eyelids they writhed with the blossoming of the season. Every free moment was indulged with bare feet slapping over pavement and swishing through grass. Dirt collected between toes and behind ears so rapidly that by April most mothers gave up the fight except for Sunday mornings.

On a Saturday in early May Mark Haskins, Ryan Peters and William McDouglas were shooting marbles underneath the red oak tree in the Peters' lawn. A circle had been sketched with a twig in the dirt and the three boys crouched over it, studying the positions of the marbles within. It was only just past nine in the morning, though the boys had been playing for some time. All three had dark patches of dirt on their knees and shins with bits of grass sticking to them. Mark had already won three marbles from Ryan and one from William and was lining up for another shot.

Three houses away Kirsten Lawrence stepped out onto her porch. She was bored waiting inside for her mother to finish dressing her brother Dustin and immediately became interested in the game down the street. She skipped over, the skirt of her dress flipping about and the flat heels of her shoes spraying dust and grass particles before her. William looked up as she approached.

“Whatcha doing?”

“I’m going to my Grandma’s.”

“Oh.” William looked back down at the balls of colored glass in the dust.

“It’s her birthday.”

“Hmm-mmm.” William mumbled.

“She’s fifty-nine today.”

Ryan looked up. “Wow, that’s almost like Methuselah.”

“No it isn’t. My Grandma isn’t that old.”

“Nearly.” Ryan said.

Kirsten walked slowly around the threesome. “I’m wearing my new dress. Do you like it?” William, who had sisters and recognized the question, glanced upward quickly.

“Yeah, it’s nice.” Kirsten giggled and Mark stuck his tongue out at William.

Kirsten began parading around the boys, lifting the skirt of the dress well above her knees and kicking her feet in an improvised two step. She hadn’t worn the dress before and the silky blue fabric brushed gently over her skin. Blushing she looked back down at the boys, but they were again too engrossed with their marbles to notice what she was doing. Kirsten bent over and asked.

“Who’s winning?”

“I am.” Said Mark. “I’ve won six marbles.”

“Wow.” Kirsten muttered as she glanced back at her own house. There was no one outside and she saw no indication that any other member of her family would be ready to leave soon. Kirsten pulled up her skirt, braced her right leg on the tree trunk and swung herself up into the lower branches of the oak tree. She waited a moment to balance herself, and then carefully lay down, belly down, along the outstretched branch. Ryan, William and Mark were just below her and she could see could see the whole marble’s circle. The boys continued to flick marbles about and Ryan won back a red marble with gold flecks.

Tom Maeves walked by a few minutes later and stopped to look at the game. He crouched down between William and Ryan, studying the rainbow of marbles resting in a dust-drawn circle.

“Who’s winning?”

“Mark.” William snapped out flatly.” “He won six, but Ryan won one back.”

Mark smiled. “Yeah, I’ve been licking these girls.”

Tom sat back on his heels. “I can beat Mark.”

“You can not beat me.”

“I can too.”

Ryan looked up. “Do you have any marbles?”

“Not here.”

Ryan scooped out five marbles from his bag. “You can borrow these. Just don’t loose.”

“I’m not gonna loose. I’ve beaten Mark”

“Only ‘cause the ground was too muddy.”

“It wasn’t either too muddy.” Tom shook his head. “Willie’s got two shooters; let me use one of ‘em.” He pointed to the large green cat’s-eye marble that rested near William’s foot.

William looked up, his eyes already narrowed. “He can’t use my shooter. He’ll loose it.”

“I will not.”

“Will too, you lost the red crayon Anna lent you in Sunday school.”

“It fell behind the radiator. Besides, I won’t loose your shooter.”

“You still can’t use it.” William cupped a hand over the marble momentarily, removing it from Tom’s sight and the negotiations.

Tom appealed to Ryan. “Tell him to let me use his shooter.”

“Let him use your shooter Willie.”

“No.”

“Oh come on. He’ll win back your marbles.”

“No.” William balled his fists and smacked them against the base of the tree.

Ryan shrugged and rocked on his heels. Tom settled back and watched as Mark knocked four marbles out of the circle with one hit. William fumbled his shooter and only bumped a white and red stripe, and then Ryan knocked a translucent blue marble out of the circle and past William’s foot. Tom, who was following the game closely, again became aware of the shooter next to William’s foot. He waited until William leaned

forward to shoot again before stretching out his hand. His fingertips had just brushed the curve of the marble when Kirsten's voice exploded above his head.

"Tom's trying to steal Willie's marble."

Tom retreated his hand into his pants pocket. "Am not." William snatched up the shooter and shoved it into his pants pocket.

"Yes you were." Kirsten pointed down at Tom from the branch.

"Stupid girl."

"I am not. You're a stupid thief." Kirsten grabbed an acorn that had not fallen off the tree last winter and threw it at Tom. It missed widely to the left.

"I am not."

"Tom's a stupid thief. Tom's a stupid thief." Kirsten sang the words, pitching her voice from the tree and sending it echoing down the street. The marble game halted and the three boys looked up at Kirsten who had begun shaking the branch she clung to; a few leaves were rattled from the tree and drifted over the boys. Tom felt tears bunch up in the edges of his eyes.

"Shut up."

"Tom's a stupid thief."

"I am not." Tom shouted, but Kirsten continued her taunts. Tom tightened his legs and then sprang up towards the branch that bore Kirsten. As his hand groped for the branch Kirsten jerked upwards in alarm; the sudden movement disrupted her balance and she fell. The sound of ripping fabric accompanied the bright blue shape of Kirsten in her dress tumbling to the ground. Tom jumped again, this time backwards as he dodged away from the girl. He nearly tripped Ryan who was attempting to roll out of the way.

Kirsten landed heavily in the middle of the marble game, knocking marbles in all directions. Her hands and knees were scraped and her chin was split at the jaw-line, but only a small scrape, barely a half-inch long. Dust covered her shins and her forearms. She sniffed and coughed, trying to avoid crying in front of the boys. William put his arm around her shoulder and helped her to sit up.

“Are you ok?”

“I think...” Kirsten looked at her hands and then slapped them together, brushing off the dirt. “I’m not so bad.” She pushed her self up standing and looked down at her dress. One of the sleeves, a short bunched piece of cloth, was ripped at the seam and there was dirt all over her chest, but the entire right side of her skirt was gone. Kirsten grabbed the skirt and pulled it up towards her face, incredulous at the jagged edge that marked out an entire missing triangle of her dress. The gap at the bottom of her dress was nearly six inches wide, entirely too much of a gap to be sewn up and made to look new.

Tom had stepped back around the oak tree, his face hot as he watched the girl as she stared at the rip in her dress. He could bare only a moment and averted his eyes towards the tree. There he saw the scrap of blue fabric hanging limply from the branch. The wider end, which had been part of the hem of the skirt was hooked around a knot in the branch where a new budding twig was jutting out. In his stomach Tom felt something thrust about, kicking against the walls of his belly as if trying to avoid being digested into Tom’s body. Ryan and Mark were gathering up marbles as William held Kirsten steady. Tom continued to stare at the fabric caught in the tree. There was no wind to move even the tiniest of threads. It simply hung from the branch; like a dead thing. Tom reached up

and unhooked it from the branch. It was soft against his grimy hands. He squeezed it, feeling the fabric crush between his fingers.

“You bully.” Kirsten stepped around the tree to place her hands on Tom’s chest and shove. Tom staggered backwards and thrust the scrap of fabric into his pocket.

“You ruined my dress.” She punched his arm. “On purpose.”

“I didn’t ruin your dress.” Tom pointed above himself. “You fell out of the tree.”

“You pushed me.” Kirsten drew in a breath and shrieked. “YOU PUSHED ME OUT OF A TREE.”

“No he didn’t.” Ryan looked up from the ruined marbles circle. “He never touched you. You just fell.”

“No. He pushed me.” She pointed her finger towards Tom again. “He did it.”

“I did not.”

“He didn’t,” Ryan nodded. “I saw him.”

Tom folded his arms. “See.”

“You did.” She shrieked. Then she covered her eyes with the sleeve of her dress and resumed her sobbing. William put an arm strangely around her torso, just under her shoulder blades, and turned her away from Tom. She rolled into his arms and rested her chin on his shoulder. She was almost six inches taller than William. As she moved his hand slipped from her back down towards her bottom. William felt the gentle curve of flesh and dropped his arms, already feeling stick-hot where Kirsten touched his chest.

“I didn’t.” Tom’s voice broke as his speech was interrupted by the spectacle of William touching Kirsten. Ryan and Mark also stared. Six eyes tracked the slide of William’s hand, and then lingered over the spot where it had last touched. The tear in



Kirsten's dress ran all the way up the skirt, tapering off at the moment the skirt was sewn to the bodice. Soft pink underpants were visible as momentary flashes underneath shifting fabric.

Mrs. Lawrence had heard her daughter's screams and emerged from the house, hairbrush in one hand. She ran to where her daughter wept, noting the four boys and set her face into its most stern expression. Kirsten pulled away from William and flung herself into her mother's arms. She gasped, forcing a new set of tears to squeeze through her eyes.

"What happened sweetie." Mrs. Lawrence's voice was soft in the way that the first winds of a thunderstorm are caressing. William backed away, not wanting to get caught in the middle of Mrs. Lawrence's bad humor.

"Tom pushed me out of the tree." Kirsten raised her hands to show her mother where she had hurt herself. Her mother glanced over them quickly before turning to Tom, who had ducked further around the trunk of the tree.

"You're a wicked boy Tom. A wicked boy." Mrs. Lawrence clutched her daughter, smothering her tears with a starched blouse. "How could you pick on a girl?"

"I didn't pick..."

"You'll go to hell for lying Tom. Do you want to go to hell?" Mrs. Lawrence's voice rose to nearly match her daughter's earlier shrieks. Ryan and Mark moved away from Tom, not daring to be implicated in his guilt.

"No Ma'am."

"I'm going to have a talk with your father Tom." And she turned her back on the boy, returning her attention to her daughter as she shepherded the girl back to the house.

The four boys watched Kirsten return to her house. William touched his shirt where Kirsten's tears still moistened the fabric. He almost thought they stung.

Tom licked his lips. Mrs. Lawrence was going to call his father.

There was a hollow space underneath the back porch of Tom's house. A wooden latticework surrounded most of the underside of the porch, but a section had fallen off near the rear of the porch allowing for admittance to a small earthen cave. Tom crouched there as his parents searched for him. He had been there for almost three hours now, sneaking in around four o'clock after he had seen his parents walk down the street calling for him. He had spent most of the day in the fields around the swimming hole, though he never tried to go swimming, as his parents would check the spot. The tall grasses around the hole were, however, easy to hide in if you knew how to move and when to sit still. His parents had come to the swimming hole. Twice they had looked for him there, but they never saw him.

"Thomas." He heard his father's voice call out into the street. "Tom, where are you?"

His father's voice was calm, but there was a subtle flavor of anger in his tone. One that was detectable only by Tom's watchful ears. Footsteps approached over grass, the soft *shush-shush* noise warning Tom in time to pull back to the furthest edge of his tiny cavern.

"Tom, are you in there." The voice still calm; the neighbors might be listening. Tom had seen Mrs. Patz sitting on her porch as he ran home. His father's face appeared

sideways at the opening. Tom closed his eyes. The skin around his father's nose and mouth had gone red and puffy. He was angry. But the hideout was very dark and in the brightness of the late afternoon sun his father was unable to see Tom's huddled body only six feet away. Mr. Maeves withdrew his head and the *shush-shush* noise moved off past the house and into the rest of the neighborhood.

Tom relaxed, settling more agreeably into the dirt. A few minutes passed and his mother's feet strode by, followed quickly by his older brother Matthew's. Then there was quiet. He thought about trying to sneak into the house and nip something to eat. He hadn't had anything since breakfast. He crawled forwards to the entrance of his hideaway. He could see his mother standing at the edge of the yard, scanning the horizon. She would definitely notice if he tried to go inside. Tom pulled his head back under cover. The strip of fabric from Kirsten's dress was still in his pocket. He took it out and held it up to the light. The blue was a pale blue, and as he studied it he realized there were tiny pale blue flowers stitched into the fabric, each with five tiny leaves and a pale blue stem. A few splinters from the branch were still caught at one end, while the other trailed off into a few threads. The entire piece was not big enough to wrap around his head. And it was thin, thinner than anything he had ever handled. Tom had never had clothing made of fabric this delicate. Even his church shirt was much thicker. He suspected that his mother's grey dress was this thin.

Tom wadded the cloth into a ball and rubbed it over his cheek. It was so soft that he almost wasn't sure that it touched him at all. It was like Kirsten herself most of the time. When he passed her papers in school he was never sure if the tips of his fingers actually brushed against the tips of hers. He wondered if William knew. William must

know. He had touched her. Tom had seen him. The back of his throat became sour and Tom spit into the dirt.

The sun had now set and Tom's mother walked past again and went into the house. It was nearly time for dinner. His father came home soon afterwards, but Tom remained. They would send him to bed without dinner anyway. The kitchen was just above him and he could hear the sink being turned on and off. Gentle thumps from his mother's footsteps came from overhead as well as the louder sounds as his father walked across the floor. His father's voice too sifted through the floorboards and foundation, a roughened grumble that had been stripped of words by the time it reached Tom.

"She has brown hair, doesn't she?" whispered Tom to the hollow air. He could see it now, usually curled up in a ponytail or confined to a braid stretching down her back. Back in second grade she had bangs too. Mostly they hung over her eyebrows, except when her mother cut them back and then you could see the chicken pox scar on the right side of her forehead.

Tom whapped reflexively at a mosquito he felt on his arm. Dinner was certainly over and he was getting cold; it was time to go inside. He was very hungry and he remembered that he had a box of animal crackers in his closet somewhere. He squeezed the fabric tightly before folding it and tucking it behind a small mound of dirt nearer to the foundation of the house, where it was never wet, and went inside.

William came home just before lunch. His mother was in the living room with the ironing board and called to him as he entered.

“William, come here.” She turned off the radio as he came into the room.

“William, Mrs. Petersen told me that Kirsten was pushed out of a tree this morning. She said you were there when it happened.”

William stiffened, “I didn’t push her. It was Tom. I was playing marbles with Mark and Ryan. I swear I didn’t...”

“William, don’t swear.”

“Sorry.” He flushed and looked at the iron.

Mrs. McDouglas set down her iron and knelt by her son. “I know you didn’t sweetie. I just wanted to know if Kirsten is all right.”

“Oh.” William wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “She got her hands scraped, and her jaw had a little cut in it.”

“But, she’s ok?”

“Yeah.”

“Good.” Mrs. McDouglas returned to her ironing board. “William, I want you to stay away from Tom. He’s a wicked boy.”

“Ok, Mom.”

“That’s my good boy. Now go to the kitchen and help your sisters with lunch.”

After lunch William went back outside. A wind had picked up since the morning and now tugged at the edges of his shirt and shorts. William began walking south along his street. A few houses down he found a large stick underneath a maple tree. He picked it up and began poking it into the cracks in the sidewalk as he walked. The stick had

three forks in it, so he picked of the little twigs, leaving one nearly straight stick about three feet long and nearly an inch wide at its base. William switched from poking things to balancing the stick on the palm of his right hand.

The stick was no where close to having an even weight distribution, so William had to keep moving to hold it upright. A couple steps forwards, lean back, swing out his hand to the right. William kept moving, generally forwards, until he lost the balance of the stick completely in front of Betty Updike's house. The stick fell forwards from his hand and landed half in the grass, half on the sidewalk, startling a toad. It was a very big horned toad, the size of two of William's fists. It jumped away as the stick fell next to it.

"Oooh, look at you." William dropped down to all fours. "You're huge." The toad hopped again, towards the house. "Hey, don't go anywhere." William crawled forwards, but the toad hopped again, and again, William following it all the way to the rose bushes on the left side of the house. William peered through the thick leaves and clumps of flowers. He could no longer see the toad, but after a moment spotted some leaves twitching irregularly. The bushes were very thick and old; they had very thick thorns. William ran back to the sidewalk to fetch his stick.

He thrust it into the bushes near where he had seen the toad and waited for movement. There was none. He jabbed into the bushes again and again, but nothing stirred. The boy sat still for a moment, peering in, hoping his prey hadn't escaped. He stood again, held the stick out like a wand and, beginning at one end, ran the stick along the hedge, whacking all the outer branches and causing a rain of petals to shake loose from the bushes. He paused and looked for signs of the toad. A movement caught his

eye near the back, near the wall of the house. William repeated the maneuver with the stick, twice more. After the third pass he saw the toad jump from behind the hedge and back out onto the lawn.

William dropped the stick and swooped down for the toad. He caught it easily, as if he were scooping up a fly ball. The animal struggled in his grasp, but William had caught it around the belly, pinning his thumbs and forefingers tightly around the toad while letting its arms and legs writhe freely in the air. The toad pumped its back feet, but could push against nothing. William stood with his prize. Around him was a carpet of rose petals, red, pink and yellow. The row of bushes now seemed to droop, dethroned, with only a few tiny petals clinging to their bare heads. William glanced about; if these were his mother's bushes she would be furious. He felt a slow heat rising behind his eyes, but he didn't see anyone. William abandoned the stick and ran home with his toad. He stumbled twice as he ran, trying to see if Miss Updike would appear and chase him. Once in his bedroom he glanced out the window, but saw no one coming after him.

Mrs. Maeves was finishing the dishes as Tom entered the kitchen through the back door. She swung around to face her son, a soapy pot in one hand and a rag in the other.

"Paul," she called out. "He's back." Then dropping her voice into a low snarl. "I can't believe what you did to that poor girl. What makes you think you can hurt people like that anyway. I didn't teach you that. Your father certainly didn't. You should be ashamed of yourself Tom. Ashamed. I already have to grit my teeth every time a school

report comes home. Why can't you be more like William McDouglas? He's a good boy. His mother talks about the award he won for swimming at the high school in March. And he always does well in school." Mrs. Maeves snapped the back of the pot with the rag for effect. "Couldn't you at least try to be more like William? Do you have to be so wicked?"

The cold brass doorknob from the back door poked Tom in the spine. He realized he had been inching away from his mother, who had moved from her place at the sink and now stood only a few inches from him. He could smell her breath; both sour and musty.

"I didn't do anything to Kirsten. I didn't"

"Don't lie to me Tom."

"I'm not lying."

Mrs. Maeves pulled her face in closer, now only a couple inches from Tom's. "So she just fell out of that tree then?"

"Uh-huh."

"Thomas, I won't stand any more of your lying."

"But I ain't lying. I ain't."

"Why can't you be a good boy, like William McDouglas?"

"He's not so good. He doesn't share."

"Thomas..."

"He won't. I asked to use his marbles today and he wouldn't let me."

Mrs. Maeves snatched Tom's ear. The dishrag pressed coldly against his cheek, wetting his temple. "I have had just about enough of you."



Mr. Maeves entered. “Is he giving you trouble?”

“Now he’s lying.” Mrs. Maeves released the ear.

“I am not lying.”

“Don’t talk back to your mother.” Mrs. Maeves stepped back, allowing her husband to fill the space in front of Tom. Mr. Maeves leaned down to meet his son at eye level. “I have never been so ashamed of you Tom. Pushing a girl out of a tree. I didn’t realize my son was a bully. You’re lucky she didn’t break anything.”

“I didn’t push her...”

“Lying isn’t going to fool me Tom. Now you are going to pay for the dress you ruined. It’s going to come out of your allowance. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” Tom sighed.

“Go to your room Tom. I don’t want to look at you right now.” Mr. Maeves stood and turned away from Tom. He took his wife’s arm and led her back towards the sink as Tom slunk towards the stairs.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with that boy.”

“I wish he were more like his brother.”

“Or William McDouglas.”

“He’s a good boy.”

Tom stopped at the third step up and listened as his parents finished the dinner dishes. They weren’t even trying to whisper. He could see Matt in the living room listening while he pretended to study for his algebra final.

The next morning at church William saw Tom come in with his family just before the service started and slink into the very back pew, even though there were two empty pews in front of them. The McDouglas family was sitting on the left side of the pews, about halfway back, and William saw heads turn throughout the sermon towards the back of the church. William himself looked back three times. Even at his distance he could see that Tom's ears and neck were red, and that he perched on the pew so that his bottom didn't rest squarely on the seat.

Kirsten Lawrence sat in the first pew next to her mother and brother. William couldn't tell from his position that anything was wrong with her. He never saw her looking back, or her mother, though her brother turned all the way around in his seat at one point. Minister Lawrence at the pulpit also seemed to pay most of his attention to the back of his congregation.

After the service William lost sight of Tom as he and his parents walked up to Minister Lawrence. William walked out of the church with his parents and began milling about on the lawn. He went looking for Mark or Ryan to tell them about the toad he caught when he passed Betty Updike speaking Peggy Barnes and Abby Dalton.

"I came home from buying myself some new stockings and there were my rose bushes. All destroyed."

"Completely?" Whined Mrs. Barnes.

"There wasn't a petal left." Said Miss Updike; she noticed William, who had stopped a few feet away. He dropped to his knees and began picking clovers out of the grass. Miss Updike looked back to her friends. "Anyway, I think it was the Maeves boy.

I hear his parents couldn't find him all yesterday afternoon." William closed his eyes and stopped picking clovers.

"He's a troublesome one." Mrs. Dalton agreed.

"Like his mother, but not a subtle."

"The minister sure was bent on his sermon today."

"Well he should be."

"Someone's got to teach that boy some shame."

Mrs. McDouglas's voice came to William. "Are you ready to go?" William opened his eyes and looked up. His mother was bent over him, smiling. William flushed and smiled back.

"Yes Mom." He released the fist he now realized he had made and clovers fell back to the ground.

"Did you find any four-leaf ones?"

"No." He shook his head and looked back towards the women still discussing Tom. "I didn't find any."

"Well that's all right. You're my special good boy. You don't need any luck."

For the first two weeks of the grounding Tom found an escape in school. At home he was continuously under the eye of his mother, who ensured that when he wasn't busy with chores he was kept in his room reading the New Testament. His father had spanked him three times since Kirsten fell out of the tree, each time for lying. School, on the other hand, included a twenty minute recess after lunch. Tom hurried out to the

playground each afternoon in order to claim the spot on top of the monkey bars.

Stretching himself over two bars he allowed his arms and legs to dangle as he rested his forehead on a third bar.

If he lifted his head he could see the swings clearly. There Kirsten and her best friends Jenny and Alice habitually sat during recess. They didn't actually swing, it was more like they swayed gently, keeping the toes of their shoes dug into the woodchips that covered the playground. They never got high enough for their skirts to blow over their knees.

On Wednesday, not long before Mrs. Kilney would sound the bell to return to class, Tom was drooping from the bars when William walked underneath. Tom watched the boy approach. He was short, and had freckles all over his face. Why did his parents want him to be like this dweeb? Maybe he could do long division, but he was a whiner. Quickly Tom sucked back and spat into the boy's flat brown hair. William slapped his head reflexively and eeewed before looking up. Tom grinned down.

"Hello, Willie."

"You bully, I'm telling." William wiped his hand on his pants.

"I'm not a bully, you deserved it."

"Did not."

"Did too."

"Did not, anyway Kirsten says you're a bully, so you're a bully." William planted his fists on his hips. Tom felt hot behind his eyes. He ratcheted his head up and looked towards the swings. The girls were there, doing something with a wad of string. He returned his gaze to William, holding the panic from his voice through sheer will.

“She did not.”

“Uh-huh. She said you were a wicked, stinky bully.” William drew in breath, attempting to puff up his lie.

“And why would she tell you that?”

“She likes to talk to me.”

“Since when?”

“Since we walk home together after school.”

Tom bit his lip. They only lived a few houses away. It must be true. What if they...

“Do you hold her hand?”

“What?”

“Do you hold her hand when you walk home?”

“No-oh.” William again wiped his hands on his pants, this time as an excuse to avert his eyes. “Why would I hold a girl’s hand? They’re always sweaty. My sisters have...” He stopped and glanced back towards Kirsten, when his eyes returned to Tom they were wide and glowing. “You like...”

Tom spat again; this time with desperate accuracy. The spit landed solidly in William’s left eye and the boy screamed. Mrs. Kilney ran over to the monkey bars to coddle William and send Tom to see the principle. From the swings Kirsten and her friends watched as Mrs. Kilney took out her handkerchief to wipe William’s face. William caught her look and waved, his indignity already put behind him.

That afternoon, as Tom was removing his shoes by the kitchen door, Mrs. Maeves, padded up behind him, clutched his hair and pushed him into a chair. Tom cawed and groped at the back of his head.

“How could you, Tom?” Mrs. Maeves began to pace the kitchen. “How could you spit on that sweet little boy?” The dishrag in her hand snapped about like a whip.

“It was his fault.” Tom sat in one of the oak, high-backed chairs belonging to the kitchen table. The seat was flat, hard and uncomfortable. Tom fidgeted.

“How could it be his fault?” Mrs. Maeves leaned in, breathing into her son’s face. Tom pressed himself into the chair, trying to avoid the stale heat, but it felt as if his mother had sucked away all of the clean air. “Answer me Thomas.”

“He called me a stinky, wicked bully.”

Mrs. Maeves flopped into a chair, her dishrag sweeping the floor. “My son.” She whispered to the ceiling. “My son, a bully.”

“I’m, not a bully.”

“That’s what he called you.” She clicked her tongue. “Does everyone call you a bully Tom? Does everyone?”

“But I’m not.” Tom felt his eyes begin to swell and as a sharp slap ricocheted inside his chest. He winced and clutched at his breast.

“I need some water. Go get me some water Tom.”

Tom rose and went to the cupboard, sniffing. He pulled out one of the tall glasses, and began filling it at the sink. His mother drooped in the chair; a thin sweat coated her face, making her appear more pale than usual.

“What will people say?” She wiped her face slowly with the dishrag. “We’ll have to sit on the back pew at church now.” Tom handed his mother the water and sat back down. Mrs. Maeves didn’t move for a long while, not even to sip her water. She was very thin. The bones of her arms seemed almost to poke through the skin at her wrists. Not at all like Kirsten. Kirsten was subtly rounded all over; except, of course, for her chest. His mother’s chest was the only bit of her that really looked soft. Tom flushed and began pulling at the toe of his sock. Mrs. Maeves rolled her head along the chair back to look at her son.

“I know what this is Tom. You’re jealous.”

Tom let go of his sock. “I’m not jealous.”

“William is a very smart and gifted boy. Just because you’re not doesn’t mean that you should be jealous. You should be his friend.”

“I’m not jealous. I wanted him to stop...”

“Tom,” Mrs. Maeves stopped her son mid-sentence. “Don’t covet.”

“I’m not coveting.” Tom whined.

Mrs. Maeves clucked her tongue. “Go to your room Tom.” Tom hopped off the chair and skidded in his socks across the linoleum. He was halfway up the stairs when his mother spoke again. “I don’t want to see you.” The whiplash returned, stronger and more sudden this time. Tom bowed his head, trying to shield his body, but the pain rose inside him. He reached out for the railing, but missed, his right hand slapping against the bare wood of the steps as his left shoulder whacked into the edge of a step.

William avoided going past Betty Updike's house for weeks. He cut through the back yard and then walked up Beech Street to get to school and back. Whenever he went over to see Ryan he cut across the other side of the street and used Oak instead. No one mentioned Miss Updike's ruined bushes around him again, but he still wanted to be careful.

The toad he caught was doing well in a large shoebox. He had named it Henry and bought flies for it from the bait counter at the hardware store. Every evening William would close the door to his bedroom and let Henry hop about his room. He thought the creature was growing. Whenever he picked it up it seemed harder to keep it from writhing out of his hands. The shoebox eventually seemed too big for it so he cleaned out his sock drawer and lined it with newspaper and grass clippings.

Since school was out William no longer saw Kirsten regularly. She didn't live very far away, but it seemed that every time William rode his bike past her house or walked over to Ryan's that she wasn't there.

Tom's summer consisted mostly of his grounding with brief stints at snuck-away freedom. The first time he was able to get clear of the house he crawled back into his hole underneath the porch and retrieved the scrap of fabric. It was a little dusty, but brushed clean quickly. After that he kept it with him at all times. During the day it occupied his front right pants pocket; at night he slept with it under his pillow. Each night he would crush it into a ball and rub it over his body. He always started with his face, allowing the frayed ends of the fabric to tickle the fine hairs on his cheeks. Then he moved to his arms, rubbing them lightly, but quickly, until they felt almost as smooth as the fabric. Slowly caressing the insides of his calves. He could never do it for very long.



His skin would tense and he would have to pull his hand away, afraid of the pulsations that spread throughout his body.

On a Thursday in June Mr. and Mrs. Maeves took Matt over to Macon to see the optometrist. Less than twenty minutes had passed since his parent's departure then Tom found himself walking purposefully towards the Lawrence house. Kirsten was in the backyard. She was wearing another dress, this time a brown one that spread itself softly around her form as she sat in the grass. Tom approached from the front of the house, stopping as he reached the corner. Kirsten was picking clover flowers and plaiting them into a chain. Already a necklace of flowers drooped down to her belly button and two more were looped around her ears. Tom glanced around and spotted a clump of clover flowers. Quickly he gathered them before stepping out from behind the house.

"Hi, Kirsten." He said. Kirsten looked up and rolled into a crouch. "I found these for you." Kirsten sat back and took the flowers he offered. Her thumb and index finger brushed against his wrist. Tom smiled and sat down Indian style across from her.

"I can't use these."

"Why not?"

"Because," she pushed out a short breath "the stems are too short." She set the flowers back down on the grass at his feet. Tom picked one up and studied it. There was a stem there, a whole inch long.

"Are you sure?"

“Look,” she leaned over and stretched out her necklace. “You have to have a long stem so you can tie them, see.”

“Can’t you put the flowers closer together?”

“No.”

“Well, maybe you just aren’t any good with knots.”

Kirsten picked up the chain she had been working on and began tying on a new flower. Tom leaned forwards to watch. Kirsten scooted backwards in the grass.

“What are you doing here?”

“Nothing.”

“Then why don’t you go away.”

“Maybe I wanna sit here.” Tom picked up two of the refused flowers and began trying to tie them together. The stems were thicker than they seemed and resisted being bent. Kirsten watched him for a moment, just to see if he could do it, but he couldn’t.

“Maybe I don’t want you to sit here.”

“Why wouldn’t you want me to sit here?”

Kirsten raised herself so she was sitting on her feet and folded her arms. “You did push me out of a tree.”

“I did not. You fell.”

“You jumped at me.”

“I missed.” Tom sucked in some air; it smelled of clover.

“But, you wanted to push me, didn’t you.”

“You were lying at me.”

“So you wanted to?”

“No.”

“Then why did you jump?”

Tom pulled hard at the two flowers half-tied in his hands and the stems snapped. The white and purple tipped heads fell to the ground and Tom found himself holding two twisted stems.

“Just go away, Tom.”

“I didn’t mean for you to fall.”

“Meaning doesn’t mean anything Tom. Now go away. I don’t want to talk to a bully.”

Tom stood and threw the two stems to the ground. They fell slowly in an entirely unsatisfying manner. He swallowed, realizing that his throat felt swollen.

“Fine.” He shouted at her, surprised at the volume of his voice. “I’m a bully. A dirty, stinky, filthy, wicked, bully.” Tom stomped on the pile of flowers at Kirsten’s feet, and then ran off into the neighborhood. When he got home he crawled into his hole and pulled out the scrap of fabric. He didn’t think Kirsten had noticed him cry.

The bare flesh of William’s thighs stuck to the hot concrete of the stoop, where he sat shucking corn. Shifting produced a muted sucking noise and revealed bits of gravel stuck with sweat to the underside of his legs. The not-quite small child leaned over to grab another ear from the giant wicker basket and intercepted a rock with his right temple. The bit of milky quartz was clearly stained with blood when it hit the ground and William’s temple had already produced a stream that curled around his jaw line and dripped from his chin; but William was unaware of this. His whole body already dripped

with mid-August sweat and he had not glanced at the rock on the ground. Instead he had jumped up, peering into the street and neighboring yards trying to locate his assailant.

He already knew who it was. Tom Maeves had chosen William to ‘fun around with’ after his last ‘playmate’ Kirsten Lawrence broke her leg after being pushed from her bicycle and was forced to stay inside. William had seen the whole thing happen and ran off to tell Kirsten’s parents. Tom had been grounded for weeks and William heard that he had been beaten twice with his father’s belt. But after Tom was loose again he made a point of finding William. So far he had put ice cream in William’s hair during a church ice-cream social. He had broken the birdhouse William built that used to hang from the oak tree in William’s backyard. William was sure that it was Tom who stole his swimming goggles from where William had left them on the front porch, but his mother thought he had just lost them and made him go without dessert for a week. Tom had also given him a number of cuts and bruises and even a black eye. William always got grounded for fighting when he came home with new scratches, even though he couldn’t touch Tom.

From behind a thin hedge in Elsa Petersen’s yard, two houses down and across the street, a small patch of yellow could be seen. William bent down to pick up the baseball bat he had brought out to the porch with him before standing up slowly and creeping out towards the middle of the yard.

“William McDouglas, where do you think you’re going with your chores unfinished?” The boy nearly slipped his bare feet in the grass, but did not turn to face his mother.

Tom raised his head and peered through a gap in the hedge. Mrs. McDouglas pulled a baseball bat from her son's arms and cradled it in her own. She was wearing a calico print dress. It was blue, like the scrap of Kirsten's dress, but looser, more billowy. Tom didn't think it had stitched flowers either. Instead large printed flowers covered the garment, making Mrs. McDouglas radiate out from her surroundings. She looked so much warmer than Tom's own mother.

William took a quick look away from his mother and back towards Tom. Tom dropped back to the earth, and then began crawling away from William's line of sight. William watched the yellow patch move until it reached the edge of the hedge and disappeared around the corner of the Petersen house.

"You aren't going off to play baseball until you've finished this corn. Honestly William, you're usually such a good boy. Now go finish."

A good boy. William harrumphed. Good boys were left alone outside to be punched about by Tom. William watched as his mother took his bat somewhere inside the house. Empty handed, the yard suddenly felt very large. He hoped that Tom had left completely. He picked up another ear of corn and began yanking at the silks and the tops of the stiff husks. After exposing the slick-looking yellow kernels he began to pick the strings from between the rows, his stubby fingers missing more than they caught. He had added three more ears to the kettle at his feet when he heard the soft scratch-scratch of bare feet over gravel. Tom was entering his yard. He was alone, but from the way his shoulders were held back that didn't seem to matter. William clenched a fist around the ear he was holding as he rose. Tom stopped short of the porch. His eyes level with Williams despite the two step difference in terrain.

“I’m sorry you can’t come play with me Willie.” He puckered his lips as he spoke, spraying saliva and moistening his words. William spent a moment wondering how long it would take his mother to rescue him if he screamed. The tap was on in the kitchen, which indicated that she was nearby. Good enough.

“Drop dead, you lame goat.”

“Ooo. Willie’s upset.” Tom began prancing, kicking dust with the toes of his shoes. The soft brown clouds billowed before adhering to the sweat on his legs as it settled.

“You’re a stupid, stupid idiot.” William unconsciously raised himself to the tips of his toes as he spoke. Tom had stopped his dancing and stepped up onto the porch.

“You take that back.”

“No.” William raised the ear of corn up to Tom’s face. “I won’t”

“I’ll make you.”

“No you won’t you ugly pig.”

“William. What has gotten into you?” Mrs. McDouglas’s voice called from the kitchen window. Both boys glanced at the source of the noise. Tom quickly jerked a fist into William’s stomach before hopping down from the porch. William winced and dropped to one knee. He could feel his eyes tear up but he lifted his chin so the tears wouldn’t roll down his cheeks. He couldn’t stand it if Tom thought he had made William cry.

“Bye Willie.” Tom began skipping down the front walk.

”Bye stupid.” William wheezed.

Tom glanced over his shoulder before rejoining. “Sticks and stones may break

my bones, but words will never hurt me.” As he chanted he felt his ears grow hot. The muggy-ness of the summer swelled up around him, making his skin warm then suddenly chill as a breeze flickered by. Tom shook himself, blinked his eyes and felt better. Behind him he heard the front door of Willie’s house open and grinned. Mrs. McDouglas would probably send Willie to bed without dinner; or maybe even ground him.

William heard the front door open behind him and whimpered. He realized that his left hand felt squishy and raised it to see dozens of split kernels that had spit their juice all over his fist.

That evening William was stretched out on the living room floor with his crayons and paper. He had drawn a picture of a trout and a picture of a catfish when his sister Laura walked into the room and flopped to the floor besides him.

“Let me draw some.”

“No.” He took the crayon box and placed it out of her reach.

“I wanna draw something.”

“No. I don’t have enough paper.”

“I can get some more.” She stood and ran to her bedroom, running back in a minute with a binder full of colored construction paper. “See.” She announced her re-arrival. “I’ve got some paper.” Laura bent down towards the crayon box. “I wanna use the purple.”

“No.” William slapped at her hand, knocking half the crayons onto the floor. Laura cradled her hand as the tears appeared on her face.

“Mom.” She yelled. “Moouoom. William won’t share with me.” Mrs. McDouglas put her head around the corner and saw the crayons.

“William, let your sister use your crayons.” Laura grabbed up the purple one. “That’s my good boy.” Mrs. McDouglas said as she returned to whatever it was she had been doing. William sat very still as he watched his sister scribble with his crayons. She always pressed so hard that the tips were worn down flat, instead of pointy. Once they were flat you had to shave them to get them to do thin lines again. Good boys had to let their sisters ruin their crayons. Laura drew a purple house with a purple cat and a purple sofa, and then switched to blue. William crumbled up his drawings of fish and threw them at his sister before storming back to his room.

The next morning was Sunday morning. Mrs. Maeves cooked ham for breakfast and wrestled her sons into their nicest shirts. Tom and Matt argued over who got to look at the comics in the paper first while Mr. Maeves got to sleep in until eight-thirty. The family left the house at nine forty-five. They used to leave for church at nine-thirty, but since Tom had pushed Kirsten out of a tree Mrs. Maeves tried to get to church just before the service began, so she wouldn’t have to talk to anyone. They also sat in the back of the church so that they could make a quick exit and not have to talk to Minister Lawrence on their way out.

On this Sunday, however, Tom wanted to get to church early. Kirsten would be there early, and she couldn’t tell him to go away from the church. Unfortunately his mother was resolute and the Maeves slid into their pew at nine-fifty-seven. From his



position at the end of the back pew Tom could see Kirsten sitting next to her mother at the end of the front row. Standing next to her was William McDouglas. Kirsten was smiling at William. Mrs. Lawrence nodded and said something, then William said something back. Tom felt his heart constrict and reached into his pocket for the scrap of fabric. He watched Willie run back to his own seat as Minister Lawrence approached the podium.

The next morning was humid and William awoke to damp sheets twisted around his legs. He stared at the ceiling and gathered the resolve to get out of bed. It was a good day to go swimming. He had just gotten a new pair of goggles and wanted to try them out in one of the ponds in the outskirts of towns. Mrs. McDouglas walked past his door and rapped three times on the wood without breaking her stride. As William shuffled towards the bathroom he noticed that his mother had left his slacks and jacket pressed and hung on his bedroom doorknob. It must be Sunday.

He was trailing behind his parents and older sisters an hour later, dressed as neatly as his mother could impose. The walk to the Lanham Methodist Church was a short one, but by quarter to ten the sun was high enough to shine down his starched collar and sting the back of his neck, leaving it slightly burned by the time he arrived at church. William had tried to smuggle one of his cars so he would have something to do during the sermon, but his mother had spotted it and the car was now stowed in her handbag.

The church was already filled and the stone walls muted further the whispered conversations. Mr. McDouglas led his family to an open pew a few rows from the front and the five of them squeezed in. William managed to claim the end and thus had only

his sister Laura sitting next to him. And he was out of arms reach from his parents. A small success. He slipped off the end of the pew and walked over to Kirsten Lawrence who was sitting with her mother and her aunt in the front. Kirsten noticed his approach and turned to smile at him. William stopped just a few inches from her and thrust his hands into his pockets.

“Hey, do you want to go swimming later.”

“Kirsten turned her head and swung her feet out in front of her. “Maybe.” She turned back to her mother. “Mom? Can I go swimming with William after church?”

Mrs. Lawrence looked over and smiled. “Of course.”

Kirsten relayed. “I can come.”

“I’ve got some new goggles. You can use ‘em if you want.”

“Thanks.”

“See you later.”

“Yeah.” William nodded and hopped back to sit next to his sister. He had to pass Miss Updike as he went, but she wasn’t looking at him. William shivered once and slid into his seat. As Minister Lawrence walked up to the podium, William noticed Laura’s hand slip slowly into her handbag and then extract something that shined as it caught the mid-morning light.

“What’s that?” He whispered.

“Nothing.”

“Huh-uh. Whatcha got?”

“None of your business.” She jerked her elbow into his side. William bit at his lip, but stayed quiet.

“I’ll tell mom.”

“You wouldn’t tattle in church.”

“Would too.”

“You would not, it’s a sin.” She sniffed triumphantly.

“No it isn’t.”

“It is too. You don’t even know what a sin is.”

“I do so. It’s not eating your vegetables or coveting your neighbor’s wife.”

“Those are just sins; they’re not what sin is.”

“Yeah, then what is it.”

“Making God angry, like if you’re mean to someone.” William looked over towards Miss Updike, who was now praying. He swallowed and turned back to his sister.

“What if no one catches you?” He whispered even more softly.

“You’re always caught. God always catches you and then lets someone find out so you get in trouble. Then you don’t have to go to hell.”

“But what if you’re never caught?”

“Then maybe it wasn’t a sin.” William sat back in the pew. Laura again began lifting the shiny thing.

“But what you’re doing is a sin.” He pointed his finger towards Laura, but only raised it a few inches from his lap so his mother wouldn’t notice.

“You don’t even know what I’m doing.”

William leaned forwards and across his sister’s lap. “Mom.”

His mother glanced at him as well as two of the women in the pew in front of them. Laura quickly tore at the shiny object and pressed half a piece of gum into his palm.

“William, don’t speak during the sermon.”

“But I need a tissue.” Mrs. McDouglas withdrew one from her purse and passed it down. William smiled at Laura as he pretended to blow her nose, but she had her eyes trained on the minister, her jaw grinding steadily. William unwrapped the foil from his bit of gum and popped it in his mouth. It was minty, but not the type you could blow bubbles with, but blowing bubbles in church would be discovered. He folded the tinfoil into halves four times, then unfolded it and tried to refold it into a tiny paper hat. He placed the hat on his pinky finger and poked at Laura. She laughed and folded her own tinfoil. William smiled and began to watch his feet as he tried to wiggle them so they caught the morning sunlight.

By the time the sermon had ended William was hungry and sore. The gum had gone sour and then tasteless long before and there were now two brownish wads stuck underneath the pew. When his family emerged onto the church’s lawn his parents immediately went over to speak with a cluster of their neighbors who had gathered under a sycamore tree. William waited a few minutes as Betty Updike complimented his sisters on their summer dresses, then slowly wandered off to the back of the church where there were a half dozen garter snake holes. The Forsythia bushes planted along the back wall of the church were thick and hid most of the holes as well as turning the air sugary. Finding no one else around William bent down and began to crawl under the bushes using his fingertips and toes, so as to not get dirt on his church clothes.

He hadn't found any snakes before he felt a sharp kick on his right thigh which cost him his balance and sent him to the ground. A laugh, frequently augmented with a snort came from behind. William rolled over and sat up, knowing it was Tom.

"Whatcha looking for Willie? A little snake to be your friend?"

"Why don't you go away?" He tried to move to his feet, but couldn't stand while still underneath the bushes. He began to scoot forwards. Tom waited until William was nearly clear of the bushes before giving him another kick, this one landing on William's left shoulder. William fell back and yelped as his head landed on a stick.

"Damn you, Tom." He struggled up and leaped out of the bushes before Tom could get in another kick. The taller boy stepped back, waiting for William to steady himself.

"Do you want to fight me Willie?" Tom raised his fists and began bouncing. William stared at the fists as they arced through the air, each one twice the size of his own. "I think you're chicken."

William gulped and looked at the ground, and inadvertently towards his own clothes.

There was a tear on his knee and probably another elsewhere and he was dirty. He could feel the caked dirt on his cheek where he hit the earth. He was going to get in trouble. He was supposed to be a good boy, but he was going to get in trouble. He knew that ripped and dirty church clothes were at least a spanking and probably a day in his room without dinner or supper. And, worst of all, it would mean that he wouldn't be able to go swimming that afternoon. He would have to sit at home on a hot, sticky Sunday

afternoon. It was all Tom's fault. William felt the muscles in his stomach clench. "I'm not chicken, stupid."

As the last syllable lingered between them William noticed that Tom's eyes had suddenly widened and that he was sucking in his stomach. Tom's hand went reflexively to the area around his naval then dropped to his side as he realized William was watching. "You are dead."

"Yeah, come and get me you big oaf." Tom stopped in mid stride to clutch again at his side and this time he plopped to the ground. The boy seemed to be breathing hard and was hunched over himself. William took a step closer, reveling in the abnormality. It was then that a small tear emerged from Tom's tight-shut eyes. Tom brushed it away quickly and then stood, getting first to his knees and using his hands to push himself up to standing. He looked at William for a moment, and then stumbled towards the church lawn.

William remained in the back garden for nearly half an hour until Laura found him and told him they were going home. She grinned, before turning around and yelling. "I've found him. And he's dirty."

Tom ran around the front of the church and away from William. "*Wicked, stinky bully.*" Kirsten's voice called to him. Tom turned around, teared-up eyes looking for the girl, but she wasn't there. He stumbled across the church lawn and out onto the square.

“*My own son, a bully.*” The voice sounded as if it were right inside his own ear. “Mother.” Tom tried to whisper, but all of the air had left his lungs. “*I don’t want to see you Tom.*” His mother’s voice again; the pain in his ribs turned sharp and throbbing. Green seemed to crowd his vision as he swept his gaze over the town square. He was falling. Branches and grass swirled around him and he realized he was lying on the ground. He lay breathing for a moment, then pushed himself back up and continued running. Other voices came to him. Miss. Kilney’s eyes stared at the back of his mind. Elsa Petersen’s nattering criticism flooded him. “*He’ll never amount to anything. He’s just like his mother.*” Then his mother’s voice again. “*A bully.*” Tom ran and stumbled all the way home, all the way back to his hole under the porch. There he clutched his scrap of fabric, ignoring the holes that had already been worn through the widest bit. He squeezed the fabric up to cover his eyes, and cried.

When his parents returned from church Tom was dragged from under the porch and into the kitchen. His mother’s face was white and the skin stretched tight around her frowning jaw. His father took off his jacket and tie, resting them on the counter.

“What have you done to your good shirt?” His mother reached over and pinched his right arm where there was a long brown streak on the sleeve. “You’re a very selfish boy Tom.” A slap to his cheek, Tom put his hand up, but there was no hot flesh, only the sting. Mr. Maeves leaned forwards, “Don’t you have something to say Tom.” Tom sagged in his chair. He felt dizzy, and the space behind his eyes began to ache.

“You are a very selfish boy Tom.” His mother screamed and his father added.

“You are grounded for three days young man, now go to your room.”

Tom raised himself to his feet and wobbled off to his room.

The next three days were hollow ones. William tried to stay cool while doing both of his sister's chores in addition to his own. Most of them were very dull and he thought about Tom as he washed dishes or folded laundry. Tom had to run away from a fight. A strange euphoria sometimes settled into him that suggested that he was the reason Tom ran away. That somehow Tom was afraid of him. William found himself mentally strutting and tried to dismiss it, but the feeling always came back. He was a good boy, even if he was doing extra chores, and he had beaten Tom, somehow. Maybe Tom was sinning and God had chosen William to punish him.

After doing the dinner dishes on Thursday William went into the living room and sat down on a sofa. The room was cooler than the rest of the house and William found himself mesmerized by the stillness of the house. His father was sitting in an easy chair on the other side of the room, reading the paper. Mr. McDouglas finished the sports section and looked up at his son. "Your mother took your sisters to get their hair trimmed." There was a pause while William scuffed his feet on the carpet. "Why don't you go for a swim?" Mr. McDouglas winked and turned back to his paper.

"Thanks Dad." William grinned and rushed upstairs. He changed quickly into his bathing tunks, and grabbed his goggles and a towel. A few minutes later he was on his bike, pedaling towards the swimming hole.



The world was very still on Thursday. His grounding was over, but still Tom slunk about the house like a frightened animal. Mrs. Maeves watched her son as he moved from the living room, to the kitchen, to his own room. He kept sitting in corners, watching as his mother dusted the furniture. Mrs. Maeves sent him outdoors after lunch. She told him not to bother her or anyone else, and to stay out of trouble. Tom nodded as he laced up his shoes. Outside he kicked his shoes off again and tucked them into his hole.

The day was bright and empty. His brother had left to play baseball hours ago and there was no one else on his street he wanted to see. He didn't really want to see anyone. The voices hadn't returned, but Tom continued to look around for someone about to curse him. Every time his mother spoke to him he felt his hands move to cover his ears and he had to hold them down in his pockets.

Tom pulled his bicycle out of the garage and started pedaling west, away from the center of town. Soon he was off pavement and wheeling down a gravel road that led past the Johnson's farm to the fishing hole. Tom when he reached the point in the road to veer off for the pond he noticed a blue bicycle lying in the grass. Willie had a blue bicycle. Tom jumped off his own bike and began pushing it towards the pond.

The day was very still. The only disturbances were the hum of the mosquitoes and the occasional car passing along the road on the opposite side of the Johnson's cornfield. As he approached the pond William breathed deeply sucking in a mouthful of pollen scented air. The pond itself had a layer of green algae that stuck to the body of anyone entering the water. William's clothes were covered and he was adjusting his goggles when he heard a voice.

“Why look, it’s Willie.” Tom said as he pulled up his bicycle to the edge of the pond. “Are we going swimming?” Tom dropped the bike between his feet and stepped closer. William wanted to move back, but stood still, terrified of what Tom might do to him in deep water. The larger boy waded in, but only to slightly above his ankles.

“Leave me alone, you stupid jerk.” William spat out. Tom stumbled backwards and landed on the bank, his legs still in the water. William stood as Tom twisted about, splashing water as he kicked his feet wildly. Slowly William got out of the pond and onto higher ground. Tom slowly regained control of his body and he sat up and faced William.

“Devil’s favorite.” He snarled. “You sold your soul for the evil eye.”

“I didn’t...” he started, but the words evaporated before reaching his lips. Tom’s face was strained as the boy looked up. And William realized that it was true. He was causing Tom’s pain. But it wasn’t the evil eye. William was a good boy and Tom was a bully. He was beyond Tom’s reach, but Tom was still clearly within his. William smiled.

“You awful goat. You jerk. You stupid, worthless, horrible, awful slug. *You pushed me out of a tree.* You’re dumber than my sisters. *A selfish boy.* And you smell. You smell like pigs. *A stinky, wicked bully. Why can’t he be more like his brother.* Dirty pigs. I think you probably sleep with pigs. *Or William McDouglas. Yes, he’s a good boy.* That’s why you’re so ugly. Ugly as a pig. You stupid pig. I should make you eat your underwear. *What will people say? They must be muddy. And scummy. I can’t use these, the stems are too short.* You’d probably like it, since you’re a pig.”

The voices mingled together in Tom's ears, eating into his mind. His mother shrill, Kirsten nasal and his father a deep sound that carried below all the others. With each syllable he jerked and twisted, kicked out his legs and each successive snap to his skin seemed to tear through to his bone. He screamed, over and over until he snapped his teeth down on his tongue. His mouth filled up with warm fluid and Tom began to dribble as he wailed. William was a diffuse shape now, his movements registering only as shifts in the light.

William grinned as Tom writhed on the bank, tears reddening his eyes, while he screamed out, not even trying to form words. His face slowly became blue and then purple with red creeping in at his temple. The smell of sweat tinged with fear and blood crept into William's brain and he moved closer to Tom, hovering over his face. He wanted to laugh, but the gyrations in his belly kept getting stuck before they reached his mouth.

*"Your mother probably makes you eat out of a bowl outside. You wanted to push me, didn't you? Probably throws you table scraps. Can't you behave Tom? My own son, a bully. You stupid awful pig. Go to your room you stupid, stinky, bully. I hope you rot. No one wants to see you. I hope that when you go home your father kicks you back outside. You terrible skunk. Go away Tom. You worthless piece of dirt. You smelly cow pie. Leave me alone."*

William stopped and put a hand to his throat. He smacked his lips twice and swallowed, trying to relieve the scratchy feeling. Looking down he saw the boy at his feet. Small and covered with mud, algae and bits of cattail Tom moaned and shrunk further inwards. His left leg jerked out twice before his body went still. Silence flooded

the area and William watched Tom breathe heavily for a long time. As he calmed the smell of blood abruptly changed from one of power to one of brutality and William suddenly heaved out his stomach onto Tom's torso. On the ground the boy flinched at the sudden acidic warmth, but remained unconscious.

In the failing light the vomit appeared a bright orange, dimming everything else around it. William found himself chilled. The mud around his feet had hardened and the algae that clung to his legs felt like a thick scum that was taking root in his body and growing inwards. "I'm a good boy." He whispered to the cat tails, but only a breeze bearing the stink of stomach acid returned to him. William bent over and touched Tom's skin. It was cold. So cold that William got goose bumps just touching it. He spit out the remaining taste from his mouth onto the earth and began running for home.

Tom whimpered as he drifted off into unconsciousness. The cacophonous voices seeping into his dreams as he lay in the mud. His mother was before him, and his father. Tom ran to them, but they faded away. Kirsten appeared next to him, a chain of flowers in her hands. Tom smiled, but she dropped the flowers and ran, disappearing into the emptiness of the dream. Willie appeared, laughing. A white glow seemed to emanate from his body. Tom sneered and called out to him 'I know better'. The image twisted and Willie stopped glowing and instead turned green. A flash of heat sprang into being on Tom's legs and Willie retreated. Tom moaned and coughed. The air smelled bitter.

Tom opened his eyes. His feet were cold, and so was his left leg. He raised his head and saw a dark orange stain covering his pants. The whiff of pungent air approached his nose and Tom gagged and heaved, adding a thin green slop to the ground next to him. Tom awoke further and found that his entire body was sore, and cold.

August seemed to have abruptly lost its heat. Tom shivered underneath a fading sun. Slowly he moved into a crouch and peeled off his shirt; sucking through his teeth as the pain burned across his arms and chest. Then he lay out on his back while peeling his pants from his legs which seemed to fizzle out in a knot of pain at his knees.

Tom wadded up the pants, careful to fold the vomit in towards the center, and was about to toss them in the pond when he remembered. He straightened out the pants and pulled from the pocket a blue scrap of fabric. It too was soaked and muddy and when he held it to his cheek he realized that it carried the faint smell of vomit. Kirsten's voice floated up to his mind. 'Dirty, stinky bully.' Tom shoved it back in the pants pocket and threw them both as far as he could into the field. The shirt followed quickly. Then he dropped back to the ground and lay still.

Slowly the sky shifted from blue to yellow to red to purple as Tom lay in the mud.

A strong wind picked up as the sun was setting and blew over the pond, tugging at Tom. It wiped over his body and around him, clearing away the odors of vomit and fear. The sweetness of grass pollen drifted over Tom and then through him. He could feel the wind rushing over the organs of his body, scouring away the cuts and bruises. His mind was put through a sieve and when it was strained all that remained was the calming rush of the wind. In some hidden corner of his mind Tom knew his mother would be angry with him. He breathed in deeply, filling his lungs without them biting back.

Tom didn't hurt anymore; all that remained was some stiffness from lying in the mud. He sat up and stripped off his underwear. He draped them carefully over some cattails before wading into the water. The pond was warm and Tom quickly immersed

himself up to his chin. He realized that he had had a headache as it faded into the stillness of the summer twilight. Tom dunked his head, and then turned to float on his back. The pond water lapped at his skin, sucking away the dirt and the smell. Tom's muscles relaxed and his eyes became droopy. The moon was already out, peaking softly through the hazy atmosphere. No where did Tom see or hear another person. He smiled. A school of fish swam underneath him tickling his back. Tom rolled over and began swimming, trying to follow the fish. He went from one shore to the other, following the fish; loosing them and finding them again. Back and forth, he zigzagged across the pond until the stars had completely populated the sky. Exhausted, Tom crawled from the pond up to the field, stretched himself out on the grass and fell asleep.

When William ran through the front door of his parents' house they were in the kitchen and his sisters were setting the table for supper. His mother called out to him.

“Is that you William? Go get dressed for dinner.”

“Yes, Mom.” William called back, and then ran upstairs. He needed to be alone. Tom's form lingered like an afterimage in his mind. His arms were jerked backwards and his stomach protruded wildly from his abdomen. William stripped off his swimming trunks and tossed them on top of his clothes hamper. He could see the blood that trickled from Tom's mouth. Then he hung his goggles carefully around the bed post before pulling on a clean pair of shorts and a tee-shirt.

At the table Mrs. McDouglas passed around the green beans. “How was your swim William?”

“Fine.” He mumbled as he scooped beans onto his plate.

“Did those new goggles work ok?” His father asked.

“Yeah, they were fine.”

“Are you feeling all right honey?” His mother stood and moved around to feel his forehead. “I think you might have a fever?” She frowned at her husband and then looked down at her son. “Are you not hungry?”

William shook his head. He could still taste the remnants of vomit. His mother bent over and kissed his forehead. “Why don’t you go upstairs and take a bath then. That’s my good boy.”

*Good boy.* William felt the words whip through his soul. He hunched over and began to cry. Mrs. McDouglas crouched over and put her arm around his shoulder. “My poor sweetie, you really don’t feel good do you?”

William couldn’t answer her, he just kept sobbing as he stood and walked back up to his room. Behind him he heard his mother say, ‘poor little dear. I’ll fix him some soup.’

Back in his room William stripped for his bath. He looked blearily around for his bath towel, but didn’t see it. He crouched down to check under the bed. His bare skin grew goose-bumps as it brushed the floor, but William didn’t notice. He felt the guilt rise up in him, grip his brain in panic. In his mind he saw Tom rise from the shore of the pond, his eyes sunken inwards in pain.

But wasn’t Tom the bully. William was a good boy. He winced again at the thought of the words. He never pushed anyone out of a tree. He’d never hurt anyone.

Never meant to at least. Miss Updike's roses flashed through his mind, but he moved his thoughts quickly away. They were only replaced by Tom's face flinching and crying out. William crawled under his bed, the solid wood surrounding him, a barrier against the outside world. Voices filtered through the floorboards. He could hear the clinking of dishes beneath him, the shouts of his sisters as his mother served dessert. Tom's voice came to him again as indistinct moans, penetrating into his body. He began to feel stinging in his arms and legs, a tight constricting in his chest. The sensation rose and increased, more invisible swats landed on his back and ripped across his face. Tom's voice now filled his head and William could hear nothing of the sounds his family made downstairs. The boy writhed where he lay under the bed; a small and beaten figure. His eyes were as swollen as his heart, and he thought that both were bleeding.



## The Fourth Daughter

Gertrude Mary Anderson was actually the third child born to Alice and Gregory Anderson. She had two older sisters Amy and Rebecca and one younger sister, Megan, but somehow as she grew up she developed a quality of superfluous-ness. Amy, the eldest girl, was becoming a practical woman of twenty. Already she spent most of her time assisting Mrs. Anderson with her chores, apprenticing herself to her mother against the day that she would be someone's wife. Rebecca, the next eldest, was clever and quick. She kept herself occupied through the last year of high school by writing the jokes that were published on the society page of the Lanham Weekly. Fourteen-year-old Megan was the youngest child. Even though she was two years younger than Gertie she seemed older, and she was considered to be the loveliest of the sisters. Megan had fine yellow hair that curled gently against her neck and a dimpled smile.

Gertie grew in duplications. She always did well at school, but so had Rebecca, always two years before her. Rebecca was the first Anderson to ever receive an all A report card. Gertie earned one nearly every term, but none of hers were framed for the living room wall. Everyone always remembered that Amy played the piano and asked her to perform whenever the Anderson's had company. They asked Amy even though Amy stopped taking lessons after she completed the level six practice book and Gertie was still taking lessons and had nearly perfected all the pieces in book ten. Sometimes

Gertie would also play for her parents' guests, but always after Amy's hands had become exhausted.

Despite these slights and inattention Gertie arrived at the sixteenth year of her life a happy girl. Gertie loved her sisters and her parents. All four of the Anderson sisters shared a room with two bunk beds, one at either end, and four dressers in the center along the north wall. Four cedar wardrobes lined the opposite wall, filling the room with the open smell of the wood. At night the four girls climbed into their bunks, Megan and Amy on the right side of the room with Megan on top and Rebecca and Gertrude on the left. Gertrude also had a top bunk, which she loved. Megan often complained of feeling claustrophobic and would crawl into Amy's bed. Most nights the sisters spent whispering to each other until they fell asleep. Rebecca and Amy spent the twilight speaking of boys and the new *McCall's* patterns while Megan chirped questions. Gertie was mostly quiet, pulling the blankets up to her ears and listening to her sisters.

The Anderson's were a family of routines. Every day, every meal, breakfast, dinner and supper they gathered in the dining room. Mr. Anderson sat in the large oak chair at the head of the table, with Amy on his left and Rebecca on his right. Gertie sat to the left of Amy, Megan sat to the right of Rebecca while Mrs. Anderson sat at the end, with her back to the window. Mr. Anderson always started the rolls at dinner and they all passed to the left. Rolls first, then butter, potato, meat, vegetable, salt, pepper and then any toppings or sides the meal required. They said grace once everyone had a full plate. Mr. Anderson on Friday and Sunday, Mrs. Anderson on Saturday, Amy on Monday, Rebecca on Tuesday, Gertie on Wednesday and Megan on Thursday. On weekdays, when the girls walked home from school for lunch, meals were a taciturn affair, but at

dinner there was structured conversation. First Mr. Anderson would ask his wife how her day was. She would respond and then inquire about his. Talk would then proceed to how the girls were doing at school, each one of them asked and a reply given.

Afterwards Mr. Anderson would pick a topic, usually the price of seeds, or pesticide, or a new tractor, and mutter about it as he cleared his plate. Mrs. Anderson would contribute the occasional question or acquiescing remark. The girls nodded their heads.

The serving of dessert meant a change in conversation, Mrs. Anderson would begin to gossip about her neighbors, while Mr. Anderson would light his pipe and stretch out his legs. Vanilla flavored smoke would spread through the room, cloaking life in a fine haze. After dinner Mr. and Mrs. Anderson would retire to the living room to see the evening television programs while the girls cleaned up. Amy cleared the table, Rebecca washed dishes, Gertie dried and Megan put everything away. Afterwards there was a period of about two hours before the girls had to get ready for bed. Most nights Amy and Rebecca and Megan worked on their cross stitching or one of the jigsaw puzzles. Gertie almost always went outside.

The Anderson farm bordered the western edge of Lanham. One hundred and sixty acres of Nebraskan farmland growing what her father called the heart of this country. Forty acres were planted wheat, forty of corn, forty of soybean and forty lay fallow. The house was built at a corner of the farm, as close as it was possible to get to Lanham proper. Behind the house, and allowing some space for a back garden, was a barn, a stable and a chicken coop. Further on behind that was a large silo, that rose three stories high and was painted a bright green. The barn housed the tractors and seeders and thrashers and reapers and other tools of the land. In the stable were three horses and two

cows, each in her own warm stall. The coop was a tiny building that was supposed to hold the Anderson's twenty-two chickens and a rooster, but the animals didn't quite fit. Usually extra chickens spilled out into the pen, pecking at grass and laying their eggs in the dirt. Gertie wasn't much concerned with chickens, but she always checked on the horses and cows every night after dinner. It wasn't officially her chore, but she always fed and watered them and made sure they had blankets in cold weather. She was also the one to care for them if they were sick. She could stuff a pill down a horse's throat without being bitten and they trusted her to rub ointments into cuts in hooves or infections in the udder. After visiting the stable, Gertie would walk.

Ash Street was the street that intersected with the Anderson's long driveway. It ran past the house, past a small pond on the other side of the street and then just petered out another half mile on in the midst of some prairie grass. Gertie had been told that another family had planned to put their house at the end of Ash Street and farm the land behind it, but they never arrived in Lanham. She often walked in that abandoned property. No one had cut the grasses down in at least twenty years, if they had ever been mowed down at all. The field was thick and full of flowers; not at all like the grass of the Anderson front yard; short and green and weed-less. In the summer the grasses would climb so high in some spots that Gertie could stand on her toes and not be seen. Beneath Gertie's feet was a matted down layer of dead grass that blanketed over the black dirt. She meandered through the field in all seasons. In spring she picked ticks from her skin, in summer she slapped at mosquitoes, in fall she scratched the itches that dry grass left when it brushed skin in the winter she pushed her way through snow.

Gertie always took a notebook with her on her walks, to record the plants and animals she saw. It was a habit she began when she was very young, so young that she couldn't now remember the origin of her interest. She had dozens of journals now, filled with pressed flowers and leaves and sketches of insects. She had dozens of books too; books on botany and entomology. She kept a log of all the birds she saw as well. It was usually quiet as she walked in the fields north of Lanham. Not many people came up there. There were several boys who came to swim in the pond, but they were only around in the late spring and summer when it was warm enough to swim. The only other person who Gertie saw frequently walking in the fields was Dr. Waters. He was a bird watcher too and he always let her look through his binoculars when they met.

Her sisters never came with her on her walks. Gertie used to ask them if they wanted to come, but she gave it up. They didn't want to get bits of grass on their clothes, or they were too busy working on one of their jigsaw puzzles. Recently Amy and Rebecca would go out on Friday or Saturday nights with some boy, or a group of friends. Gertie always made sure she was back when Amy and Rebecca came home. She and Megan would sit in the front room on those nights. Gertie would be reading, a book for school or National Geographic magazine. Megan would be doing homework or cross stitch. Both would be on the red couch that was placed in front of the window. They usually sat down about nine o'clock and peeped through the curtains ever fifteen minutes. By ten they were pulling back the curtains for a look ever five or ten minutes, and as eleven approached they would have abandoned all else to sit, elbows propped on the window sill, watching for their sisters. The girls were always flushed when they

returned. They smiled and laughed and told their parents they had a fun time before hurrying off to bed, where they would giggle about dancing and movies and boys.

For most of her life Gertie was unaware of her situation. She loved her parents and sisters. She was never physically neglected. She progressed through the first sixteen years of her life with a quiet ease that can only come as the result of minimal demands on her mind and heart. Her parents did not expect anything from her outside of doing her chores and not causing trouble. Her sisters saw her and spoke to her, but never confided in her directly. Even those outside her family regarded her presence as an unsurprising part of life; she was often asked to be the fourth in four-square or hold the ends of a rope for double-dutch, but she was never thought of first. But this blasé acceptance never bothered Gertie. She considered herself to be a happy child, and since she considered her self thus, she largely was.

On a day in late October Gertie Anderson stood on the top root-cellar step listening to her mother and Mrs. Vrenn as they drank their mid-morning coffee on the patio. It was the last day of fall warm enough to drink coffee outside, though the women wore thick stockings and sweaters. They leaned back in the porch chairs, eliciting small creaks from the stiff metal as it bent unwillingly in the cold. Gertie had gone down into the root-cellar to get a jar of canned peaches that she was going to use in a pie. As she was climbing back out of the cellar she heard Mrs. Vrenn's voice.

“You are so lucky to have such beautiful daughters Margaret.” The root cellar was around the corner of the house from the patio, and thus Gertie could not see her mother or Mrs. Vrenn, but she stopped to listen.

“Why thank you Anne, I’ve tried to raise them right.” Mrs. Anderson laughed and Gertie imagined she was waving away Mrs. Vrenn’s words with one hand as she held a coffee cup steady in the other.

“I’m serious Margaret; I wish I knew what you did. Ann is turning into a lovely woman, Rebecca is so smart and Megan is just charming. I wish my Susan were at all like them.”

“Anne, Susan’s a good girl.”

“Oh, she tries, I know she tries, but she won’t put her mind to anything. Do you know yesterday she knocked the sugar bowl off the counter while she was fixing her corn flakes?”

“Well it happens.”

“It shouldn’t all the time. She broke a plate last week too and she got a tear in her blue wool dress, the one with the stitched flowers around the hem.”

Gertie heard the noise of breath being forced through clenched teeth. “Well Anne, you’ve just got to watch her, make her be careful.”

“I wish it were that easy; I’ve got two boys to look out for too. A daughter is supposed to be a help to a mother. You’ve been blessed with three sweet girls; I’ve got to be keeping after Susan all the time.”

“Well I won’t argue with you about my girls, those three are my treasures. But you shouldn’t fret so much about Susan. If she’s acting like a tomboy she’s probably

spending too much time with her brothers. Doesn't she like to spend time with any of the neighbor's girls? Cindy Mitchell lives down the street, isn't she Susan's age?"

"She does tend to spend a lot of time with the boys. They are friends, not like some people's children. I heard that the Snyder's three are always quarreling with each other. Claire has to be constantly keeping them apart or they'll wreck the house."

"I heard that Jimmy Snyder came to school with a bloody lip last Thursday..."

There was a soft clink of china on china and a low gurgle of poured liquid. Gertie walked back down into the cellar and pulled the hatch closed behind her. She sat on the bottom step, clutching the jar of peaches in her lap. It was as if she had been slapped. Her mother couldn't have forgotten her, could she? Gertie felt tears, warm against her cool skin, flow down her cheeks and drip onto her sweater. She stayed in the cellar, her hands clinching tighter around the cold glassy jar until Rebecca opened the cellar door. Rebecca walked down the steps, holding to the rail because it took a moment for one's eyes to adjust to the darkness in the cellar. She climbed slowly down until she nearly reached the bottom and stuck her toe into Gertie's back.

"Oh. What?" She squinted into the cellar.

"Rebecca?" Gertie whispered her voice rough.

Rebecca stepped around her and walked over to the shelves of canned vegetables. Gertie stood, holding the jar of peaches. Rebecca held up a few cans to the light that came in from the cellar door, selected two cans of green beans and began walking up the stairs.

"Rebecca?" She nearly whimpered.



“Oh come on.” Rebecca said from the top of the stairs. Gertie climbed up into the bright late morning light. Rebecca continued to hold open the door until one of the barn cats bolted up the steps and around the corner of the house.

“Silly thing.” She laughed and went into the house. Gertie followed her inside and made a kettle of tea.

That night Gertie decided to stay inside with her family instead of taking a walk after dinner. Neither Rebecca nor Amy was going anywhere that evening, even though it was a Saturday. Gertie had finished her homework for Monday already, as had Megan and Rebecca, so at about eight-thirty the whole family gathered in the living room to spend the evening until it was time for bed. Mr. Anderson was seated with his newspaper at the left end of the sofa. Mrs. Anderson and Amy sat on the love seat with a basket of scrap fabric and a book on quilting between them. Rebecca and Megan were on the floor working a large puzzle that was supposed to end up as a garden full of flowers. Gertie entered after everyone else was settled and sat down near the puzzle. She spent a few minutes turning over puzzle pieces and fitting two bits of a sunflower together before venturing to speak.

“I heard that Mrs. Emsen is asking for volunteers for the school fair. I thought I might do some baking.”

Mrs. Anderson set down her quilt pieces and leaned over towards Rebecca. “That reminds me honey, are you planning on making your lemon squares again this year?”

“I can.” Rebecca looked up from the puzzle. “But I’ll need some fresh lemons and I think were nearly out of powdered sugar.”

“I’ll put an order in with Mr. Durham, I think he’s going to Lincoln on Tuesday.”

“Could we get some licorice sticks too?” Megan added. “Mr. Herman’s been out of them for weeks.”

“Oh Megan, you don’t need those.” Mrs. Anderson gently chastised her daughter. “You don’t want to have a ruined smile because you’ve got a mouth full of rotted teeth, do you?”

“Pleeeeeease? I’ll brush my teeth after every one. Pleeeeee, Mom?” Megan dropped to her hands and knees so she could peer up at her mother with her head cocked almost completely upside-down. A spill of blonde curls fell over her face and Mrs. Anderson laughed.

“All right, I’ll order a small packet, but you’d better not eat them all at once.”

“I won’t.” Megan turned back to the puzzle and began studying the pieces that lay strewn across the carpet before her. Gertie watched as her sister tried to fit together two pieces of blue flower, Megan kept twisting the pieces about, but they wouldn’t snap together.

“I don’t think those two go together.” She said, leaning over towards Megan.

“They’ve both got half a yellow center bit.”

Gertie peered at the puzzle pieces. “That’s more than half for each of them. Here set them down and I’ll help you look for the other halves.”

Megan set the pieces off to the side and began using her index fingers to push apart the pieces remaining in the box. “Oooh, here’s some blue flowers.”

Rebecca stretched out her hand, “Let me see.” She held the pieces up close to her eyes. “I think these are coneflowers you’re doing periwinkles.”

“Aaarr..they all look the same.” Megan made fists, bending the puzzle pieces in her hands. “Oh now look.” She said as she unfolded her hands to find the crumpled cardboard.

“No, they don’t.” Rebecca insisted, “You need to pay more attention to the colors.”

“Here, Megan, I’ll straighten those.” Megan dropped the bent pieces and went back to combing through the box. Gertie studied the painted sides of the pieces. The puzzle was made off a painting of a garden, not a photograph and she could see the lines of the brushstrokes replicated in the puzzle’s detail. Whoever had painted the original painting hadn’t much studied his subjects. Long yellow pistils emerged where they shouldn’t from the coneflower buds, and the surrounding leaves were the wrong color green. She carefully bent back the puzzle pieces, using her thumbnail to smooth out the crease in the painted side and handed them back to Megan.

Gertie watched the puzzle building for a minute longer, and then looked up at her mother, who had resumed matching fabrics for her quilt. “Mom, I was thinking that this year for the fair, I could maybe work one of the booths.”

Mrs. Anderson didn’t set down her quilting. “Amy, did you say that you were going to sell tickets for the raffle this year?”

“I already told Mrs. Emsen that I would.”

“Do you know what you’re going to wear?”

Amy put her own quilting down and Megan, Rebecca and Gertie looked up at her. Mr. Anderson turned the page of his paper and shook out the creases, but no one gave him any mind.

“I thought I’d wear my grey dress, with a red scarf and my black shoes.”

“I don’t know.” Rebecca shook her head as she spoke, “It’s not a very cheery dress.”

“But it makes me look older.”

“Peter Hennessey isn’t going to care if you look older.” Megan chimed in. “You don’t want to look like you’re at a funeral.”

“Well what would you wear?”

“Your yellow skirt with a white blouse.”

“In November?”

“You’ll be inside, and we’ll keep you full of cocoa.” Rebecca said as she leaned over to tickle her sister. “Besides everyone needs some sunshine in November.”

Gertie listened to the discussion of Amy’s clothing with a wilting heart. They were all excited, even her father though he pretended not to notice. Gertie had seen that he was on the advertisements page, and he never spent any time reading it usually. She watched Megan stand up and begin dancing around the room with Rebecca. The two of them each tried to lead and ended up swinging each other into the side of the couch. They started giggling and Rebecca sunk to the floor. Megan swept open the skirt of her dress and bowed to Rebecca, who began to hiccup. Gertie stood and walked quickly out of the room. When she had reached the hall she looked over her shoulder, but everyone was still watching Megan who had begun modeling mock-hair arrangements.

Gertie went back to the room she shared with her sisters. The wardrobes and dressers were all closed and the beds were all made. Gertie stood in the middle of the blue latch-hook rug and studied the tops of her sisters' dressers. On Amy's was a hairbrush and comb neatly laid out next to a small bottle of perfume that she had bought with pocket money saved up for six months. Rebecca's dresser had a scrapbook, filled with all of the jokes she had published, and a painted miniature house that she had been given by Elsa Petersen. Megan's dresser was much more cluttered, with friendship bracelets that she had been given by other girls at school and small folded notes that were passed around during class. She had a number of hair ribbons and a small folding mirror that was currently open and reflecting the light from the overhead lamp onto a spot on the wall. Gertie's own dresser seemed nearly bare next to Megan's. On it was a bunch of dried lavender tied with a thread and a scrapbook of pressed flowers.

Gertie stared at the top of her dresser for a while longer, then reached out and crushed the dried lavender in her left fist. A shock of scent followed a poof of particulate petals. Gertie sneezed and let the remaining scraps of flower fall to the top of her dresser. There was no draft in the room so they settled quickly, forming a pile that looked strangely like the pile of jigs in their box. Gertie blew on the pile and then climbed into bed without waiting to see how the flakes would settle. The normally warm quilt on the bed felt cool against her skin and she curled her knees up to her chest as she told herself that she wasn't crying.

The next morning Gertie felt better. She had fallen asleep before her sisters came into bed and when she awoke in the morning someone had tucked her in and the destroyed lavender had been swept away. She told herself that she had been silly, getting

upset over nothing. She went to school and church and took her walks outside, even though it was quite cold now and there were six inches of snow on the ground. Rebecca and Megan finished the garden puzzle and started one of a sailboat race. Amy decided what to wear to the fair and Mrs. Anderson finished cutting strips for her quilt.

On Saturday Gertie got up before dawn to go bird watching by the pond. It was a dry day, with only a little wind blowing ripples over the water. Gertie packed a sandwich and a thermos of cocoa and went to the pond. Dr. Waters was already crouched at the edge of the pond when she arrived. He was wearing a long striped scarf that trailed down his back. Gertie walked quietly up behind him.

“Good morning.” She whispered as she crouched down.

“Hello Gertie.” He lowered his binoculars and smiled. “There’s a pair of Ruffed Grouse, behind that clump of grass. Why don’t you take a peep.” He handed her the binoculars and looked where he pointed. Two birds were sitting on the other side of the pond bobbing their necks at each other. They were relatively small birds, about the same size as pigeons with brown and black feathers and white undersides. As she watched the one on the left raised himself to the tips of his feet, stretched his neck in the air and began beating his wings against his sides.

“See that Gertie, that’s the male. See the black feathers around his neck? That’s his ruff.” He leaned closer to her and she nodded. She passed back the binoculars and pulled out her notebook. She had seen Ruffed Grouse before, but not in a while. They sat quietly for a while trading looks through the binoculars. The grouse flew off mid-

morning as a flock of Canadian geese landed near the pond. Dr. Waters leaned back in the grass and watched them fly east.

“How have you been Gertie.”

“All right, mostly doing schoolwork.”

“Good, good. How’s your family?”

“Oh, they’re all right. Amy’s all nervous about Peter Hennessey.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. And Megan’s jealous. She keeps dressing up like Amy. I don’t think Mom’s noticed though.”

“Well, she’ll grow out of it. Are you doing all right?”

“Yeah, I’m ok.”

“All right.” He pulled a foil wrapped sandwich out of his pouch and began eating.

In three weeks Gertie had completely forgotten that she was ever upset with her family at all. The days had passed smoothly, with Gertie falling into her quiet routine of existence. She woke up smiling on the Saturday before Thanksgiving. The school fair was to start at eleven, and she had saved a month’s worth of allowance to spend on the games and funnel cake that would be there. Her sisters started dressing directly after breakfast; it always took them hours to get ready to do anything. Gertie laid out the dress and shoes she was going to wear and got out of the bedroom. The living room was

currently empty and Gertie sat down on the sofa with the latest National Geographic to read until it was time for her to get ready.

The cover article was about the Amazon and Gertie had read clear through it, an article on Siberia and one on sharks in the south Pacific before she noticed the quiet. There were no sounds of people getting dressed or shouts to hurry up or a car being packed. Gertie dropped the magazine and ran into the front hall to look at the grandfather clock. It read ten-thirty. She looked out the front window but the car was gone. Her family had forgotten her, really. She grabbed her coat and shrugged it on as she ran out the front door and started down the walk. A wind blew through her and made her shiver. She didn't want to walk all the way to school in the cold. Quickly she turned and ran back into the house, stomping snowy footprints on the front rug. Gertie stomped to the kitchen, and shoved the kettle under the facet. As she waited for it to fill she looked about. Above the sink were a series of snapshots; Amy standing in front of a piano right before a recital; Rebecca and Amy dressed up to go to a dance; Megan on her tenth birthday. Gertie searched the pictures for one of her, but found none. In a fury she switched off the tap so hard she made the metal squeak. She turned to face the rest of the kitchen. It was decorated in green checks, her mother's favorite. Megan's barrettes lay on one counter, two hairs still caught in them.

Gertie put her coat back on and went through the back door and to the stable. There was nothing to remind anyone of her sisters there. Gertie pulled open the door and stepped inside. In the winter the building always smelled both over-sweet and foul, like cow's breath and new hay. She didn't mind the smell today. She sat down one of the bales of straw that was stacked along side the walls of the stable and leaned back. The



cows mooed softly at her and one of the horses stretched his head over the stall towards her, but when Gertie didn't pull any apples from her pockets he lost interest. It was a very warm building. The body heat of the animals in addition to the small heater Mr. Anderson bought kept the stable often warmer than the house. Gertie felt her head loll, but didn't care. Her stomach was twisting against her breakfast, making her nauseous. Her eyes drooped and she felt very tired, her anger pushed itself up inside her throat, but she was too exhausted to lash out.

The field was planted with corn. Tall corn, with ears almost ripe and pushing their silks out. Gertie was walking through it, the sharp stiff leaves leaving thin slices on her exposed skin. She looked down and saw that she was naked. A part of her mind nearly panicked but it was silenced before the thought could be articulated. She was going somewhere. The field was a very large one, but she knew which way to go. All she had to do was to follow the row she was in to the end. It was simple. At the end of the row she would be there. Gertie began to walk faster. She had been in the field for a long time. As she increased her speed the corn leaves sliced against her more frequently, still shallow cuts, but they stung. She felt something oozing out of the cuts and stopped to look. Dark red droplets of blood were slowly flowing out of her cuts. Gertie lifted her left arm to peer at a cut across her wrist.

As she stared at the droplet that was forming at the end of the cut she caught a glimpse of a woman's face reflected in the bead of liquid. It was a tiny image and very clear, it wasn't Gertie at all. The woman had the same color hair, the same eyes, and the same nose. All of the woman's features were in the right place, but it just wasn't Gertie.

She felt as if she were looking at a doppelganger. The replication was physically perfect, but there was still something alien about the face. She wiped the droplet off her wrist and then smeared the blood over her leg when she tried to wipe her hand clean.

She had stood still for too long. Gertie looked around. The corn stretched in all directions. Was she walking down the right row? She couldn't remember. She pushed her way through a row of plants and into another thin dirt trail. The plants here looked the same as the plants before, corn at the point of ripening. There were insects too. Mosquitoes smelled her blood and flew towards her; she batted them away and smashed others against her skin. Crushed sections of mosquito clung to skin that had finally realized the heat of the day. Gertie felt dizzy and sat down. Near the ground the cornstalks gave more shade and she felt better. A sharp tug came from her stomach and she realized she was hungry. Reaching up an ear of corn nearly fell into her outstretched palm. It would be all right if she stopped to eat something. She peeled back the silks from the ear and bit in. The corn was juicy and sweet. Chewing quickly she reached for another ear. It occurred to her that walking was very tiring. Stretching out on her side she cushioned her head with her arm. Around her the cornfield seemed to grow, the edge moving impossibly further. Gertie woke suddenly, her mind twisted into panic. All around her the corn grew higher, pushing the sun from the sky. She stood and turned about looking for the way she should go. She spun wildly in her place, 'which way to go? Which way?'. She couldn't remember. In an ill lighted part of her mind she knew the cornfield was still growing. She began to run down the rows of corn, her head jerking from side to side, but all around her the field looked the same.

Gertie woke to sweat staining her shirt. Thin sticks of straw pushed at her skin from the bale and itched. She stood slowly and brushed the straw away from her clothing. The horses and cows were all asleep, standing calmly in their stalls. She wiped her eyes, brushing off greenish clumps of sleep from her lashes. It must have been a long time that she slept in the stable. Opening the door she could see that it was dark outside and that the lights from the house were all on. In the kitchen her mother and Amy were cooking dinner. Amy had changed out of the yellow skirt and was wearing one of her house dresses. Both women were laughing as they chopped and boiled and stewed. Neither of them looked up as Gertie entered. Gertie felt her chest cave inward; they didn't seem to notice she hadn't come with them. Or that she wasn't in the house when they came back. In the living room her father was reading the newspaper, held high as always so that even the top of his head was hidden. He didn't look up as she took a book from the shelf behind his chair, thumping it loudly on a shelf as she pulled it down. In the bedroom Megan and Rebecca were talking loudly.

"I can't believe you hit Mr. Dalton with that ball." Rebecca giggled as she spoke and leaned against her dresser. Megan was standing a few feet away braiding her hair.

"I didn't mean too. He was standing too close to the buckets."

"He was all the way to the side of the booth."

"I said I didn't mean to." Megan stamped her foot in mock frustration and Rebecca laughed again. Gertie squeezed through the girls, brushing roughly against Megan.

“I wish I had some more funnel cake.” Rebecca continued, picking up a bottle of polish remover and some cotton balls.

“Mmmmmm... I can still taste it.” Megan finished the braid and tied a large blue ribbon at the end. Gertie looked back over her shoulder. She had meant to knock into Megan, but her sister didn’t seem to notice. She yanked open the top drawer of her dresser and pulled out a thick pair of socks. She slammed the drawer closed again and looked to her sisters. They had settled themselves on the floor and were wiping away their nail polish. Both were completely engrossed in their hands, she didn’t think either of them had even twitched at the noise. Gertie put the pair of socks on over the ones she was already wearing and left the room.

In the kitchen again she banged shut the refrigerator door after removing two apples and a carton of chocolate milk. Her mother was only a few feet away at the stove, but she didn’t even look up. Gertie squeezed her eyes shut. She didn’t think her mother would indulge such tricks. Why were they all so mad at her? It was a stupid game really; eventually they would have to speak to her again. She could stay in the stable until they decided to give up. It was warm in there and she had become mostly acclimated to the smell. She left the house and crunched her way through the layer of ice on top of the snow in the back yard. As she got to the door she paused. Soft noises emanated from the kitchen, harsh clinks of metal on wood or clay diluted into tinkling sounds by the distance and the muffling qualities of snow.

She slept in the barn that night. Early in the morning she awoke to the cow stamping her foot and mooing. Gertie sat up and brushed the straw from her hair. Then she remembered it was Thanksgiving and it was her task to make the stuffing. It had to be finished before her mother wanted to stuff on the bird. Gertie left the barn and went back into the kitchen. The clock above the stove read five-thirty, but she felt unusually alert. The night in the barn had been spent more comfortably than she had expected. And her family couldn't keep mad at her on a holiday. She set baking two loaves of white bread with oregano and sage. While punching down the dough around seven, her mother entered and made coffee. Mrs. Anderson poured the water into the percolator, scooped grounds into the filter, and then sat at the kitchen table while waiting for the water to percolate. Gertie mumbled a good morning, but didn't take her eyes off the dough.

At breakfast that morning Rebecca and Megan chatted cheerily about whether or not they could go to Lincoln for Christmas shopping this year. Mrs. Anderson was inclined to take them, since she wanted to look for a new pair of snow-boots. Gertie kept excusing herself to check on the loaves of bread in the oven. Mr. Anderson usually frowned at someone jumping up during the middle of a meal but said nothing to Gertie.

After breakfast Gertie helped with the cleaning up as the bread cooled. The sage and oregano in the hot bread blanketed over all of the other kitchen smells. Megan tore off a chunk of bread from the end of a loaf. Gertie glared and quickly moved the tray to the other end of the counter. Alone again in the kitchen Gertie cut the bread into slices and then cut the slices into half inch squares before laying them out flat on a baking sheet

and sticking them back into the oven. She poured a glass of water sat down at the kitchen table to wait for them to crisp. Amy entered the kitchen a few minutes later.

“Whose stuff is in the oven?” She called out loudly.

“I’m making stuffing, I’m almost done.” Gertie took a drink of water. “You don’t need to shout.”

Amy called out again. “Whoever this is needs to do something with it. I’ve got to make three pies and none of them can bake at the same temperature.”

“Fine, they only need a couple more minutes.” Gertie went over and peered into the oven. “Can’t you hold on for two minutes?” She went and sat back down at the table. Amy pulled a pair of pot holders out of the drawer next to the stove and took out the trays of stuffing. She set them on top of the stove and turned on the cooling vent.

“Jesus Amy, I said they only needed a couple of minutes.” Gertie looked over the stuffing. The corners of the bread had not quite reached the dark brown color Gertie wanted, but the crumbs did seem relatively crisp. She stirred in two cups of chicken broth and sprinkled in some rosemary and oregano

Amy had begun mixing the dough for her pies in a large wooden bowl.

“You didn’t even need the oven yet.” Gertie exclaimed. “Why do you have to be so bossy?” She banged the spoon on the side of the stuffing tray, but Amy didn’t look up. “Fine.

Just be like that. I don’t care.”

Gertie finished the stuffing and left it in a large bowl on the counter. She went to the bedroom and climbed up on her bed. She took a book with her, one she had pulled at random from the shelf in the living room. She didn’t look at the title, just tossed it onto

the bed and then eventually kicked it down to the end as she lay there. None of her sisters bothered her as she sulked in the bedroom. Even when lunch was served and she could hear the dimmed sounds of her family talking, no one came to get her. They must have agreed to leave her alone. Gertie rolled over on her side and stared at the wall next to her bed.

The off-white paint had been mixed with sand and then painted on with a roller in a wave pattern. From a distance it looked pretty, but when you rolled against it during the night it scratched your skin. Gertie focused on the grains of sand in the paint, looking for images to distract her from the sounds of her family. She squinted her eyes and widened them, turned her head until she was only looking out of one corner, but she could not ignore the sounds flowing from the dining room, down the hall and to her ears. A thought seized upon Gertie's mind but she kicked it off before she could come to realize it. Soft tears began to fall again and she closed her eyes to sleep.

When the smell of roasted turkey eased itself into Gertie's awareness several hours later she sat up slowly and looked around. The bedroom was as neat as it always was, except for her own bed where she had kicked the quilt into bunches. The door was closed and there was no sign that any of her sisters had been in the room while she slept. Climbing down off the bed she saw that her dress was wrinkled so she brushed at it for a moment and then straightened her hair before leaving the room.

Mr. Anderson and Megan were in the kitchen. Mr. Anderson was carving slices off the turkey while Megan put dollops of whipped cream on the pumpkin pie. The

density of the turkey smell in the kitchen made Gertie salivate. She peered over her father's shoulder at the twenty odd pound bird. Her mother had rubbed it with sage and rosemary before putting it in to roast and flecks of spice clung to a golden-crisp skin.

“Want a taste?” Her father pointed with the carving fork to a pile of thin white slices of turkey on a platter without looking up from the carving. Gertie picked up a thin slice and chewed it, the sweet taste of basil just detectable over the juice of the turkey.

“Thanks. Mmmmm.”

“It's a juicy one this year. I got him from Martin.” He carved off a few more slices and then began working around the front of the bird. “I'm just about to the wishbone; do you want to pull it Megan?” He looked over his shoulder and narrowed his eyes. His gaze went straight though Gertie. He looked over his other shoulder to see Megan at the table.

“Do you want to pull the wishbone?” He repeated. Megan looked up from the pie.

“I'll pull it. I love pulling the wishbone.” She stood up and walked over to the counter. “Oh, I'll go find Amy and Rebecca.” Megan turned to leave the kitchen, but Gertie spoke, quite loudly, and stepped into the doorway in front of her.

“I'll pull it with you.” Megan jumped and her eyes opened wide.

“Gertie. Oh, ok. If you want to pull it with me, sure.” She shrugged and Mr. Anderson handed them the bone.

“Remember, big piece gets their wish.”

Gertie took one end of the bone between her left thumb and forefinger. It was slick with turkey juice and smooth threads of muscle. The dark end of a vein clung to the



top where the bone doubled back and v-ed. Megan took a hold of her end as well, though pinching more with the tips of her fingers; rather than get her whole hand dirty. As she stared at the bone Gertie took a deep breath and tried to formulate her wish. Megan began pulling at her half of the wishbone. The wish came tumbling into Gertie's consciousness in a wordless rush. The sensation, warm and spreading through her body forced her arms into moving. She yanked her half of the wishbone up and there was a snap. The bone came in two with Gertie's half the larger. Megan looked at her smaller half and then laughed, tossing it in the waste basket. Gertie squeezed her half tighter as she felt a giddy tickle bubble in her throat.

“Has the table been set yet?” Mr. Anderson asked the girls.

Megan shook her head. “It's Rebecca's night.”

“I'll do it.” Gertie pulled plates and silverware out of the cabinet and headed for the dining room. Once there she pulled a paper napkin out of the holder and wrapped the wishbone half tightly before sliding it into her pocket. She could still feel the whirling in her mind.

Mr. Anderson came in a few minutes later with the turkey, followed by his wife and other three daughters carrying yams, sweet potatoes, green beans, squash, butter pickles and rolls. The family sat down and filled their plates. Once the plates were full Mr. Anderson motioned for everyone to bow their heads as Mr. Anderson spoke grace.

“Dear Lord, we thank you today on Thanksgiving for giving us many blessings. The blessing of this meal and this day, we thank you for. We also thank you for our lives and our health as we do every day. We also thank you for each other. I have no greater joy than my wife and my daughters. Amy has grown up to be a fine young woman and I

thank you for her. Rebecca is so bright as to make any father proud and I thank you for her. Megan with her constant smile always cheers me when I am sad and I thank you for her. And finally my wife Alice, my devoted companion for twenty-three years. I thank you for her. Amen.”

The Andersons echoed ‘Amen’ and lifted their forks, but the meal had gone sour for Gertie. She excused herself when her father started on seconds. No one looked up to watch her leave the room.

Gertie kept the wishbone. Every time she touched it she thought she could feel a low vibration coming from the center of the bone. She cleaned off the vein and the clinging muscle, washing the bone in the bathroom sink until it glistened. She found a thin blue ribbon and used it to tie the wishbone around her neck. Gertie spent the winter holed up like a fox in her bad mood. The procession of the holidays: Christmas, New Year’s, Valentines Day passed her by without cheering her. Her family still paid as little attention to her as possible. She still did her chores, went for walks after dinner and didn’t take up much space in the bedroom. She spent all the hours she could in the barn instead of the house, bringing books to read or examining her collection of pressed flowers. Gertie wasn’t sure that her parents ever noticed that anything was out of place. Mr. Anderson spent much of the winter in the barn repairing tools and building some new kitchen cabinets for his wife. He worked at one end with his tools while Gertie at the other end watched him in silence. He never spoke to her or even nodded as he walked by her. Mrs. Anderson finished her quilt and began making knitted booties and caps for her

cousin Helen in Iowa who had her first baby in late January. She went to visit for two weeks in February taking Rebecca and Amy with her. Gertie and Megan stayed behind so they wouldn't miss any school, though Megan cried for two nights about being left behind. Those nights when Gertie and Megan were alone in the bedroom Megan went to sleep early after brushing her hair for one hundred strokes in front of the mirror over her dresser.

Gertie dreamed every time she closed her eyes that winter. It was always the dream of the field of corn. She was forever walking through endless rows of corn, turning about, losing her way. Sometimes she would see other people in the field, though they never saw her. Sometimes she saw houses or roads off in the distance, but she always became lost again before she arrived. Sometimes the dream was repetitive beginning from the same spot in the field of corn each time she fell asleep and sometimes she returned to the point where she had left off from the last dream as if the time she spent awake was nothing more than an interruption.

Every year, early in the month of April, the Lanham Methodist church held a hat box lunch to raise money for the orphaned children of Nebraska. No one in Lanham had actually ever met an orphaned child, but Mrs. Lawrence posted flyers on the church bulletin, with statistics from the Nebraska Bureau of Child Welfare and pictures of orphaned children with large eyes and torn clothing, to ensure a good turnout.

The Anderson sisters were in a state of rapt anticipation for weeks beforehand. Last year Amy's hatbox had been won by Peter Hennessy and he had hinted to her that he would bid again this year on whatever box he believed to be hers. Rebecca too had been queried as to what her box would look like and it appeared as if both Bobby Tims and George Duncan would be bidding on her box. Megan was too young to have anyone asking about her box, but she giggled with her sisters as they went through Mrs. Anderson's collection of hatboxes. They pulled all of her hats out of their boxes as they inspected the boxes for size and stability. The hats were set on Mrs. Anderson's bed, turning it into a mound of straw and felt, plastic flowers and colored feathers. Gertie wasn't present for the box choosing, her sisters had stopped letting her know when they were doing anything. It was when Gertie saw four hatboxes lined up in a row on the kitchen table on the morning of the lunch that she remembered.

She wanted to go to the lunch. It was an afternoon guaranteed to be spent with someone other than one of her sisters. In her wardrobe, on the top shelf, Gertie had a hatbox. It housed her only hat, a wide brimmed straw sunhat that lay on her head like an upside down saucer. She retrieved it and brought it to the kitchen. It was a plain brown in color, not like the striped or flowered boxes her mother and sisters had prepared. Their boxes also had ribbons tied around them with the ends run over the edge of a scissors to curl them. Gertie didn't have any ribbon and her box was wide and flat instead of a short pert cylinder. She looked at the other boxes for a minute and then turned hers upside down to knock the stray wisps of straw from the bottom. Then she began preparing a lunch.

There was chicken in the refrigerator which she floured and quickly fried. She pulled a box of cornmeal out of the pantry and made cornbread muffins, then added a couple of apples a hunk of cheese and two slices of blueberry pie to her box, before cushioning the food with some napkins. She wrote her name on a slip of paper, taped it to the inside of the box and put on the lid. Then she waited. She pulled out a chair and sat down at the kitchen table, five boxes in a row lined up in front of her. She wondered what sort of lunches her sisters had packed, but the boxes were sealed tight and she wasn't sure she could get the ribbon back on right if she undid them. So she waited at the kitchen table for her sisters.

When Rebecca came to get the hatboxes Gertie picked up three and followed Rebecca out to the truck. She slid quietly into the back, setting the boxes in the middle and tucking her knees against her chest. Megan and Rebecca also got in the back with her; Megan let her hands dangle over the sides as they drove into town and parked on the square in front of the church.

The turnout for the hatbox lunch was a good turnout, Gertie guessed near to five hundred people showed up. The crowd was spread mostly over the large church lawn and out into the square. Minister Lawrence had set up a table in front of the church doors where he was taking hatboxes and stacking them. The table was already nearly filled with boxes, and by the time Gertie got there to hand in her own box he was stacking boxes on a blanket on the ground. The minister smiled at her as he took her box, a quick smile perfected by someone who needs to smile genuinely at sometimes hundreds of people in a day. His gaze didn't linger on Gertie's face nor did he say any more than 'good morning' and 'thank you' before turning to the next in line.

Gertie moved to the back of the crowd and watched as the boxes were all delivered. Then Minister Lawrence stood and waved his arm to get everyone to quiet so they could get to the bidding. Gertie spotted Amy and Rebecca clasping each other's hands as the bidding started. It would probably be a while before their own boxes were bid upon, but it was the most exciting part for them. Gertie wasn't much concerned with the process of bidding. Almost all of the boxes went quickly. They were purchased at the minimum bid by husbands or sweethearts that recognized the correct box.

Gertie's box also went quickly, only one bid placed on it, but she didn't see who had bid upon it. Amy's box was won by Peter Hennessey and Rebecca's by George Duncan. Her sisters both giggled again as their hatboxes were distributed to their winners. The bidding began to taper off and Gertie started looking around for someone carrying her own hatbox. The crowd seemed even thicker with people searching about for each other and some couples already spreading out on the lawn to eat.

"Good afternoon Gertie. I believe this is yours." Dr. Waters stood in front of her, raising her brown hatbox slightly in a strange sort of salute. "Why don't we go eat in the back garden, it'll be quieter." Gertie nodded and then followed the Doctor.

The back garden seemed much more spacious than the front. A dozen couples already were settling down to eat, but no where near the press of the front lawn. Dr. Waters chose a spot next to some Forsythia bushes and they sat down. He began by pulling the plates and silver out of the box and then setting the food out between them. As he worked he looked up at Gertie and smiled though she noticed a tight line of worry in his forehead.

"So how have you been Gertrude?"

“I guess I’ve been all right.” She said taking a piece of chicken. “And you?”

“Oh I’ve been doing as I’ve always done.” He took a bite of cornbread. Gertie looked up at the doctor.

“How’s school going?”

“All right.”

“I’m sorry I haven’t been out bird watching lately, my back’s been bothering me.”

“I’m sorry. Is it something serious?”

“No, I’m just feeling my years, that’s all. That’s an unusual necklace you’ve got there.” Dr Water’s reached forwards to finger the wishbone that had slipped out from under her collar. “Why do you wear this?” He let the bone fall back against her chest. Gertie lifted it in front of her eyes. It was now a polished piece of bone, the snapped end had been scoured of marrow and only a pockmarked surface remained. The bone still seemed to hum in her hand, but the attention Dr. Waters placed upon it made her flush and feel ashamed.

“It’s silly I guess.” She lifted the ribbon and began to take it off.

“Don’t do that Gertie. It’s not silly.”

“No?”

“Not if you have a reason.” Dr. Waters smiled and leaned back on his elbows. “I know you have some reason for it. Some wish?”

“Well...I...” Gertie looked around, most of the other couples who had come to the back garden had finished their lunches and left. The few who remained were not paying her and Dr. Waters any attention. “I just wanted to be noticed. No one ever seems to see that I’m here... I mean I guess they know, but it doesn’t matter...” She

covered her face with her hands as she felt her eyes inflate with tears. Dr. Waters scooted around to sit next to her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and pulling her in to cry on his chest.

“It’s all right Gertie.” He whispered as he rocked her gently. “It’s ok.” He smoothed the hair back from her face. “Not everyone fits in here. It doesn’t mean you can’t fit in anywhere.”

Gertie sniffed and looked up. “Anywhere? You mean I should leave?”

“I left too when I was your age.”

“You left?” Gertie sat up straighter to look him in the eye.

“Yes. For eleven years.”

“But, my parents won’t let me leave home.”

“Gertie, do you still talk to your parents?”

“Well, I see them all the time.”

“Gertie, when did your mother last speak to you?”

“Well, I...” She started to speak, and then stopped as she could not think of anything her mother had said to her in months. Her eyes teared again and Dr. Waters squeezed her tightly until her sobs dissipated. Gertie sat up and wiped her eyes. “But how do I leave?”

“All you have to do is go to the highway. You’ll see the way out from there.”

Gertie and Dr. Waters stood and faced each other in silence for several minutes. Gertie looked around at the picnic things before turning her attention to the backyard with the budding forsythia bushes and then the town beyond. It was all the same as it had always been. She looked back at Dr. Waters.



“I think I will go.”

“I thought you would.”

The easiest way Gertie knew to get to the end Karnack road was to cut through her father's fields, then the Landry farm and then the Duncan farm. It wasn't often that she went to there. Only when her family took the occasional trip into Lincoln for shopping or went to visit her mother's family in Iowa did she see that spot. Gertie had been outside of Lanham six times in her life, but always before she had carried Lanham with her. This time she was leaving. It didn't take her long to pack her small, orange flowered suitcase. Some clothing, an extra pair of shoes, all the allowance money she had saved up and her notebooks of pressed flowers. She packed a brown paper sack with some apples and another slice of blueberry pie and folded that carefully on top. Her family still had not returned from the hatbox lunch, though it was nearly time to start dinner. It didn't much matter. Gertie checked that her bed was made and then left through the back door.

In April the cornfields were a soft green spread of new growth. No plant reached over the top of her shoe, let alone cut at her skin. She ran. The urgency she had felt in her dreams filled her and she stopped to look around. The cornfield had changed. The plants were all still short and she could see well on such a clear day, but she found herself completely lost. Gertie knew all the farmhouses, barns, creeks, groves of trees and ditches in Lanham, yet she didn't recognize any part of where she now stood. The

cornfield was now virtually featureless, with identical rows of corn stretching towards the horizon and joining there with a perfect blue sky.

Again Gertie began to run. She ran down the row she was standing in, and then turned left and crossed over a few rows to run back the other way. She varied the speed at which she ran, starting off at a sprint and then moving into a moderate trot. Around her the stalks of corn began to grow. Nearly all at once they went from being tiny plants to giant stalks that rose above her head. Their sharp leaves slicing at her skin as she went by. Exhausted she sat down in the middle of the fields, sweating and with blood smeared over her arms, legs and face. She grabbed the wishbone that dangled around her neck.

“Please,” she screamed. “I just want to leave.” An unstoppable wave of exhaustion blanketed her and she closed her eyes to sleep.

Gertie emerged from the cornfield and onto the highway late one afternoon. She stood along the side of the highway underneath the white and green sign marked ‘Bus’ as the sun began to set. She could see the roofs of the town over the slight dip in the ground around the interstate. They were hazy in the distance and dust, like some sort of dream. The bus came as promised at six-eleven. It was an old bus; she could see rust around the wheel wells and the bumper. But it could still move her forward. She climbed on the bus. It was half full of other travelers, sweaty and smoky. She placed her suitcase on the luggage rack above an empty seat and settled down for a ride.

Gertie watched the fields clip by from her seat on the bus. She had never traveled so quickly before. Her father’s car didn’t go so fast, or maybe it was just an illusion of

the bus. I-80 stretched both in front of her and behind, a tiny wisp of concrete in an ocean of greening land. Lanham had disappeared behind her more quickly than she could ever have guessed it would. She read the signs along the road, glancing backwards over her shoulder to see them be pulled into her past; Macon, eight miles, Sylvania twenty-four miles, Lincoln ninety-two miles.

It was her plan to get off the bus at Lincoln. She had been there twice before and knew where she could find a place to stay for the night. Or maybe she wouldn't bother. She didn't feel at all tired. She could sleep a bit on the bus and walk around all night in Lincoln. It shouldn't be too hard for her to get a job, or find a place to live. A rise of worry crept into Gertie's mind, but she tucked it back away. She leaned back in her seat and fingered the upholstery. Most of the other passengers on the bus sat slumped in their seats, as if they had been sitting there for a long time. Their heads bobbed and torsos jerked as the bus hit potholes and dips in the road.

## Epilogue: Salt

In the month of October Irving and Sharon Deluth moved from Cincinnati, Ohio to Lanham, Nebraska. They were a young couple, Irving twenty-nine and Sharon twenty-seven, with no children except for their dogs Rocky and Pumpkin. They arrived at their new home on Beech Street early in the morning, followed by a large yellow moving truck. The Deluth's had seen the house only once before, but they were in a rush to move and signed the papers for the second house they saw. The house was a single story ranch, painted a thick cream color with lime green trim. Sharon didn't care for the colors, but the floor plan was taken from her dreams. The veranda, the wide open kitchen, the large master bedroom and the cozy den with a fireplace were arranged as ideally as she could have wished. Irving let the dogs out of the back seat of the car and watched them scamper out onto the lawn. The dogs barked and snapped at each other, restless from the confinement. Irving motioned to the men in the moving truck to start unloading and then walked to the front door to open up the house.

It took until noon for all the furniture and boxes to be taken from the truck inside the house. As the sun rose in the sky a small crowd gathered in the yards on either side of the new Deluth house. Men and women dressed in light coats and sweaters collected where they could see all the items as they were unloaded from the truck. Sharon caught several comments about her black leather couch and polished metal table and chairs. A

tall woman with graying hair gestured to the glass topped dining room table as two hefty men standing near her shook their heads. One of them said 'I bet that breaks when they have children,' but Sharon wasn't sure which one. The crowd dispersed around lunchtime, though a dedicated minority stood outside with sandwiches in hand to see the last of the boxed carried inside.

Irving found Sharon in the kitchen, stacking plates in one of the cabinets. He walked up behind his wife and slid his hands around her waist. Sharon turned around to kiss him.

"So what do you think of the neighbors?" He asked after they parted.

"Not much. Kinda nosy, don't you think?"

"Well, I hadn't expected the audience." Irvin walked over to the table where several boxes were lying open. "Where do you want the silverware?"

"Pick a drawer, somewhere near the end." Irvin opened a drawer and began to arrange the silverware in a plastic tray. He had finished with the spoons when the doorbell rang. He looked over at Sharon who shrugged.

"Probably one of the neighbors, who didn't get a good enough look at our sofa." Irving laughed as he went to answer the door. A few minutes later he returned escorting a thin woman in a blue floral patterned dress. The woman looked to be in her fifties and she carried a large tray of sandwiches which she set down on a clear spot on the table as soon as she entered the kitchen.

"Hello." She said as she approached Sharon. "I'm Abby Holms, your next door neighbor." Mrs. Holms gestured with her thumb to the right. "It's nice to meet you. I

though you probably wouldn't have had time to buy any food yet so I brought you over some sandwiches."

"Oh, thank you Mrs. Holms." Sharon said, "That's very nice of you."

Mrs. Holms laughed and waved her hand. "You can call me Abby, and you're very welcome." Mrs. Holms pointed to the tray. "The ones on the right are ham and cheddar and the ones on the left are turkey and swiss."

"Well they look good." Irving lifted off the cling film and bit into a sandwich.

Abby Holms pulled a chair out from the table and sat down. "So where are you all from?" She glanced quickly at Irving and then smiled at Sharon. Sharon raised an eyebrow but smiled back.

"We're from Cincinnati."

"Ohio, huh? That's a long way. Why'd you come to Lanham?"

Irving spoke up. "My job. I've just been hired as the new superintendent for the county's schools. We thought we'd live somewhere near the middle."

"Oh really?" Mrs. Holms' voice rose as she spoke. "Well that is nice. I suppose you like children then?"

"Yeah, I do."

"None of your own though?"

Irving looked up startled towards Sharon, who glared back.

"Not that it is any of my business." Mrs. Holms quickly interjected. "But someone else will ask that question eventually." She shifted in her seat. "Not much stays quiet around here."

Sharon stepped over towards Mrs. Holms, placing her hands on her hips and looming over the woman in her chair. “Is that why all those people were watching us today? They were trying to find some gossip.” Sharon flared, feeling her annoyance rise into anger.

“No, no.” Mrs. Holms leaned back, away from the younger woman. “You’re arriving here today? They’re just curious; they don’t mean anything by that. No one’s moved to Lanham in thirty-four years, you have to expect everyone will be curious.”

“Thirty-four years?” Irving nearly chuckled. “You’re not serious, are you? Surely someone’s come here since then. The real estate agent told us that many of the houses in this part of town were built in the last fifteen years. How can no one have moved into them? I haven’t seen any standing empty.”

“No, no one has moved to Lanham in thirty-four years. The new houses, well they were all built after that fire when Nancy Kelston left her stove on when she went to bed and it burned down twenty-four houses before it was finished. That and people have children; they grow up, get married and want their own house.”

“And no one had come here in thirty-four years?” Sharon repeated.

“Nope,” Mrs. Holms shook her head. “Some people move away. That Anderson girl left here three years ago, she’s the most recent. Going to college now I hear. But almost nobody comes to Lanham.”

“Huh?” Irving bit back into his sandwich. Sharon pulled out a chair and sat down next to Mrs. Holms. She looked at the older woman for a few minutes before

taking a sandwich herself. Mrs. Holms smiled and eased herself more comfortably into the chair.

“So do you know anything about how to get around town?”

“Not really, we thought we’d go out and get some groceries later this afternoon.”

“Well, you can get groceries from Herman’s, there is a hardware store around the corner of the square if you need to get anything for fixing up. I know the cabinet doors above the sink hang out a bit. You’ll probably want to fix that. And you’ll likely want a new screen for that fireplace.”

Sharon stood up and walked to the indicated cabinet, frowning when the door did in fact swing out and downward about an inch. “How did you know that?”

“I was friends with Anne and Burt before they moved out. He was never much use fixing things around the house. She was always complaining that all the drains in this house got stopped up anytime she ran some water. You might want to get someone to look at that too. Richard Selster over on Maple street could probably fix it for you, he wouldn’t charge you much either.”

“Thanks, I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Good, you’ll be fine here.” Mrs. Holms stood up to leave. “I figure you probably won’t be up to it tonight, since you’re moving in and all, but I’d like to have you both over for dinner on Wednesday, maybe?”

“Sure, thanks.” Sharon escorted Mrs. Holms to the front door. “Good-bye.” Mrs. Holms left and Sharon went back to the kitchen to continue unpacking.



Irving left the house just after five to drive down to Herman's general store for groceries. He pulled out of his new driveway, drove half a block south, before making a right turn onto the square. He parked in front of the store and then shook his head as he realized he hadn't even traveled a quarter mile. The store was a cool place that retained an odor of sawdust. He looked around for a shopping cart or a basket, but didn't spot one.

"Just pile what you need on the counter; I'll ring you up when you're done." A rusty voice called to him. Irving turned to see a thin man in suspenders leaning over the counter. "I'll bet you're the new folk, aren't you?"

Irving walked over to shake the extended hand. "Yes, I'm Irving Deluth and my wife's Sharon though she's not with me at the moment."

"I'm Mr. Herman. Welcome to Lanham. If there's anything I can do for you just let me know." He smiled.

"Thanks. I only need a couple things for dinner right now."

"Well, sure. Groceries are all on the left side."

Irving nodded and went to gather his groceries. He bought some bread and deli meat, some mayonnaise, a few apples and some coffee and cream. As he was checking out Mr. Herman spoke again, this time in a more hushed tone.

"You live next door to the Holms'."

"Yes? I do."

“I know. I know them real well. They’re nice people. But watch what you say about David. I know he looks a bit funny, but they’ve always been real sensitive about him being a watermelon baby.” Mr. Herman nodded after he spoke.

“A watermelon baby?” Irving nearly laughed.

“Yes. That’s what David is, just don’t go poking the Holms’ about it, ok?”

“Yeah, sure...of course.” Irving left the store quickly and went home.

Sharon and Irving continued the process of unpacking until late in the night. After midnight had passed and they both began yawning they decided to go to bed and continue in the morning. Sharon went back to make the bed while Irving turned off the lights and checked to see that the doors were locked.

“Sharon, come here. Sharon.” Irving called from the living room. Sharon came at a hurry, nearly slipping in her socks as they glided over the hardwood floor.

“What?”

“Look at this girl.” He pointed out the window and Sharon leaned over to see better. A girl of perhaps twenty-five years was walking slowly around the Holms’ back yard. She was dirty, with long brown hair that was held back in a tangled braid. Her clothing was very dirty and was obviously tattered even at a distance and in poor light. The girl walked back and forth across the yard, stopping each time at a window at the back of the house to peer inside. Finally she went over the shed in back and went inside. Irving and Sharon turned back to each other.

“Do you think we should call the police?” Asked Sharon.

“No, she looked pretty harmless.” He shook his head and then looked up at his wife startled. “Oh I forgot to tell you. When I was at the grocers, he warned me not to say anything about David Holms, because he’s a watermelon baby.”

“What?”

“That’s what the guy said.”

“That’s crazy. I hope they’re not all superstitious around here. It’d drive me crazy having to listen to stories about black cats and not walking under ladders.” Sharon laughed and put her arm around her husband. “Anyway, let’s go to bed.”

“Yeah, all these nutty country folk can wait until morning.”

The Deluths unpacked their possessions relatively quickly and began to settle into the house. Every day more of their new neighbors would drop by to welcome them to the town and to inspect their furniture up close. Mrs. Holms came over every day to see how they were doing and exchange the local gossip. On the second day Sharon and Irving were in town she brought with her Mr. Holms, Jane and David. Both Sharon and Irving looked closely at the boy, but neither saw anything about him that was unusual. He seemed a happy four-year-old, with large dark brown eyes and beautiful thick hair.

When it came time for the Holms’ dinner party to start on Sunday evening, the Deluth’s felt as if they already knew all the residents of the town. The Holms’ had invited over two other families, the Lawrences and the Updikes. Both arrived before Sharon and Irving and were talking in the living room as they entered. They had met

previously and easily joined in the conversation. Sharon relaxed as the chatter about children and salaries for teachers grew more lively.

Dinner was served at seven. Mrs. Holms had cooked an enormous roast along with potatoes, green beans, snap peas, carrots, yams and bread. The Deluth's filled their plates and then listened quietly as Minister Lawrence said grace. As they started to eat Sharon reached for the pepper shaker the back of her hand bumped the salt shaker, tipping it over. A wave of tiny crystals fell from the shaker and onto the tablecloth.

“Oh, I'm sorry. I've made a bit of a mess.”

“Don't worry dear; it's just a bit of salt.” At the mention of salt all heads turned towards Sharon, who began to feel self conscious. She brushed up the salt with her napkin, but everyone continued to stare at her. Eventually Betty Updike spoke up.

“You should throw a pinch over you're left shoulder.”

“What?”

“A pinch of the salt.”

“Why would I do that?” Sharon asked, looking around the room at a group of faces that suddenly seemed alarmed.

Mrs. Holms interjected. “To keep away the bad luck. You've got to ward it off.”

“You're kidding. Oh, I see. It's some old superstition. Well, I'm not scared.”

She fluttered her napkin and settled it back onto her lap. Kirsten Lawrence whistled through her teeth and her mother quickly pinched her to stay quiet.

The dinner party continued until late in the evening. When it was at last time to return home the Holms' escorted their guests to the front porch where they all said their goodnights. As Sharon turned and stepped down from the porch she lost her footing and fell to the ground. Irving bent down beside her.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." She took his hands and he helped her to her feet. "I slipped is all."

"Bad luck." Jane said solemnly.

"Yes," Agreed Mrs. Lawrence. "Definitely bad luck."

Irving and Sharon glanced at each other and Sharon rolled her eyes. "I'm sure it's just a coincidence. Now good night everyone."

"Definitely not a coincidence," Mrs. Holms muttered, "that is no coincidence."

"Sprinkle salt all over your house." Betty Updike said. "Make sure you get every inch, that'll keep the bad luck away."

"Yes, that should do it."

"Well, I'll keep that in mind." Sharon and Irving returned home, still shaking their heads in confusion. From their bedroom window half an hour later Sharon could see all the other guests from the dinner party standing on the porch. They were talking excitedly, though Sharon could not hear what they said, and they kept pointing and waving in the direction of her house. Sharon stood at the window, anger at being talked about behind her back rising again. No one seemed to notice that she was watching even though everyone looked towards the house.

The discussion on the porch did not appear to be winding down when Sharon decided to go to bed. She was just pulling the curtains closed when she noticed the girl

she and Irving had seen wandering about a few nights before. The girl in the tattered clothing began weaving through the crowd on the porch, stopping to listen to someone, stepping out of the way as someone else walked by. As Sharon watched she became more certain that nobody even notice that the girl was there. She studied the girl and concluded that she must be related to the Holms' because of her resemblance to Jane. Sharon had just reached her conclusion when the girl vanished from the porch. The girl had stepped near Jane, allowing Sharon to make the comparison, when she disappeared. Sharon leaned closer to the window, trying to see the girl ducked down or perhaps slipped into the doorway, but she couldn't find her.

The next morning Sharon woke to find a large swollen pimple at the end of her nose. It was very sore and she put some cream on it, but it didn't help much. When she went into the kitchen to make breakfast she found that all the eggs in the carton had been cracked. She threw them out and made toast. Later when she went about dusting the house, three pictures fell off the wall in the hallway and cracked. She dismissed these as accidents even though the thoughts of last night's salt incident resonated strangely in her mind. The rest of the day she moved through the house carefully, avoiding brushing against the walls or picking things up. Still she tripped on the rug in the hallway, gave herself a paper cut and burned the vegetables she cooked for dinner. Irving didn't seem to notice that the vegetables were burned and complimented her on the dinner. Sharon, trying to look calm picked at her food and only tasted ashes as she ate, she kept looking over at the food on Irving's plate, but it didn't look any different from her own.

Her string of bad luck continued as the week went by. A branch from the pine tree in their lawn fell off and scraped some paint off the side of her car. The grass in the back yard began to brown and die, despite the rain and the extra watering that Sharon performed. One afternoon all the doors and windows in the house became stuck closed and Sharon sat for three hours in the spare bedroom rattling the door. Irving let her out when he got home and oiled all the hinges in the house.

On Friday Mrs. Holms came over to ask Sharon if she would like to have coffee. Sharon accepted and came over to sit in Mrs. Holms' kitchen. It was a very bright morning and the sun reflected off every surface.

They had just poured their second cups of coffee when David ran in, still wearing a pair of blue pajamas with feet. He saw Sharon and ran towards her, his arms outstretched.

"Lift me up." He demanded. "Lift me."

"David," Mrs. Holms scolded. "Be polite."

"Please?" The boy begged.

"I think he likes you,"

"I think you're right." Sharon smiled and bent down to take the boy into her arms when she noticed that his skin seemed faintly green. David shook his arms, annoyed at the pause and Sharon scooped him into her lap. At once David began studying the table. Sharon ran her hands through the boy's hair, stopping as her fingers caught on something in the boy's hair. She looked down to see a tiny leaf, dark green with a tiny white line

running down the middle. Carefully she pinched it between her fingers to lift it away, but David cried out.

“Owww....don’t pull.”

“Oh,” Sharon jumped, startled. “There’s a leaf stuck in your hair, I didn’t mean to pull.”

“Mrs. Holms leaned over. “Oh, don’t worry about that.”

“Oh, all right.” Sharon looked back down at the leaf. It seemed to be resting on top of his hair, but as she looked she realized a stem extended towards his scalp. Then she saw another one. Several others, in fact, all of them resting calmly amidst the boy’s thick hair. Sharon looked closer, studying the leaves. Then she remembered what sort of leaves they were. They were the leaves of a watermelon, only much smaller. Sharon gasped and stood up quickly almost tossing the boy on the floor.

“I have to go.” She called out as she ran out the back door and into her own house.

When Irving returned home from work that evening he found the house covered in a fine grainy powder. Sharon was in the spare bedroom, sprinkling salt on the floor from a large cardboard tube.

“What are you doing?” He asked, placing his hand on the container of salt to stop his wife.

“I’m getting rid of the bad luck.” She pulled the container away from his hand and resumed her sprinkling. “I have to cover the whole house.”

“Sharon, stop. This is silly.”

She paused and looked at her husband. “No, it’s not silly, you just don’t see.”



Irving watched his wife for a few minutes as she sprinkled salt on the floor, the bed and the dresser. Then he went out to the living room where he sat down on a white granular couch, placed his head in his hands, and sighed.

The next morning Sharon woke early. She showered and began making breakfast before she realized that the salt had disappeared from the house. She dropped to her knees, sweeping the floors with her hand, looking for residue, but found none. Sharon sat up and laughed. The sound came easily from her chest. The morning sun was seeping through the curtains into the kitchen. She pulled back the curtains and let the full brightness of the sun flow through her.