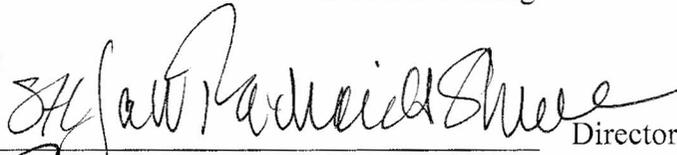


A QUIET PROCEDURE AND OTHER STORIES

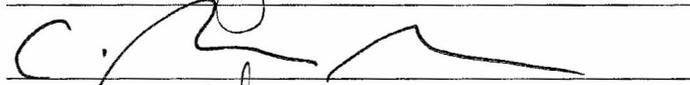
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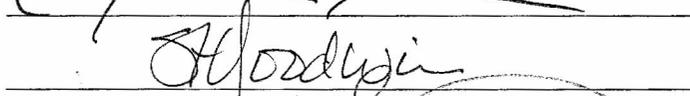
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A Thesis
Submitted to the
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of
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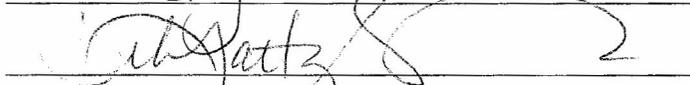
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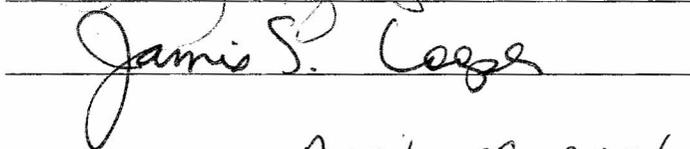


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Department Chairperson

Dean, College of Humanities
and Social Sciences

Date: April 28, 2014

Spring Semester 2014
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

A Quiet Procedure and Other Stories

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

by

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Bachelor of Arts
Florida State University, 2010

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Spring Semester 2014
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA



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DEDICATION

For my mother and father. For Papa. And for Dennis especially, who continues to believe in me.

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ABSTRACT

A QUIET PROCEDURE AND OTHER STORIES

Matthew Oglesby, M.F.A.

George Mason University, 2014

Thesis Director: Dr. Susan Shreve

This thesis features an excerpt from a longer work about American eugenics at the turn of the 20th century. In addition, several unrelated short stories.

A QUIET PROCEDURE

Towards the end of Mary Cedar's junior year at the Allfancy Academy, Miss Meadows, the biology teacher, came in and explained that for their final project, she wanted all of them to conduct an in-depth, personal family history. She felt that it would be a relatively easy and enjoyable way to end the school year, and not only that, but also of great help and importance to the Genetics Research Laboratory.

“So I want you all to do your very best,” she said as she moved down the aisle between the desks, handing out the forms. “When you're finished, I will be sending these to the Laboratory, where they will be indexed and permanently preserved. Except of course those I deem inaccurate or in any way scantily prepared. These will be eliminated—a fate I can assure you will not bode well for your final grade...”

As she spoke, she projected a reel of film that showed pictures of the Genetics Research Laboratory. The picture that struck Mary Cedar most indelibly showed a group of six or seven women sitting around a table outside a two-story colonial clapboard. Directly behind them stood a marked-up chalkboard, and next to it the only man in the picture, dressed in a coat and tie. The women wore white blouses and long chaste skirts and sat casually in ladderback chairs. In the background one could see the trunk and branches of what looked like a pine, except the long limbs hung down almost to the ground, like those of a weeping willow.

Mary Cedar was entranced by this image. For awhile now she had been fretting over what she would do when she got out of school. Even though this was more than a year away, she couldn't help but worry. All of the options seemed so utterly boring. She could teach or she could nurse or she could do library work. Or she could do like so many of the other girls planned to do: she could get married and have babies.

But none of this struck her as the least bit interesting or important. And whatever she did, it needed to be important. That was somehow necessary. Whereas this on the other hand—this was exactly the kind of future she had been unable to imagine for herself.

Suddenly she wanted to go to the Genetics Research Laboratory. Not because she had any real zeal for the institution or its mission; she hardly knew about it. But because it was the very best opportunity. Unlike so many of the other girls at the Allfancy Academy—who seemed only ever to think of when they were going to get married and to whom; how many babies they planned to make, and where they hoped to settle down—Mary Cedar wanted to get out and experience the world. She wanted to be on the cusp of scientific change and excitement. And this in part is why she applied to be a member of the 1916 Training Class for Fieldworkers at the Genetics Research Laboratory. It was a six-week course held every summer in Laurelton, a little island village off the coast of New York City, and she arrived on the sixth of July, feeling very dizzy.

Standing on the sidewalk with her luggage and valise, she began to sweat, even in the wind that whipped around the buildings, resounding loudly, as though she were still in the tunnel below. The city lights blinked; wraiths of street steam swirled about her,

making her worry that her bleach-white summer dress would get dirty. And then there were the endless throngs of people—of every race and language and color and identity—many of whom she'd learned about in school but had never actually seen. She came from a very small town in Georgia.

The people weaved around her.

And the noise, the sheer, unending, seam-bulging noise. All of it seemed to bear down on her until finally she began to feel as though she could hardly see or even think.

But she managed to find a taxi and was driven to the port.

Since she had spent the past couple days cooped up in a train compartment, she decided to stand at the front of the ferry. It was a clear afternoon, the sun high, the sky cloudless. Gulls circled overhead. Just enough wind blew so that it wasn't too hot outside. She stood staring ahead at the glittering water from beneath the broad brim of a hat that shaded her face. The breeze matted her dress. Seaspray misted the railing.

Ah, Laureltown! The name seemed to conjure up the place. She'd repeated it so many times in her mind as she went about finishing the rest of the semester, and now here she was, so close she could feel her life beginning. She hadn't far to go. Just across the channel. Soon the little island village would be appearing.

"Where're you headed?" asked a man suddenly at her side.

He stood squinting at her in the sunlight.

"The Genetics Research Laboratory."

“Oh really?” He stuck out his hand. “Charles Davenport.”

She flushed deeply. Charles Davenport. Director of the Genetics Research Laboratory.

She was confused as to why this should embarrass her, but it did. And the thought of her turning red beside the eminent eugenicist made her turn even redder—so much so that her face and hair seemed almost to blend together.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t...”

He didn’t seem to hear her. “You must be one of the new fieldworkers?”

“Yes.” She offered her hand. “Mary Cedar.”

“Nice to meet you.”

She mentioned none of this to her father. Not the city, which dizzied her. Nor her first encounter with Davenport, which embarrassed her.

Instead she described Laureltown, which had a magical effect on her.

Dear Father, she wrote in her first letter home. I have just arrived in Laureltown and it is absolutely beautiful. I know you must imagine me in some cold, clinical laboratory building, but actually nothing could be further from the truth. We live in renovated stable buildings attached to the main house, a vast colonial clapboard painted a canary yellow. In fact, everything is quite colorful here. Have you ever seen mountain laurel? It reminds me of the blossoms on the magnolia trees we have back home. There are also plenty of dogwoods. That’s one of the first things you notice. The ferry

approaches, the island comes into view, and you see this pink and red confetti of flowering trees, and all the colorful clapboards, which dot the hillside, and the campus of laboratory buildings, which are no less idyllic than the rest of the houses. It's all very picturesque, like a New England fishing village. Elms border the road that takes you from the harbor up to the campus. Along the way you see windmills and in the distance the church and clocktower. Access to the Laboratory is hidden amid landscaped gardens. The beaches are small, the roads sylvan. I ate oysters for the first time today. Have you ever eaten oysters? I'm sure you have. You've been so many places and done so many things, whereas this is only my first time away from home. I'm filled with wonder and excitement and also a good deal of nervousness. But I guess that's to be expected. I'll send a picture and a postcard as soon as I can. Love, Mary.

The campus had a temperate, morally upright atmosphere. Classes were held outside, as Mary Cedar had seen in the picture. They sat gathered around in ladderback chairs. The soft summer grass was vibrant. The long tree limbs hung down like gangly arms. When the wind stirred, they resembled dusters. Overhead the shade was intermittent, and the sunlight permitted flickered across the lawn like schools of brilliant fish.

"I'm sure you are all well aware of the problems we face today," Davenport began. "Even here, in Laureltown, a mostly wealthy and exclusive island community, we have our fair share of these... how shall I put it? These... citizens of the wrong type. You've encountered them in your charity work, in the Florence Crittenton Homes and

poorer neighborhoods—these charity-dependent families. And many if not all of them exhibit a variety of defectiveness that is neither mental nor physical but moral.

Tendencies such as alcoholism and criminality fall under this category. Also sexual waywardness and to an extent poverty. These are just a few examples; there are many others. But what I'm saying is, these are the kinds of traits the Genetics Research Laboratory hopes to identify and eliminate.

“We do this by conducting in-depth family histories. And the people who actually go out into the towns and villages and penal institutions and perform the actual leg work of collecting these family histories are the fieldworkers. It's investigative work, and some of it pretty dangerous, as you're not exactly sent to the most savory of places. In fact, much of your work will be conducted in poorhouses and reformatories and other suchlike institutions, these being the kinds of places where you are most likely to find your primary subject—or propositus, as we call them. But one need not be a good physician in order to be a good fieldworker. In fact, a physician would be apt to diagnose and that is exactly what we do not want you to do.” He was emphatic on this point. “Do not diagnose. Remain impartial in your telling. But make your case history as complete and thorough as possible. Overlook nothing. Consider no detail too trivial. You never know, some small incident may throw much light on a case.”

And so the mornings and afternoons were spent. There were lectures on Darwin's theory of evolution, Mendel's genetics (of which Davenport was the nation's foremost

expert). Anthropometry, endocrinology, anthropology. The different types of defectiveness were defined. In particular, feeble-mindedness and the term moron, which had recently been invented by Davenport's colleague in New Jersey, and was a precise, scientific definition for, as Davenport put it, "The most dangerous class of feeble-minded people: those whose illness is so subtle and hard to diagnose that it can almost go unnoticed and often does. Feeble-minded people can be literate and fully functional in society, easily blending into the population. But their illnesses give them weak wills and poor judgment, making them easily influenced for evil and susceptible to antisocial, deviant behavior. Greek for foolish or stupid, the term moron distinguishes them from idiots, who are by definition severely retarded and unable to speak, and imbeciles, who can only speak and function at the level of a four year old. Whereas your average feeble-minded adult has the mental age of about seven to twelve years old."

Mary Cedar asked, "But if a person is literate and seemingly normal..."

"Yes."

"And let's say they're forty-five years old."

"Okay."

"Well, how do you know when to mark them feeble-minded?"

"Good question. But like all good questions, this one is hard to answer. The thing is, Mary, there is no set line. Nature recognizes no such thing as feeble-mindedness. Man tries to make laws of classification, but we can draw no hard and fast line, for in the end such a classification is artificial..." He trailed off then, pausing to think, or perhaps let this sink in. Then after a moment he looked around. The women were all nodding their heads.

Mary Cedar hadn't understood a word of his explanation and doubted that any of the nodding heads had either. But it satisfied her immensely, the fact that Davenport knew her name. The thing is, Mary... None of the other girls were called on by name. Perhaps it signified something more than the simple fact that they'd met on the ferry and he remembered her. Perhaps she was memorable. Perhaps she stood out, was somehow special.

After the lessons on classification and diagnosis, focus shifted mostly onto the practical aspects of fieldworking. They were drilled in charting—eye color, skin pigment, and all sorts of other physical measurements. They learned the various methods of collection and practiced these by interviewing and examining one another. Probing sensitive areas, as Davenport put it.

They were shown how to fill out Individual Analysis Cards and taught the correct form in which a Record of Family Traits is written. They went over how to administer the Simon-Binet Intelligence Test and scored their mental ages. They all scored very high, of course.

“You must be cunning when administering them,” Davenport said, pacing back and forth in front of the chalkboard. “You may even find that sometimes you have to hide your true motive in order to get the most accurate information. But all in all, it is the very best means we have for determining mental age and so it must be used. School records are also of great value and should be obtained whenever possible,” he pointed out.

“Although of course knowledge of an individual’s actions in their natural habitat is really the most important thing. One cannot very easily study the habits of lions by their actions in Central Park, can they?”

And so trips were taken to various nearby institutions—prisons, reformatories, mental and other correctional facilities—where they observed patients, took notes, studied hospital records, and conducted examinations. Later, they travelled to the home territories of these patients and in the field secured first-hand historical, personal, and pedigree data, thus simulating the work they would later do.

Mary Cedar enjoyed all of this immensely. The only part that brought her the slightest bit discomfort came near the end, when there were a series of lectures on sterilization.

These were given by Harry Laughlin, one of Davenport’s colleagues. Unlike Davenport, who made such a strong impression, Laughlin looked nervous and even sickly as he stood in the blinking light beneath the trees. He was an exceedingly pale-skinned man, bald save a crown of thin blond hair, with thick lips and eyelids that hung puffed and heavy over his eyes, making him appear dissatisfied.

It was a sultry afternoon in mid-August, the heat so thick you could poke a hole in it. Mary Cedar sat fanning her face under the broad brim of the hat she’d worn on the ferry. Davenport wasn’t there that day. He’d been called away.

“It is a sound eugenic tenet that normal persons owe a debt to the community that can only be discharged by the breeding and rearing of another generation as desirable as themselves,” Laughlin said. “Conversely, those defectives who are practically certain to breed principally more defectives, owe a debt to the community that can be discharged only by an adequate guarantee that they shall not contribute to the next generation.”

He stood stock-still at the front of the class. One hand fidgeted in the pocket of his trousers, the other clutched at the notecard on which he’d written the main points of his lecture. He looked up and then quickly resumed.

“So how do we do this? Well, it’s no different than compulsory vaccination, really. A simple procedure on the womb, taking no longer than an hour, and as painless and inexpensive as having a tooth pulled, and like that a future burden is removed. We’re trying to get this passed into law in every state across the nation, but of course public sentiment is very much against it. Especially in religious sectors, where they believe we’re aiming to threaten their God-given right to bear children. But consider the alternative. In states that refuse to pass a eugenics sterilization law, the only other option is to keep feebleminded women committed for the entirety of their fecund period. Which seems all right and even okay until you consider the logistics. Already hospitals and reformatories are overcrowded, and many of them with patients who aren’t receiving the kind of care that we the taxpayers subsidize. In ten years, it’ll be a nightmare.”

As Mary Cedar sat listening, a thin quiver of discomfort crept in under her skin.

“How can good, upstanding parents rear large families if they have to support hordes of feebleminded? Surgical sterilization is the only logical option.”

*

But nevertheless, she returned home, elated, and in the spring of the following year singlehandedly (along with the help of resources from the Genetics Research Laboratory) set up a Fitter Families for Future Firesides exhibit.

This was featured as an attraction at that year's annual Geranium Festival. It was a warm and sunny day in April. The brick town square was filled with people. Tents and exhibits crowded the central green. Children screamed in excitement and terror and tried to burst forth from the restraint of their parents. Girls wore flower-print dresses; the elderly sat on benches in the shade of the tall oak trees. Plumes of woodsmoke wavered in the air, smelling of food. The trees were festooned with banners and balloons

The Fitter Families for Future Firesides exhibit stood on a patch of lawn in a corner of the square. Unlike the other exhibits, it was not a tent but a small wooden structure, like a little house or manger, with a tilted iron roof. Signs with flashing lightbulbs adorned the unpainted walls. "This light flashes every fifteen seconds," one of them read. "Every fifteen seconds a hundred dollars of your money goes for the care of persons with bad heredity such as the insane, feeble-minded, criminals and other defectives." Another sign flashed: "Every forty-eight seconds a person is born in the United States who will never grow up mentally beyond the age of a normal eight year old boy or girl. Every fifty seconds a person is committed to jail in the United States. Very few normal persons ever go to jail."

Two other signs, both of them without flashing lights, hung from the edge of the roof, on which was a wooden banner that read, in bold, red lettering, "Fitter Families For

Future Firesides.” One of them said: “Unfit Human Traits such as feeble-mindedness, epilepsy, criminality, insanity, alcoholism, pauperism and many others, run in families and are inherited in exactly the same way as color in guinea-pigs.” The other sign was titled “The Triangle of Life.” An equilateral triangle was painted in the middle of it. On the left side was the word Environment, on the right side Education, and on the bottom Heritage. “Environment is what you have. Education is what you do. Heritage is what you are. You can improve your education, and even change your environment, but what you really are was all settled when your parents were born.”

The exhibit was crowded. Three stairs led onto a small pillared porch and in the middle was a door that opened into the back. People stood in line outside, waiting to go in and be examined for their “eugenic worth,” as Mary Cedar put it.

She stood on the porch, next to a cage of rabbits, encouraging onlookers.

Her father, George Cedar—in town people still called him Judge Cedar—understood very little of this. But he did understand from the sign next to her head that every seven and a half minutes a high grade person was born in the United States who would have the ability to do creative work and be fit for leadership, and the fact that his daughter fit this description made him very happy.

The sign next to it made him frown. It listed the conditions for “Fit” and “Unfit” marriages and below this asked, “How long are we to be so careful for the pedigree of our pigs and chickens and yet leave the ancestry of our children to chance and blind sentiment?”

But children are not rose bushes, George Cedar said to himself. Children are not livestock, and they cannot be treated as such!

“What was that?” Mary Cedar said, coming up to him.

He spun around. “Oh, nothing. Just talking to myself.”

“You look a little lost.”

“No, just seeing how things are going.”

“Busy,” she said. She pointed to a poster that showed Uncle Sam holding a trophy. “We’re doing a Fitter Family Contest.”

The sign urged families to register.

“The family who has the highest eugenic worth wins a gold medal,” she explained.

“Ah. Well, who’s winning?”

“I don’t know.”

“The Lamberts, I hope.”

Mary Cedar frowned. This was an old joke.

“Do you want to come inside?” she asked.

“Oh, no, no. We won’t win the contest—it’s just you and I!”

“Not to be examined. I mean, just to look around.”

“That’s all right. I’m going over—”

“To the Tasty Pastry, I know. But first come inside.”

She tugged on his arm. She wanted him to see all the work she had done.

Inside it was dim and the tables were filled with families being interviewed and examined. Amid the interpolating voices rose the plangent wails of crying babies. They sat shirtless and in nothing but diapers on the tabletops, their pudgy little legs drumming the wood. Mothers held onto the backs of their heads to keep them from rolling around.

“What do you think?” Mary Cedar asked.

She laughed a little. She knew what her father thought. He was a conservative Christian man, and like so many of this superstitious tradition (as Mary Cedar considered it), wary of scientific advances. For example, Darwin’s theory of evolution, which she had mentioned only briefly in one of the letters she wrote home from the Genetics Research Laboratory. This alone had been enough to upset him. He sent her back a long, irate missive, condemning both Darwin and the field of eugenics.

And so, not wanting to further aggravate him, she rarely brought up the Genetics Research Laboratory. From time to time she mentioned something, but mostly she kept these details to herself. Her father, she could tell, was uncomfortable with the idea that she might pursue fieldworking as a career.

She lived alone with him in a large house on Main Street. Her mother had died when she was a child, and her father had never remarried. Nor did it seem he had ever wanted to. He had devoted himself entirely to Mary Cedar.

Which was suffocating. Every day after school she ran upstairs and shut the door of her room. Not that it locked and not that he didn't mind sticking his head in or even entering and sitting down on the bed or in a chair next to it to talk.

Talk talk talk. All he ever wanted to do was talk.

For years he had been a district court magistrate, until recently a stroke had forced him into early retirement, and ever since then he had not been himself. Without work, he was at once restless and exhausted; excitable, fretful, and cruel; lonely and stir crazy. In short, he didn't know what to do with himself. He haunted the house, finding work where there was none, waiting for Mary Cedar to return and keep him company.

At the foot of her bed stood a white wicker vanity that had once been her mother's. In fact, all of the furniture in her bedroom had once belonged to her mother.

She wanted to get away.

But even as she hid in her room, she could hear her father's footsteps downstairs. They echoed as he walked across the foyer.

"Mary?"

"Yes."

"You're home?"

"Yes."

Yes, yes, yes. Yes, with the obvious questions.

"Do you want some coffee?"

Which meant he was probably hungry. Even before his stroke, she had cooked and cleaned for him. It was a bit like a marriage they had.

*

She was at the stove when her father came in from the backyard. For a moment the screen door hovered between open and closed, and then abruptly it snapped shut, sending little flakes of white paint onto the floor. He bent over and picked them up.

“I don’t know why you bother picking up little pieces of paint when you come in here with your boots on.”

Her father looked down at his feet.

“Please—take off your boots! They’re filthy!”

He crossed over to the table and began to remove his shoes.

“You know, that defeats the whole purpose,” she said.

“What?”

“You just tracked mud across the floor.” She pointed to the smears of grass and dirt and then went to the closet and got the broom. “Why didn’t you just take them off at the door?”

He looked at her dumbly. “I guess that’s true. I didn’t think of that.”

Mary Cedar felt her back stiffen and a familiar irritation rise up in her throat. But she forced herself to relax. She had learned to be tolerant with him. And she had something she wanted to tell him.

At dinner, she heaped a mouthful of potatoes into her mouth and through them said, “I’d like to leave town.”

She hoped the potatoes would somehow soften the blow.

Her father said, “Mary, don’t speak with your mouth full! At least wait until you’ve finished your food.”

Not that he had the best decorum. Even as he spoke, a morsel of bread fell out the corner of his mouth. But then, that wasn’t his fault. The stroke had paralyzed areas on the left side of his face, numbed his bottom lip, and impaired his vision. These were relatively minor side effects—he’d been lucky—but he didn’t like to talk about it. And so Mary Cedar pretended not to notice.

“I’d like to leave town,” she repeated.

She stabbed a carrot with her fork, which in this circumstance felt cruel.

The food ceased to turn in her father’s mouth.

“You want to go to the Genetics Research Laboratory,” he guessed.

“Yes.”

Her father swallowed his food and washed his throat with a sip of water.

“Well, that’s fine,” he said and resumed eating.

Mary Cedar flushed. Clearly he hadn’t understood. “And not just for the summer,” she made clear. “This time I plan to return for good.”

Never had she seen a face age so quickly. Her father looked stricken. Deep lines formed around the corners of his mouth, and in the dim light that came through the kitchen window, his tanned face looked almost wooden.

He set his fork down on the edge of the plate and it resounded loudly in the silence of the room.

“Why are you so intent on doing this?” he asked.

“What?”

“To me. Why must you do this to me?”

Mary Cedar’s throat seized and for a moment she felt that she would cry. Tears shimmered in her eyes. But she coughed them away.

“Father, it has nothing to do with you.”

“You know I am against it.”

“But why?”

She hated the way this sounded, as though she were whining.

Her father narrowed his eyes. “How would you like it if that happened to you?”

She thought he meant someone leaving her behind, as she planned to do.

“If someone took away your ability to reproduce,” he clarified. “How would you like that?”

It took her by surprise, but she made sure not to show it. Her face remained stoic. She thought about it for a moment, and then half-heartedly decided, “You know, I wouldn’t mind. One way or the other. It doesn’t matter to me. I have no desire to have children.”

“Well good luck finding a husband.”

“And what if I don’t want a husband?”

Her father lit his pipe. “You’ll change your mind.”

This seemed to make it up for her. “No. I won’t.”

She remembered the Mate Selection Forms they’d been given at the Genetics Research Laboratory. It asked them to state their preference between (a) an unmarried life

with enhanced economic and professional success, (b) marriage to a mate of compatible temperament, with personal professional success slightly diminished and struggle for economic independence harder, or... “I didn’t even need to read option c,” Mary Cedar said, having summarized this for her father. “A, unmarried. And along with that, no babies. So I guess you might as well sterilize me.”

Her father was taken aback.

“So you don’t think sterilization removes empathy from the human equation?”

“Not necessarily.”

“Then what else does it do?”

“Well, it removes poverty, criminality, and degeneracy, among other things,” she said and held up a hand, for her father looked on the verge of forming words. “So that in the future we can have a community of people who aren’t a drain on society. I mean, it might sound a bit idealistic. But what’s wrong with that? What’s wrong with striving for a better society?”

“You know they sterilize women, not men.”

“Yes, primarily,” Mary Cedar said. “You go to the root. The womb.”

And though she was appalled, she pressed on, caught up in the logic of her argument.

“Father, don’t you see? These people, they don’t need to have babies.”

“That’s not for you to say.”

“They will only produce more feeble-minded children, thus clogging the wheels of human progress.”

“Listen at you!” He laughed as he mocked her. “Thus clogging the wheels of human progress. What hogwash! They have you brainwashed!”

“No, father. It is you who is brainwashed. Don’t you see? You of all people. The laws of this country do not permit ten year olds to marry.” She paused. “And why not?”

“Because a child cannot take care of himself, much less somebody else.”

“Right. And for this exact same reason the laws of nature do not permit ten year olds to have children.”

“Your point?”

“If these laws—the laws of nature and man—do not permit ten year olds to marry and have children, then why should we permit it when the mentality is only ten?”

This was an almost word for word recitation of a lecture she’d heard at the Genetics Research Laboratory, and it filled Mary Cedar with a galvanizing sense of pride to have remembered and repeated it so cogently.

Her father was silent.

“Are you still hungry?” she asked.

“No.”

“Would you like some coffee?”

“No.”

So he was angry. Perhaps she had gone too far. Perhaps she should have reigned herself in. But Laughlin’s lecture had gotten under her skin, and she had wanted to see how far she could go—pressing, goading, in a sense playing Devil’s advocate, as a way of testing her own theories and beliefs.

She had gone too far, apparently.

Her father frowned. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

And in a sense he was right. When it came to her distaste for procreation, she stood on shaky ground, both with her father and the eugenicists. As in Genesis, the idea was to go forth and multiply. Be ye fruitful, bring forth abundantly in the earth, and multiply therein. Mary Cedar had been brought up on the Bible: prayers at breakfast, grace at every meal, psalms learned by heart, the Gospels, chapters and verse. The difference between the eugenicists’ and the Bible’s version was the segregation between who exactly should inherit the earth.

I believe that I am the trustee of the germ plasm that I carry, read the Eugenics Creed, written by Davenport, and now contending with the Bible for space in Mary Cedar’s brain. That this has been passed on to me through thousands of generations before me; and that I betray the trust if (that germ plasm being good) I so act as to jeopardize it, with its excellent possibilities, or, from motives of personal convenience, to unduly limit offspring. I believe that, having made our choice in marriage carefully, we, the married pair, should seek to have four to six children in order that our carefully selected germ plasm shall be reproduced in adequate degree and that this preferred stock shall not be swamped by that less carefully selected. Whereas her father (and those of his persuasion) made no distinction between those of carefully selected germ plasm and

those who were less carefully selected. Not when it came to the holy sanctimony of marriage and the right, the privilege, the command to go forth and bear children.

Her father did everything in his power to stop her.

Go to college, get your degree. In criminology, psychology. Anthropology. Whatever. Write about these things. Work for the advance of eugenics. But for God's sake, don't do fieldwork! I mean, Mary. You're a bright and talented young girl. You could do anything. Why don't you travel? You could go far more interesting places than some prison in the middle of nowhere, or wherever it is they send you. So you say you want to help people? Well then, donate to whatever cause your heart desires, even if that happens to be eugenics. Or there's an idea. Why don't you go down to the Florence Crittenden Home and volunteer? That would fill your need and the needs of others. But save yourself the trouble of travelling halfway across the country...

And so they'd come around to it. He'd said what she was unable to say—what she couldn't quite bring herself to say—the reason why—the reason she knew—which was that without her and without work he would have nothing to do. But that's ultimately what it came down to. Try as he might to mask his distaste in ideological debate, he didn't want her to leave because he would be lonely.

But in the end he was unable to stop her. He was, whatever else he was, her father, she was his little girl, and she had set her heart on going. And so not a month later

they stood on the station platform. It was the third of July. He would spend the fourth alone, he said.

“Well, it’s better than spending it cooped up in a train compartment,” she remarked.

“Oh, don’t pretend you’re not excited,” he said, and she didn’t try.

She looked around at the brick town square, which was just getting busy, as people, yawning and wiping the sleep from their eyes, started their mornings. The grass in the central green glistened; the water in the fountain of pennies trickled. Elsewhere, flowerbeds drooped under their burdens of dew, bulbs and stems bowed like heads. The air, crisp and bright with sunlight, smelled of leaf fires, and in the distance one could hear the train approaching.

The tracks crossed over Main Street, just outside the square, and standing on the elevated platform Mary Cedar could see the brick First Baptist church with its tall white steeple like a beacon. She glanced once and then not again at the church spire. It reminded her of the endless Sunday mornings she’d spent in the family pew of that solemn nave, light breaking crimson and gold through the stained glass windows, suspended dust, perfume, hand waving, the headaches all this caused her. When she wasn’t being made to sing from the bumpy black leatherbound hymnal, she sat pretending to hear the minister. Are you willing to let God use you in these hard-hitting questions of faith? From time to time she nodded her head to show her father she was listening, when really she was examining the forms in the grained oak pews. In certain lights and frames of mind there appeared to be characters and landscapes there, and as the

minister God-blessed the merry fine men and women, Mary Cedar made up her own stories, separate from those told in the church sermons.

There was only one church in Laureltown—St. John’s Episcopal—and as Mary Cedar stood next to her father, she remembered the sound of the bells ringing clearly over the water, reminding her that soon, she wouldn’t have to attend service, not if she didn’t want to.

The block signal snapped from red to green and the train sheered the bend. Her father looked at his watch and said, “On time.”

A gust of wind swept the platform then, as the train came hurtling in, rushing down the track as though it had no intention of stopping. And only when the engine and baggage cars were well past did the air brakes scream and the train protest to a halt. Then Mary Cedar hugged her father and said goodbye.

II

Mary Cedar awoke as the train, creaking and groaning, came to a stop at a small rural station. Looking outside the window, she had a moment of fear: in her journey south from Laureltown, had she missed her stop and reawoken back at home?

The station and its surroundings looked remarkably similar. A small wooden house like a hut stood in a corner of the platform. In the middle was a single wooden bench and next to it a glaring black pole that cast a long and lonely shadow. Perched on top was a large white clock face. And then there was the brick town square and church steeple, and beyond this an endless monotony of undulating fields and streams, and in the distance the big, blue, unmoving mountains.

Beside the small wooden building stood a hunched-over old man, his features indistinct in the narrow wedge of shade cast by the roof overhang.

That could be her father, waiting.

But no. She quickly remembered where she was and what she was doing. This was her first trip as a fieldworker, and she was here to see about a girl named Virgie.

After a brief hearing and cursory medical examination, Judge Charles D. Shackelford had ordered her to be delivered to the superintendent of the Colony. “A defect in her genes makes her unusually promiscuous, unable to control herself, and prone to bear children out of wedlock without shame,” read the court order. “It has kept her—and her mother before her—from being productive, law-abiding citizens. It requires no prophet to predict her future. If she is not sent to the Colony for treatment, I can say

with all confidence that she will continue to follow down this same wonton path. The case is assigned to Mary Cedar...”

She sat up from her slouched position, smoothed the creases from the lap of her dress, and gathered her things.

Outside, it was beyond hot. The mid-summer air was still and heavy, and Mary Cedar could feel herself moving through it as she crossed the platform towards the old man standing in the shade of the building.

As she approached, she extended a hand in greeting. “You must be Mr. Mills.”

“Bumpus,” he corrected, and reached for her valise. “Do let me carry that for you.”

He was a wisened old man—knot-backed and nearly toothless, jaw moving, the bald top of his head sunburn red. He wore a pair of brown tweed trousers gone fringy at the cuffs and tottered unsteadily on long legs bowed at the knees.

Mary Cedar followed him out into the bright, macadamized street. The stationmaster, on his way back, doffed his hat and Bumpus nodded in reply. He loaded her valise into the back of the cart and helped her up into the seat. Then he gave the horse a light thrashing and they started off through the courthouse square.

On one corner stood a boarding house, which was where Mary Cedar would have preferred to stay, instead of with Mr. and Mrs. Bumpus Mills. But she had a checklist of expenses and this was not one of them. So lodging with the retired farmer and his wife had been arranged. They were said to be two of the area’s oldest and most knowledgeable residents.

Soon they passed out of town and into the countryside, which reminded Mary Cedar unpleasantly of home. She'd left there three months ago, and yet now here she was, back again. Or so it seemed. The resemblance was uncanny. You had your hilly fields and pastures of dead yellow grass. And then here and there a little old farmhouse and lonesome tree looking ready for lightning. People from around here might tell you to turn there. Up ahead, a rutted, red clay path led nowhere, and in the distance stood a horse and scarecrow which might perhaps be a man.

It took about an hour to get to the house. A rusted black cattle gate stood in the way of the entrance. Bumpus got down and unfastened the latch and they drove onto the property.

The house was set back from the road and a little above it. A lawn or field—the grass needed cutting—sloped up to the porch, where abandoned bird's nests were wedged in the scrolls and a shrivelled vine clutched at a rain pipe.

As they approached, an old woman appeared in the doorway. Her hair was brown and short, and it hung over her forehead and ears in thin, limp curls, like a boy's. She wore a white muslin dress, and despite the heat, she looked frail and cold, standing there holding her elbows.

"You must be Mary Cedar," she said as they stepped onto the porch, which was really nothing more than a dozen nailed-together planks.

"Yes, ma'am," Mary Cedar said, and shook her hand.

"Well, it's good to meet you. Come in."

Two chairs and a small table stood on a puncheon floor in the kitchen. Mrs. Mills dipped water from a dented metal bucket and offered it to Mary Cedar, who took it and said thank you. The windows in the kitchen had no glass. Bedsheets were nailed to the tops of them, rolled and pinned up to let the air in.

As Mary Cedar drank, she looked out beyond the tarred palings of the split-pole fence that bounded the property. In the bright distance stood a big brown tobacco barn and a field where a man and his draft horse plowed. As she watched, the farmer stopped, unlooped the reins from around his neck and removed the tandem strapped to his horse. Then he just stood there, wiping the sweat from his brow.

During supper, Bumpus spoke with unabashed pride of his interest in Revolutionary times. Mrs. Mills sighed. Otherwise, there was quite a bit of silence. Outside, the sky swirled with rain-purple clouds and the rising storm breeze sent the wind chimes singing and the well bucket tinkling against the narrow stone wellhead.

Mary Cedar said she'd been told that the two of them were well informed as to the history of the locality.

"Oh, yes," Bumpus said. "Not much has happened here that we haven't taken an active part in."

His shrewd old face livened with mirth. "You see that tree over there?"

He pointed to a big old maple near the vegetable garden.

"The day Mrs. Mills and I moved in here—what was it?"

Mrs. Mills coughed. "Sixty years ago."

“Sixty years ago, we planted that tree. It was a little sapling then, and now look what it’s become!”

Mary Cedar was appalled. She couldn’t believe she’d been condemned to spend the entirety of her visit with them.

“That’s amazing,” she said, working hard to hide her irritation. And then, before Bumpus could say anything more about the Revolutionary War: “So, you would know something about most of the old families here?”

“There’s not a single old resident we don’t know.”

“Do you know a family called Bledsoe?”

Mary Cedar had a checklist detailing which expenses would be paid, when appointments began, and the logistics she should follow when compiling data.

She spent the next two days gathering court documents and interviewing Virgie’s adoptive mothers. There were three of them: Mrs. Dillard, Mrs. Hinton, and Mrs. McDonough, all of whom had found Virgie impossible. The stories they told were helpful, but you needed the primary subject—the propositus. So on the third day Mary Cedar went to see Virgie.

The poorhouse stood on the outskirts of town, atop a bold, rocky ledge overlooking a valley of mountains. Inscribed in bronze lettering on a plaque nailed to a

post out front was the picturesque name Hard Scrabble. Carrying a scrapbook of field photographs, notes and postcards, Mary Cedar walked inside, where she introduced herself to the poorhouse director.

“Oh, yes,” the old woman said. “You must be the one here to see about the girl being sent to the Colony.”

“Yes.”

“Right this way.”

The main room of the poorhouse was long and hardwood. A few women were on their hands and knees scrubbing the floor with a bucket and brush and wash towels. Narrow iron bedsteads stood against the walls and an abundance of light came in through the tall, warped windows. The poorhouse director led Mary Cedar down the aisle between the rows of beds to a corner near the end of the room, where a young woman slept.

In a whisper she said, “This must be the first time I seen her asleep in days.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes, she’s quite a handful. Although you wouldn’t guess it by the looks of her. She sleeps so peacefully.”

“And I take it she’s not?”

The poorhouse director frowned. “No, she’s not. She’s just given birth—”

“How long?”

“Two days ago.” She paused, as if remembering. “The labor was long and miserable. And not just for her but for everyone involved. After that kind of ordeal you’d think a young woman would calm down and get some sleep, but not this one.”

For a moment they stood looking at her. She slept soundly in the narrow white bed. The single sheet rose and fell lightly.

“Perhaps you’d like me to wake her?”

“No, I think I’ll sit here and wait, if that’s okay. I’ve got some things I need to do.”

“Yes, yes. Of course.” She found Mary Cedar a chair. “Let me know if you need anything.”

“A glass of water would be nice.”

“Yes, of course.”

Mary Cedar sat down, opened her scrapbook, and withdrew an Individual Analysis Card. She crossed her legs, propped the scrapbook on her lap, and took out a pencil. Quietly, so as not to wake Virgie, she repositioned her chair to face the window, through which she could see the women scrubbing laundry and hanging it out to dry. Beyond stood the precipice and the valley of mountains. Save the sound of scrubbing and sloshing buckets, the poorhouse was silent.

Mary Cedar seemed to be contemplating the scene outside the window when the poorhouse director returned with her glass of water. But in actuality she was observing Virgie out the corner of her eye. She didn’t want it to be obvious when Virgie awoke and saw her.

She read from the Individual Analysis Card:

Attach a picture or pictures of the individual to this card—profile or full front views preferable. Label each picture with name, age, and date of taking. In addition, a short description of personal appearance—physiognomy, expression, carriage, etc.—should be written. State age at which description is applicable.

She would mail a picture and a postcard later. In the meantime, she didn't want to wake Virgie. As the director had pointed out, in repose, she looked so calm and quiet. And that wouldn't make for a good, convincing picture.

Virginie Lynn Bledsoe, she wrote. Looks to be about seventeen or eighteen years old, though her exact age is unknown. Will question her on this account until some consensus is reached. Of average size and weight. Exact measurements will be noted during physical examination upon commitment to the Colony. No peculiarity in form or size of head detected. Abdomen very prominent on account of having just given birth. Otherwise thin and pretty, with short black hair, dark complexion, and eyes spaced far apart beneath a broad forehead and small, slightly upturned nose. Frequently demonstrates jerking movements. Mouth slightly open. Frowzy. Hair stringy and matted and quite untidy...

“Who are you?”

Mary Cedar started, so absorbed was she in her description of Virgie. “Oh, hi. You're awake. I'm sorry.” She gathered her things about her lap. “My name is Mary Cedar.”

“Not your name. I mean, who are you?”

Her bottom lip dipped down to one side, revealing a set of crooked brown teeth.

Mary Cedar noted this.

“I’m here to ask you a few questions,” she said.

“I don’t wanna be asked any questions.”

So the director had been correct. As soon as Virgie woke, the tranquility left her face and was replaced by a hard, mean little grimace.

“I understand you’ve been through quite an ordeal.”

Virgie continued to frown, in dissatisfaction or defiance, it was hard to tell. Mouth slightly open with a stupid, staring expression demonstrating pain and grief, Mary Cedar mentally wrote.

She shifted in her chair. “Well, how about we start with a few basic questions?”

“Like I say—”

“I won’t bother you with anything difficult.”

“—no questions, no matter what kind they are.”

“Well okay then. I understand. Would you like anything?”

“I’m thirsty.”

“Yes, of course. Let me get you a glass of water.”

When she returned she said, “You know, answering even the most basic questions beats going back to work. You could lay in bed with your water, whereas...” She indicated outside the window, where the women were still scrubbing and hanging clothes on the line. “That’s your other option. And let me assure you, it’s quite hot out there.”

“I’d just as soon work.”

“Well okay then.” Mary Cedar stood up. “Suit yourself.”

She gathered her things and left. On her way out the door, the poorhouse director stopped her.

“You get what you needed?”

“Oh, you know. She’s very unwilling.”

The old woman glowered. “We can fix that.”

The next day Mary Cedar found Virgie more willing to talk. She regretted what she’d said to the poorhouse director, but it couldn’t be helped.

She sat in a chair next to the bed and read from the instructions at the top of the form: “If this study is to be of any value, all statements concerning both good and bad traits must be frank and fair.”

“What kinds of questions are these?”

“Do you agree?”

“To what?”

“One-hundred percent honesty.”

“When have I not been honest?”

She sat propped up against the headboard of the bed.

“Okay, we’re gonna start with you. You were born here, in Big Woods?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re not married?”

She gave a bitter laugh. “No.”

Mary Cedar cleared her throat. “On your guardianship papers it mentions—”

“I’ve already been over this.”

“Well, what year were you born in?”

“I can’t remember.”

“You can’t remember, or you don’t know?”

Virgie didn’t answer.

“Do you understand the question?”

“Yes. I don’t know.”

Mary Cedar narrowed her eyes and sighed.

“About seventeen?” she guessed, and Virgie nodded, as if to say, sure, that’s okay.

Mary Cedar noted this on her chart and turned her attention to the next set of questions.

“Okay, your parents now.”

“I don’t know anything about them.”

“Well, you must know something.”

Which was like her father asking her after school: “What’d you learn?”

“Nothing.”

“Well, you must have learned something.”

Virgie shook her head.

“Nothing?”

“No.”

Mary Cedar flipped open the scrapbook. “Well, I for example know your father’s name was Frederick...”

“If you know so much, then why are you asking me?”

Mary Cedar set down her pencil. “Look, if you don’t—”

“How do you know my father’s name?” Virgie interrupted.

“I have your parent’s marriage certificate.”

“Really?” Virgie’s face lit up. “Can I see it?”

“Yes, of course.”

Mary Cedar reached into the scrapbook and produced the document. She had gotten it from the courthouse the other day. For awhile, Virgie lay staring at it, her eyes moving. But there wasn’t that much to read. She was holding onto it to delay further questioning.

Mary Cedar said, “Margaret Ruth Bell and Frederick Buck Bledsoe are your parents’ names. They were married on September 17, 1896. You were born sometime later. We don’t know exactly when. There are a lot of holes, Virgie. What I’m asking is for you to help me fill them in.”

Virgie kept her eyes on the document. In monotone she said, “Like what?”

“Well, your father for example.”

“All I know is he ran away.”

“Do you know why?”

Virgie thought a moment. "I don't have but one memory of him."

She looked up. The light in her eyes had dimmed considerably.

"Go on," Mary Cedar said.

An image came to mind whenever Virgie thought of her father. And that image, she reckoned, was her father. Though she couldn't be sure. She had never known the man who was half her. Nor had her mother kept any pictures. All Virgie knew was what her mother told her. She never asked, but her mother always came around to it. Especially when she was drinking. And then she always said the same thing:

"Your father? Couldn't hold a job. Didn't work a day in his life."

But Virgie liked to think of the man she remembered as her father much more than she liked to remember her mother.

In the memory, her mother is nowhere to be seen. She is God knows where. Light peers in through the little round window by the stove, drowsy and reminiscent-like, and Virgie can see the little girl she once was and her father, too.

He is sitting on the stove over by the window; she is down on her hands and knees on the plankboard floor. A cigarette dwindles between his pinched fingertips while he watches her play with two little dolls. He points his cigarette finger at the towheaded little boy.

"You sure do like to spoil that one, don't you?"

And that's it. Real or not, that was the only living image Virgie had of her father.

Later he drowned in Lake Waverly. Mrs. Mills told Mary Cedar the story.

“They dragged him up from the bottom of the lake. It was an effort. Practically the whole town was out there, helping or else gawking. I know I was—helping, that is. When they got him up on shore, he was all big and bloated and white as a root. It was a sorry thing to see. Oh sure, he drank. At election time, he never failed to show up in somebody’s cast-off clothing, ready to vote, for the price of a drink, the donor’s ticket. But he was never a public nuisance. Never hurt nobody but himself.”

Bumpus Mills chimed in: “Many’s the time I seen him roll off Billy Parson’s porch. Billy always kept a barrel of cider handy, and he’d just chuckle to see old Frederick drink and drink until finally he’d lose his balance and over he’d go.”

Mrs. Mills asked, “And didn’t he stab his eye out?”

“Oh yes,” Bumpus said. “He was hungover. Doin’ somebody a favor—I can’t remember who—but the screwdriver slipped loose and stabbed his eye out.”

“Yes,” Mrs. Mills said. “He had an appetite for strong drink. But his wasn’t nothing compared to Old Moll’s. That’s what she was called. Old Moll.”

“That and Old Horror,” Bumpus said.

Mrs. Mills looked at him. “I don’t recall ever hearing that one...” She considered it. “Well anyway, it’s said that not even the devil himself could’ve lived with her. Maybe that’s why Frederick run off. He got wind that Old Moll was running around on him and that drove him away. A couple days later he turned up at the bottom of Lake Waverly. Nobody knows if he drowned himself or just fell over. Like I say, he had an appetite for strong drink. He and Old Moll both. But Old Moll’s was stronger.”

*

The next set of questions asked for information about the subject's mother.

If dead, give cause, date (or year) and place of death.

It occurred to Mary Cedar that she couldn't answer these questions about her own mother.

"What do you want to know?" Virgie asked.

"Oh, I don't know. Whatever you're willing to tell me."

"Well, she drank a lot. She would come home full of liquor and usually there would be someone along with her. She brought home as much as five gallons of it at a time and left it at the back door. You always had to step over it if you wanted to get out back to the pitcher pump."

"What else?"

"That's about it. She was always drinking."

"What about work? Did she have any sort of employment?"

"No. All she did was drink."

"Did she have any other vices?"

Virgie looked puzzled.

"Aside from drinking," Mary Cedar clarified, "did she have any other bad habits?"

"Well, she put needles in her arms."

Mary Cedar stopped writing and looked up at Virgie.

“Is she still alive?”

Virgie didn't answer.

“When was the last time you saw your mother?”

Still nothing.

Mary Cedar waited a moment. “You know, I can always get this sort of information from someone else. I just figured it'd be bet—”

“I don't know.”

“You don't know what?”

“Whether she's alive or dead.”

“How long has it been since you last saw her?”

“I don't know. Years.”

Virgie turned to face the wall.

“I guess things weren't too good between you and your mother?”

A long silence.

Then: “I'd rather work than answer these stupid questions.”

So, she'd struck a nerve. Be persistent, Mary Cedar told herself, remembering the Qualities Desired in a Eugenic Fieldworker.

“I imagine you must miss your daughter very much,” she said after a moment.

And when Virgie didn't answer: “You know, furloughs are granted. If you're well behaved and cooperative, you can leave the Colony and visit your daughter.”

“Mrs. McDonough won't allow that.”

“Why not?”

“Because...” Her voice trembled. “She hates me.”

“I doubt that.”

Virgie turned on her with tears in her eyes. “You don’t know anything, Mary. Mrs. McDonough told me I was a shame on her and the whole rest of the family and that I was never to come near her house again or else she’d call the police on me. And now she has my daughter...”

She began to cry then—but only for a moment. Just as quickly the tears disappeared from her eyes and she wiped the wetness from her cheeks.

This sudden change struck Mary. It was as though Virgie had complete control over the well of her emotions and could at any moment tap into them.

Mary Cedar said, “You know, Mrs. McDonough isn’t the law. The child is yours. She might be the adoptive...” She hesitated, searching for a word more palliative than mother. “She might be the child’s temporary guardian, but that’s doesn’t mean she can stop you from seeing your child if you’ve been given permission by the Colony superintendent.”

This wasn’t entirely untrue. Mary Cedar had heard of this happening somewhere, in some cases. But assuming it might also be the policy at the Colony and stating it as the truth was the measure of her lie.

She redirected conversation. “You know, it occurs to me, here I am, talking about your daughter, and I don’t even know her name.”

“Vivian,” Virgie said reluctantly.

Mary Cedar smiled. “That’s a beautiful name.”

A moment passed.

Virgie asked, “How long would it be before I was given...”

“A furlough?”

“Yes, a furlough.”

“Well, that depends...”

“On how cooperative I am.”

“Yes,” Mary Cedar said.

Virgie sighed. “Okay, what do you want to know?”

Mary Cedar perked up in her chair. “Your mother. Tell me about your mother.”

III

Old Moll was a tall, angular woman. An intimidating silhouette in the bright sunlight.

In Virgie's earliest memory, they are on their way into town to sell berries.

"Or maybe it was soap," Virgie said. "We sold both."

Outside the small stairless dwellings that lined either side of the dirt-rutted road sat men on apple crates or else in rockers on derelict porches. Virgie didn't have to look up to know they were there. They were always there, no matter what time of day it was.

She heard them holler at her mother. "Here comes Old Moll," they'd say and turn their heads in her direction. The women, squatted over buckets of wash clothes, whispered things between them.

"I could hear them," Virgie said. "Not what they were saying, but I understood the gist of it."

It embarrassed her. She didn't want to be recognized. Not that she thought ill of her mother. At least not then. She was her mother and she loved her. But she couldn't stand all them eyeballing her like she was some kind of loose woman when she wasn't.

And so she kept her head bowed. In fact, her whole childhood seemed to be one dizzy memory of her staring down at the ground. She remembered the plankboard floor, the dusty dirt road. The adults were nothing but a bunch of shadows at her periphery.

Of the walks into town, she remembered her mother's large feet. You only remember that sort of thing if you're staring down at the ground.

But then again, everything about her mother was large.

"She was built more like a man than a woman. She always wore the same filthy dress, heavy boots, and a large sunbonnet," Virgie said.

And then all of the sudden one day she just left.

Before she left she warned Virgie.

"Now don't you go running your mouth," she said. "There's people just a waitin' to take you away from me. You mark my words, girl. They'll put you there in that poorhouse if you go round saying things about me being gone on the weekends."

"Where are you going?" Virgie asked.

"A lube job," slurred the man with her.

Her mother near about fell over laughing at that one. And then the two of them went stumbling out the door, tripping over themselves on the plankboard floor.

Not that this worried Virgie. This was far from the first time her mother had grown a wild hair and disappeared with a man come over. But she always returned on Monday. So when Tuesday passed and then Wednesday came and went she decided she'd might as well stop waiting. She'd be home, rest assured. Anytime now she'd come tumbling through that door. But in the meantime she figured she'd best find something to do with herself.

Like always in the past she'd already done the cleaning—cleared the room of all the stinking empties, swept up the stray tabacki.

That's what her mother called it, tabacki.

She'd washed the dishes and hung the clothes out on the line to dry.

So what now was there to do?

She could go to school, but she didn't want to. She'd just as soon go live at the poorhouse with all the other poor abandoned children than go back to that prison. But then again, the thought of spending another day at the house alone was like a prison, too.

In the next yard over a horse sighed. All her life, as far back as she could remember, that had been the one constant thing. The next door neighbors had a horse, and all day long he stood on that same postage stamp of land, from time to time stamping his feet and blubbering his old spotted lips. Through the stovepipe next to her bed she could hear him clearly.

“I don't know how much time passed,” she said. “A couple days, a week maybe. I lost count of them.”

But one day she heard some knocking on the door and when she went and opened it she saw a woman standing there. This was Mrs. Dillard. She was dressed in her Sunday best and wore a peacock feather hat. Like all the women Virgie later went to live with, she was deeply involved in charity. At the time she was distributing alms for The Least of These, a organization that coordinated with the Overseers of the Poor.

She peered into the squalid little house, which was no bigger than a fishing shack.

“Doesn’t look like anyone’s home...”

“No.”

“You live here alone?”

“No.”

“Then who do you live with?”

(Of course, she already knew the answer to this. Old Moll was a notorious figure and had for years been on the list of recipients for out-of-door aid.)

“My mother,” Virgie said.

Mrs. Dillard poked her head further in the door. “Is she in there?”

“No.”

“Well then, where’s she at?”

Virgie remembered what her mother told her. She didn’t answer.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Dillard stood in the road. She was growing impatient. Chickens kept waddling up and pecking at her heels.

Finally she said, “How long have you been here alone?”

Again, Virgie didn’t answer. The truth was, she didn’t know. Also she was afraid. She thought for sure her worst fear was coming true. Seeing that her mother wasn’t home and that she was living here alone, Mrs. Dillard was going to take her to the poorhouse.

She pushed open the door and stepped into the soot-dark room.

“Get your stuff,” she said.

“What?”

“I said, let’s get your stuff.”

“But—”

Mrs. Dillard wouldn’t have it. “No buts, young lady.”

“And so I went to live with the Dillards.”

“I can imagine you must have been pretty worried about your mother,” Mary Cedar said.

Virgie seemed to think about this.

“No,” she decided. “I just assumed she would come and get me. But then one day Mrs. Dillard told me she was dead and that was that.”

“Do you know whether or not that’s true?”

“It doesn’t make a difference.”

“Well, you know, I could find out that sort of thing. What happened to your mother, I mean.”

“It doesn’t matter to me.”

“I understand,” Mary Cedar said. “I was just offering.”

Pretty soon Mrs. Dillard had Virgie going to school.

“I did all right,” she said. “I got Bs and Cs. I wasn’t dumb. I don’t know if that’s what Mrs. Dillard told you...”

Mary Cedar didn't say anything. She waited for Virgie to continue.

"But I couldn't do deportment. That was my worst subject. We were taught to do all the things I didn't want to do. We learned to dance, were shown our knives and forks and other manners. I'd have much rather been outside, playing tag with the boys." She paused. "I remember one time, I don't know how it happened—I must have snuck out of class somehow—but I just started running—running, running, running. I ran until I was blue in the face and completely out of breath. Then they caught up with me and brought me back inside and gave me a whipping."

Yes, Mary Cedar had heard all about this. She'd been to visit Mrs. Dillard the day before and had been shown the school reports.

"Virgie sparks with a nervous energy," read one of them. "She doesn't seem to fit in with the other students, nor does she make an attempt to," said another. "She pulls on the girls' pigtails and knocks the books out of their hands. Teachers can barely handle her as she runs down the halls."

They sat in a sunny bay at the back of the kitchen.

"I tried to educate her," Mrs. Dillard said. "But it was difficult."

All she wanted to do was play with dolls and dogs. In fact, she loved dolls and dogs so much that she would make believe they were real babies.

"No harm in that," Mary Cedar said.

"No..." Mrs. Dillard agreed.

But the trouble was, she never seemed to outgrow these childish fancies. In fact, she liked nothing more than dolls and dogs. At times, she would tear perfectly good

clothes to make doll's dresses. And then there was the incident with the next door neighbor's dogs.

Mrs. Dillard was in the kitchen when she heard Virgie scream. She ran to the back door, thinking something terrible had happened.

Virgie was standing in the side yard with her mouth open. The two dogs were attacking each other. They were grunting and howling and kicking up grass and dirt and going crazy in a way she'd never seen before. Except they also seemed to be hugging.

It took Mrs. Dillard a minute to understand, but when she did, she was appalled. She threw open the back door and tore across the yard. She started shouting at the dogs. But they were caught up in the act and refused to part. So in the end she had to separate them.

The two dogs looked angry. Their eyes were rolled back in their heads and they were howling and baring teeth. Virgie was scared for Mrs. Dillard. She thought one of the dogs was going to rear back and bite her. But she managed to pry the two apart, and then they just stood there, cowering.

Afterwards, when they were back in the kitchen, Mrs. Dillard said, "Don't ever do that."

"What?"

"What those two dogs were doing."

"Why?"

"You'll get stuck together."

"But I would like to get stuck together," Virgie said.

Of course, the point was lost altogether.

By the time Virgie was in the sixth grade, she looked much older than the girls she went to school with.

“And that’s probably cause I was,” she said, sitting back in bed.

She seemed more relaxed now. She stared straight ahead as she recalled these stories, spinning one off the other. From time to time Mary Cedar wrote a few notes, but mostly she kept her head down and listened. She didn’t want to spook Virgie and bring momentum to a halt. Save the occasional clarifying question or remark, she kept her mouth shut and thought her own thoughts.

But every so often she couldn’t help but look up at Virgie, and in these glimpses she saw that not only was Virgie pretty, but also that she was not a girl.

She was a woman—her own age or perhaps even older.

Virgie was still talking.

“Mrs. Dillard just sent me to school and the teachers told me what grade I was in. But already I was much taller and, you know, fuller of figure than the rest of the girls. They didn’t like me very much,” she said after a moment. And then, with an edge of satisfaction: “But of course the boys did.”

Pretty soon she was sneaking down to the creek to fish and swim with them, despite the fact that Mrs. Dillard strictly forbid her.

“You’ll get worms in your bottom!” she cried.

But everything was basically fine until the spring of that year, when Virgie did something unthinkable.

Mary Cedar got the story from Mrs. Dillard and then again from Virgie. Together the two formed a cohesive picture.

Virgie was on the way home from school. This took her through a quiet neighborhood of two and three-story homes, each with a manicured yard and wraparound porch. Spindly trees stood in front of them, newly planted and not far from the curb.

It was a favorite pastime of hers. She liked to walk through town just to look at the houses. And she walked slowly, as though she belonged, here where the wind blew as though the road was a tunnel with a fan at the end of it and the season said its name.

Spring was on its way and she breathed in the fresh smell of garden flowers.

Lost in thought, she continued to walk along, when up ahead a door slapped shut and re-echoed in the quiet street. When she looked up, she saw the yellowest house she'd ever seen.

The front yard was guarded by a small black garden gate. She went over it. Beds of orange and red chrysanthemums bordered the walk leading up to the porch, where a chair rocked lightly in the breeze, as though inhabited by an old ghost. Next to it was a bassinet with a baby sleeping in it.

Virgie stood staring into the house through the screen door. There was a tall front entrance foyer with dark wood flooring and a wide staircase of carved banisters and white

railing that curved up to the second story. To the left was the lighted dining room with its long polished table, doily-print placemats, and silver candelabra. Bookcases lined the burgundy walls of the room and the sharp spring sunlight shone in on the sideboard with its gleaming tray of amber decanters. Beyond this was a doorless archway that opened into the kitchen, where a maid stood half-turned from Virgie and stirring a pot of something on the stove.

Tendrils of steam streaming out after her, she hummed; and this hum, a hymn maybe, was like a dream of that tree-lined street, light in the leaves, fresh-poured sidewalk, porches, pillars. And what come over her, she didn't know, but suddenly she had the baby in her arms and was walking away as casually as she'd come.

On the way back, she took a route through the woods she knew—the Big Woods—where on any other day she would have spent time meandering alongside the creeks and streams her mother had panned for gold in. (All she ever turned up was mica, the glittery scales of which she mistook for treasure.) But today, Virgie wanted to get back to Mrs. Dillard's as quickly as possible, so she hurried along without stopping.

Mrs. Dillard was downstairs in the kitchen when she got there—she could see her through the sidelights in the front door—so instead she went around to the cellar, where a fresh laundry smell lingered in the air.

She set the baby down on the grass, opened the coal shoot, and crawled inside. Then quickly and quietly she pulled a chair over and reached for the baby outside the window.

Once she had him inside, she set him down on the stovetop. This was the first chance she'd had to look at him. He had a watermelon head—large and thick with the most precious red curls.

She bent over and smelled his hair. It smelled sweet, like that of maple syrup.

Meanwhile, she listened to Mrs. Dillard's footsteps, and when she heard the back door open and close and no more footstep echoes, she ran upstairs to her room, which was in the attic.

She set the baby down on the bed and went downstairs.

Mrs. Dillard was back in the kitchen, washing vegetables at the sink. Virgie tried to sneak past her, but even with her back turned, Mrs. Dillard still managed to see her.

"How was school?" she asked over her shoulder.

"It was fine."

"What did you do today?"

"Nothing."

"Well, surely you must have done something."

"No, ma'am," Virgie said and slunk into the pantry.

"Now don't you go ruining your appetite," Mrs. Dillard chided, her voice moving closer.

"Just a snack," Virgie said.

She grabbed the first thing she saw on the shelves—a jar of pickled okra—and slipped it into the pocket of her dress. Then she left the pantry and told Mrs. Dillard she was going upstairs to do her homework and maybe take a nap before dinner.

“That’s a good girl,” Mrs. Dillard said.

After much twisting and turning, she managed to free the lid of the jar. Then a strong vinegar smell filled the room.

“Whew,” Virgie said, and felt dizzy.

She sat down on the bed and held out the baby.

“We’ll have us some okri,” she said. “You like okri?”

That was her mother’s word for it—okri. She couldn’t say shrimp either; she always said swimp.

Virgie felt no warmth or longing recalling her mother. She felt only a cold emptiness.

She quickly shook away these intrusions of thought and focused on feeding the baby.

“There isn’t no telling what your name is, is there?”

The baby blinked. Otherwise he was silent, as if complicit.

“Well, I guess it doesn’t matter too much what your name used to be,” Virgie said. “Let’s think of something new to call you.”

And so it happened that at that instant the baby hiccuped and for whatever reason the name Pecope came to mind.

Pecope.

Why she named him that, she didn't know. She was a creature of impulse. But the moment she said it, she knew it would be his name.

"Pecope," she said, feeling the power of creation. "That's what we'll call you. Pecope."

She reached a finger into the jar and had a taste of the okra to make sure it was all right. And seeing that it was she scooped another mouthful from the jar and held it up for Pecope to eat.

His little nose, turned down like a beak, twitched as though he was giving it a sniff, and then he moved his head away.

"I know. I don't like it very much either," she said. "But it's all we got."

She thought maybe she'd risk going downstairs again to the pantry. But Mrs. Dillard would undoubtedly get suspicious. And there was no way she could sneak away with leftovers from the dinner table. Mrs. Dillard had the rouged, deep-set eyes of a witch. But they saw everything.

She moved the hand of okra closer.

"Come on, take some. It's good for you."

But he wouldn't have it.

So, cradling the back of his head, she gently as she could nudged him closer, and when finally he opened his mouth, she opened her mouth too, unconsciously mimicking what she wanted him to do.

"There we go," she said as he took his first bite.

But no sooner had she said this than he started to turn a dangerous purple.

“Swallow, swallow!” she cried and leapt up from the bed.

On the way up, his big round head lolled back on his neck, and with her free hand she instinctively caught it and thrust it forward. This thank God sent the lodged piece of okra tumbling out his mouth and onto the floor.

All was calm for a moment afterward. But then, as if remembering, his eyes grew suddenly big and watery and soon he started to cry.

“Oh, I know it was scary,” Virgie said and couldn’t help but squeeze him. All her panic had turned into relief, and she now felt an overwhelming surge of tenderness for him.

She bounced him up and down on the crook of her hip and kissed his temple, where a vein bulged beneath the purple-webbed baby skin.

“Shh, shh. You’re okay,” she said. “I promise, you’re okay.”

Thinking he might like to crawl around, she set him down on the ground. But he didn’t know how to crawl. And when she picked him back up, she noticed a splinter had gotten wedged in his little left index finger. It wasn’t deep and she pinched it out easily, but this just started him crying harder.

Unable to think, she carried him over to the bed, where he lay on his back convulsing in tears, his chunky short arms stretched upward, as though begging God of something.

“What, what, what?” Virgie hissed. “What is it?”

She didn’t like talking to him like this, but she was scared Mrs. Dillard would come upstairs.

And so, not knowing what better to do, she snuck downstairs to listen. In the attic there was a vent on the floor that carried heat upstairs. Also noises.

She could hear the baby crying—faintly, but growing louder every moment.

She started to panic. She needed something to soothe him, something to pacify him for the time being.

She was pacing between the dining room and the stairs when it came to her to maybe wet his lips with a drop or two of whiskey. Her mother said she’d done this when she was colicky.

“Honey,” she said when Virgie got huffy about all the drinking that went on, “I used to feed you whiskey all the time when you was a baby. A little whiskey never hurt nobody!”

But there was no liquor in the house. Mrs. Dillard was a member of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. The house was dry, and that’s how she wanted the county, the state—the whole country, for that matter.

Virgie was pacing back and forth on the rug when Mrs. Dillard came into the dining room, the little white ribbon pinned above her breast.

“What are you doing?”

“Looking for the scissors.”

For a moment Mrs. Dillard was silent. She stood in the door with her eyes raised.

“Do you know where they are?” Virgie quickly asked.

“No.”

(This was a lie. What kind of housewife doesn't know where the scissors are? But she didn't want Virgie cutting up anymore dresses, so she'd strictly forbid them.)

“Okay,” Virgie said, much to Mrs. Dillard's surprise. She'd expected at least some kind of resistance.

Virgie started towards the hall.

“Are you all right?” Mrs. Dillard called.

Virgie stopped on the stairs.

“Yes.”

Her voice sounded weak and hollow in her throat, and she had to repeat herself in order for deaf Mrs. Dillard to hear.

“Yes,” she said. “I'm fine.”

Standing on the stairs, the crying sounded even louder, as though it were resounding in a tunnel.

“You look a little upset,” Mrs. Dillard pressed.

“No, I'm not.”

There was a tense moment between them, and then Mrs. Dillard sighed and returned to the kitchen, where the vegetables were stewing over.

(to be continued)

BEST I REMEMBER

The doctors at Johns Hopkins Hospital paid Richard a dollar for each four-week-old baby rabbit he brought to the laboratory—big money when you're mowing yards for a nickel apiece.

On delivery mornings, he plucked the rabbits from the hutch in the dirt-rutted back alley and enclosed them in a cardboard box, the top of which he perforated with a kitchen knife; then he walked the several blocks to the corner where the streetcar stopped, and waited in the dappled shade of the maple trees that reached over Pilgrim Road.

But on this morning, when Richard went out into the back alley, he didn't find the rabbits asleep, as he usually did. Instead, they were all huddled over in one corner, their wet noses sniffing mournfully about.

Upon hearing his footsteps, their long ears perked and their heads jerked. Then they all scattered into separate corners, and Richard saw that it was Shelby they'd been gathered around.

Shelby was the one his sister had taken in and given a name, the one she'd domesticated. This had lasted a couple months, until finally Richard had grown sick of the acrid, rotted-vegetable smell of rabbit droppings and insisted that Shelby be returned back outside, to the hutch, where she belonged, with all the other rabbits.

Except of course Shelby wasn't like the other rabbits. She was his sister's favorite, and he had promised never to take her to the hospital.

But now she looked sick. She lay on her side in a corner of the hutch, and her beady little eyes, once darting, were now still and clouded, and dark as river pebbles.

Richard lifted the lid of the hutch and reached inside.

"Shelby," he said, trying his best to make his voice sound as smooth and natural as possible, the way he'd heard Gertrude address her around the house.

But as his hand moved closer, she snapped her mouth in his direction. And then her body began to quiver and jerk. That was her instinct, she tried to hop away. Except her hind legs wouldn't cooperate. They just squirmed lifelessly about the soiled newspaper. And it was then that Richard realized she'd lost the ability to use them. They were paralyzed. Which meant she was done for. There was nothing he could do but take her out of her misery.

As Richard stood there considering the best course of action, he heard the screen door slap shut behind him. And then Gertrude appeared at his side.

Seeing Shelby, she began to cry. "Is she dead, is she dead!"

Her heavy, panicked breath smoked the air.

"No, she's not dead," Richard said. "It's all right." And gesturing towards the screen door: "Go back inside."

"No!" Gertrude yelled, and stamped her feet in the dirt. Her cheeks were red and puffy, and her face was ugly, all twisted up and pulled over to one corner.

She looked on the verge of having one of her fits. Like the one she'd had the other night, when she started beating the table with her fists. Her eyes were thrown back in her head then, and she groaned and gargled on her own drool until finally she lost consciousness and collapsed onto the floor.

Richard remembered the table, the plates, the bowl of beans they were eating—all of it trembled.

He looked around. It was a little after six; lights were coming on in the neighboring windows. He couldn't have Gertrude causing a scene.

“Okay then,” he said. “If you insist on staying, then at least make yourself useful. Go and get me the shovel.”

“What?”

“The shovel.” He jabbed his index finger in the direction of the garage, which stood a little ways away.

She returned moments later.

“What're you gonna do?” she asked.

When Richard chose to ignore this, she asked again.

“I'm gonna pick her up, that's what,” Richard huffed.

“But why?”

Richard nearly lost his temper. He was more upset than he cared to admit. But he kept his cool. His voice was calm and steady as he said, “Gertrude, Shelby's sick. She needs our help. That means I need you to calm down, stop asking questions, and just listen to me.”

What he didn't say was that it was her fault, that Shelby's brief domestication, coupled with her sudden return to the hutch, had resulted in a fatal condition.

He took the shovel from Gertrude and gently lifted Shelby out of the hutch. Then he slid her into the cardboard box at his feet.

"Wait here," he said.

"But where're you—?"

He shot Gertrude a look and her voice dropped off.

When he returned, he was pleased to see Gertrude still there, holding the box.

"All right, follow me," he said, and together they set off towards the garage.

Gertrude carried the box with the solemn air of a pallbearer.

"You can put her down there," Richard said, and pointed to a spot near the entrance to the garage.

Producing a set of keys, he took Gertrude by the arm and led her around to the front of the car.

He opened the driver's side door.

"Let's get you settled in."

"Me?"

"Yes, you."

He nudged Gertrude into the front seat and shut the door behind her.

"Now don't you get out until I tell you to."

He waited to make sure she understood and then went on.

“When I call out for you to crank the car, turn the key in the ignition. You know how to do that, right?”

“Yes.”

“If it doesn’t turn over, keep on trying until the engine comes on. And then just let it idle.”

He stopped and looked her in the eyes.

“But whatever you do, don’t put the car in gear. You’ll run me and Shelby over. You got that?”

She nodded.

“All right,” Richard said, and tapped the hood of the Plymouth.

With Gertrude firmly established in the front seat, Richard moved quickly. Kneeling out of sight behind the bumper, he cut a small hole in the side of the box. Then he looked at Shelby.

She was crouched in a corner of the box. The light inside was dim, but he could see that she was shaking. Softly, he said her name, but she didn’t react. She stared straight ahead with her eyes wide open.

Richard brought the hole in the box up to the end of the tail pipe.

“All right,” he called to Gertrude. “Crank it.”

And without a fight, the engine roared to life.

*

A blinding circle of light poured into the box. Shelby tried to cry out but the corona vanished almost as soon as it had appeared, and in its place a dark hole groped towards her.

It roared and fumed but Shelby was not frightened. She grew sick with happiness. This was a presence from long ago. This hole was something she knew, something from a dream, although she had never seen it.

As she breathed, it breathed, and its warm air smothered her like another layer of fur. Her legs beat violently against the cardboard box, but she did not control them anymore and Richard tried not to listen.

Only fleetingly had his thoughts ever turned to the slaughter that awaited the rabbits at the hospital. Having been injected with a woman's urine, they were then surgically opened and their ovaries examined to test for pregnancy.

But Richard didn't dwell on this. Already his animal brain had raised its walls in self-defense—bulwarks to protect the fortress, the fallacy, of his own immortality.

Later on that night, when Gertrude began to cry, he told her that Shelby hadn't died, that in fact she'd been sent to live with all her rabbit friends on a great big heavenly farm.

“Yes,” he said when he saw that she understood. “Just like the farm that Mom and Pop live on.”

THE SICKLING

Soon after Richard was born at Union Memorial, a nurse entered the room looking run down and flocked around, and as she handed Dick and Nancy their wailing son she said, "Have a nice life."

These words proved prophetic. Richard was a painful, difficult child.

All night he screamed and cried, and as soon as he learned to walk he started doing destructive things around the house. Like the time he took an electric iron and burned holes in the kitchen linoleum. Or when he swallowed a capful of Drano and had to be taken to the hospital to have his stomach pumped. This was for the second time in three years. The first time was after he got into some of Nancy's quaaludes. "Enough to tranquilize an elephant," joked the doctor once the emergency was over.

On the drive home Nancy sat with Richard in her lap, his arms wrapped slack around her neck, his attractive blond head thrown over her shoulder.

"Yes, I was asleep!" she cried. "So there—go ahead, crucify me!"

"Nancy... No one's trying to crucify you..."

But she was inconsolable.

"I can't take my eyes off him for a minute—not one single minute—without something terrible happening! I can't even go to the bathroom..."

And she was right. You couldn't even go to the bathroom without having to carry him in there with you. He was hyperactive—a new term then, in 1950.

Every morning he was up at the crack of dawn. And either he was out the door playing at the playground or else he was going absolutely crazy—running from one end of the house to the other, literally bouncing off the walls. At night Dick had to tie a piece of string (some of Nancy's unused sewing thread) to his left index finger and attach it to Richard's right foot—that way, if he so much as moved, much less tried to leave the room, he'd be the first to know about it.

And then one night Dick came home and the house was silent. And this was so disquieting that he would have called upstairs to make sure everything was all right, had it not been for the fact that Leonard and Caroline occupied the first floor, and he liked to sneak upstairs without them seeing him.

Leonard was their landlord, Caroline was his wife. Bagooki something or another was their last name. And though Leonard was a deaf-mute, Dick always felt that somehow he could hear him. In fact, on Friday nights, when Nancy's in-laws came over to play cards and things got too loud upstairs, with all the drinking and cussing and carrying on, Leonard would sometimes take a broomstick and bang on the ceiling. And once, when Dick was drunk, he'd gotten down on the floor and tapped back, just to let Leonard know they'd heard him.

He could imagine Caroline downstairs, in their bedroom, translating the sounds and words to him.

And so, standing inside the front hall, he unlaced and removed his shoes, which were wet with grass. Then he took off his hat and treed his coat and went up the narrow staircase to their apartment on the second floor.

Nancy was sitting at the kitchen table. Outside, the rain was falling. She started when she heard Dick coming across the landing and quickly turned in her chair. Her skin was nighttime white, her cheeks pink with pillow creases, her hair slightly tangled, as though she had just woken up. And in fact she had. She was still wearing her droopy blue nightgown.

Dick stood brushing raindrops from his face. "Where's Richard?"

"Asleep."

Asleep?

Dick could hardly believe it. For the life of him he couldn't get Richard to go to sleep at night. "All right," he'd say and push his chair away from the dinner table. "Time to hit it."

And you wouldn't believe the screaming and crying, the carrying on.

"But I donewannahidit!" he'd sob, hot tears of misery and grief streaming down his face as Dick carried him down the hall to their bedroom.

"How'd you do it?" he asked Nancy.

"He's been asleep all day."

And then: "You think there might be something wrong with him?"

“What do you mean?”

“Well, he hasn’t been wetting his diaper like usual. And then, you know, he’s been asleep all day. That’s not like him.”

And it wasn’t. So while Nancy got dinner started, Dick went to their bedroom to check up on him. He turned Richard over and felt outside his diaper. It was dry. So he took it off and held it up close to his eyes. The room was ill-lit but even in the half-light he could see a faint yellow stain. Just to make sure he gave it a sniff. There was urine. He could smell it.

Back in the kitchen he told Nancy, “There’s nothing wrong with him.”

“You don’t think so?”

“No, he’s fine. He doesn’t have a fever, he isn’t throwing up...”

“But what about his diaper?”

“He’s peeing.”

And so it seemed Richard had turned over a new leaf. Day after day he slept until late in the morning, and he was asleep again by the time that Dick got home in the evening. And not only that. When he was awake, he didn’t scream, he didn’t cry. He was calm, quiet—docile, even.

All this came as something of a relief to Dick and Nancy. Richard had been an unremitting nightmare since the day the nurse handed him over. But then all of the

sudden one morning Dick couldn't get a pair of shoes on his feet—shoes that had fit just fine the day before.

He went over and drew the curtains on the window. The shoes were brand new, kid leather; he was looking for a manufacturer's error. But he couldn't find anything wrong with them, and when he returned to Richard's bed he saw that in actuality this had nothing to do with it. Richard's two little feet were swollen. They looked like—like uncooked dough. And squishy. The depressions were slow to rise when you pressed on his toes.

Nancy groaned and rolled over in bed.

“What's wrong?” she asked, and Dick said, “Do Richard's feet look swollen to you?”

They quickly dressed and drove to the doctor.

The office was in a house made of concrete blocks, gray as any tombstone. When they got there all the windows were unlighted and the street was empty. But nevertheless they carried Richard across the humped yard and knocked and rang on the bell until finally a light came on in the upstairs window. Then there was some noise in the hall and a man wearing pajamas opened the door.

“We must have the wrong address.”

“You looking for Dr. Gordy?”

“Yes,” Dick said. “It's terribly important. It's an emergency.”

“Come in...”

He led them into the parlor, went upstairs, and when he returned he was Dr. Gordy.

“So,” he said, sitting down on the sofa, “what seems to be the trouble?”

He sat back with a clipboard in his lap as Nancy explained the situation. From time to time he wrote a few notes on the clawed file card. Meanwhile, Dick smoked one cigarette after another, depositing them in the stand between the two chairs. The smoke writhed in the sunstriped air. Every couple minutes he reached into his shirt pocket and lit another. Otherwise he kept his mouth shut. He was too ashamed to answer the doctor’s questions. How could he—how could anyone—have missed all these symptoms?

“So it’s the feet, you say?”

“Yes.”

“And he hasn’t been peeing?”

“No. He hasn’t been wetting his diaper like usual.”

“How long has this been going on?”

“A couple of days—a week, maybe.”

Although it seemed as though it had happened overnight. You see a person every day and you don’t notice how different they look. But in hindsight, it was painfully obvious.

The swelling in his feet was edema. Tests were run, blood and urine were sampled, and in the end he was diagnosed with nephrosis—a kidney disease that leaves little chance for recovery.

As time passed, his condition worsened. His stomach ballooned with abdominal fluid. His face turned nearly as pale as his pillow. And his skin became almost translucent, as though there were a layer of water trapped beneath it. Which in a sense was true. Richard had literally been drowning in his own urine.

They were not allowed to pick him up, much less hold him, something Dick felt no inclination to do in the first place. In fact, he was relieved to hear the doctor expressly forbid it. He hated to admit it—and he never did, not to anyone but himself—but the sight of his deformed child made him sick. He couldn't help it. Every time they went to visit him, he found himself shuttering at the sight of Richard's swollen flesh, and he had to resist the urge to squeeze him till he burst, till all the excess fluid drained out of him.

Of course, he felt guilty for thinking this. But he wanted to take Richard out of his misery. He felt sorry for bringing him into this world—for what, only to die, and all before the age of five?

He wanted to apologize.

In order to help pay the hospital bills, Dick took on a second job, selling reference books door-to-door for Sears Roebuck. And though he hated the job and its consistent,

embarrassing failure—you hardly ever sold a set—he found himself staying out later and later, simply to avoid returning home.

During these nighttime strolls, he often remembered his childhood. The neighborhoods he walked through were much the same as the one where he'd grown up. The houses were FHA bungalows—small and two-storied and made of gray asbestos shingle that reminded him of owl feathering. Each had a small plot of grass out front, green in the spring, dead in the summer, plastered with damp yellow leaves in the fall, and covered in drifts of blue luminescent snow in the pale light of wintertime. An iron railing went up three or four rickety stairs onto a common entrance front porch, and underneath was a latticework crawlspace of weeds and pebbly dirt that had given him, as a kid, a secret place to play.

Would Richard make it to this age? Would he ever be healthy enough to play?

He blamed himself for all the symptoms he had missed. He'd thought maybe Richard was learning to hold it. Maybe he was gaining weight. But in actuality his little legs and feet were swelling. And if you looked closely, you could see beneath his eyes the faint blue of sickness.

What had he been thinking? How stupid—how blind—he had been!

And with all this work he was doing, he sometimes wondered: was he not just running?

II

Richard was so sick that Union Memorial called in Dr. Harriet White, the Chief of Pediatrics at Johns Hopkins, who was known for her ability to cure children with especially severe cases of nephrosis.

Every day after finishing her rounds she went to visit him. She imposed on him a strict diet of her own devising, and at least twice a week performed paracentesis, a procedure which involved the use of a needle about the size of a drinking straw. The fluid that should be passed off as urine backs up in the body tissue and has to be removed. And so, lowering the needle's tapered end into Richard's swollen belly, Dr. White drew forth the milky-looking substance and expressed it into a nearby container, which she then measured in cc's, to monitor kidney function, or lack thereof.

On the way to Union Memorial, she always stopped by a corner store called Snowden Rollins, where she bought a plastic-wrapped tray of ground beef, eggs, a quart of fresh-squeezed orange juice, and a block of yellow American cheese. This she pureed together in a blender and fed to Richard, as a part of his special, high-protein diet. And at the hospital, she never forgot to stop by the lavatory and thoroughly sanitize her hands, scrubbing them with soap and rinsing them under scalding hot water, until they were red and raw-looking. Then and only then did she put on the teal-green surgical mask and powdery latex gloves and enter the sick room.

Air-conditioning hadn't yet made it to Union Memorial, as it had Johns Hopkins, an inconvenience that didn't bother Dr. White.

She was a cold-natured woman.

But when she entered the sick room and saw the window open her anger suddenly flared.

She turned to the nurse on duty, whose hair was slicked back from her forehead with sweat. "Why is that window open?"

"We thought—"

"No."

The nurse went over and shut the window. But Dr. White was unable to control her anger. "That is not fresh air!" she yelled, pointing to the window, beyond which stood a string of low-rent row homes. "That is dirty, contaminated, summer air! Keep the window closed!"

The nurse apologized and quickly fled the room.

After she had calmed down, she took out the paracentesis needle, prepped it, and said, "Time to get tapped!"—a phrase that usually made Richard squirm with excitement. But when she drew back the curtain that separated his area from the other children's, she saw that his bed was empty, the sheets starch-white and uncreased.

She summoned Dr. Elsie.

"Where's Richard?"

Dr. Elsie looked confused. "It was his last day. I thought you knew that."

“No, I didn’t.” And then: “What?”

She removed the mask from her face. Her expression was one of disgust.

“No, I didn’t know this. Why was he discharged?”

“The insurance ran out and his parents could no longer—”

“The insurance ran out...” Dr. White mocked. “So the insurance runs out and like that you’re beating a path to get rid of him? Henry, need I remind you—this child could die!”

“Look, Harriet, it’s not my choice. The insurance ran out and the business office called. I have no control over this. Absolutely none. I’d do something if I could. But I can’t. I’ve done all I can.”

Dr. White could hardly sleep that night. What with the massive doses of cortisone already lowering Richard’s resistance, she feared that some sort of infection would set in. So the next day she called Dick and introduced herself. She described how Richard had become a patient of hers and explained that since then she had developed a special interest in him. And then she invited Dick to come to her office at Johns Hopkins. He had work, he said, but she insisted. She said it was urgent. And so he went.

He had not been to Johns Hopkins since he was a boy, delivering baby rabbits to the research laboratory, where they were used for pregnancy testing. But that had not been long ago—ten years at most—and he still remembered his way around the corridors. Soon he found Dr. White’s office in the pediatric wing. He knocked and a voice told him

to come in. The office was ornate and orderly—papers and folders stacked neatly on the desk—and outside the window stood the Sears Roebuck he worked in the evenings for.

Dr. White sat overwhelmed in a burgundy leather chair. She was a short and thin, little wishbone of a woman, with long gray hair that fell about her waist. But as soon as Dick saw her he understood why she held such a position. Her face was grave and uncompromising, as though she was used to having her conditions met, and her eyes had an alert, determined look. She smiled but didn't waste any time. Immediately after they'd greeted one another she brought forth the reason for his visit.

“Last night I learned that Richard was sent home...”

“Yes,” Dick said and explained that his insurance had run out and he could no longer afford treatment. He'd come in the night before, he said, and settled the bill in blood. He and a couple of his co-workers, they'd donated at thirty-five dollars a pint, and Richard had been sent home—

Dr. White interrupted him. “I'm sorry. But do you know what this means?”

“Excuse me?”

“If Richard remains at home, he will die.”

At first Dick was angry and had to control the tone of his voice. But then Dr. White explained.

“Statistically speaking, about fifty percent of these cases are fatal. And that's in a hospital, where the conditions are antiseptic and you have around-the-clock care. And even then, it's not a perfect situation. All day, doctors and nurses—and during visiting hours, herds of family members—parade in and out of the room, carrying in more germs

than you can shake a stick at. Clean as your house may be..." And it wasn't clean. Unwashed dishes lingered on the kitchen counters, the waste basket was tall with trash. Nancy didn't so much as lift a finger, and he was gone most of the day. "No matter what, it's not clean enough for Richard. As I'm sure you know, the cortisone injections he's been receiving have resulted in a very compromised immune system. Even with the constant use of penicillin, if any sort of infection were to set in, even a cold, it could be fatal. The main things needed for the treatment of this disease are total isolation from germs and twenty-four hour care. And," she said, her voice dropping an octave, "I can offer you both."

III

The house on Regester Avenue was two-storied and red-brick and Dr. White was in the process of buying it. Her dream was to start a home for children suffering from the most severe cases of nephrosis, and she had engaged her friend and protege, the young nurse Beth Caldwell, to live in the house and work as a caretaker.

"She's already successfully treated one child," Dr. White explained as she showed Dick and Nancy around the house. "Although granted, Patty's case was not nearly so severe as Richard's. But he doesn't stand a chance at home. He'll be dead in a matter of weeks. He needs to get out of there, improvements can only be made in total isolation."

She showed them the bedroom where Richard would live. It was on the first floor and totally isolated from the rest of the house. "It even has its own separate A/C unit,"

she said. “You can pay me some nominal fee—whatever you were paying Union Memorial under the medical catastrophe policy—and I’ll take Richard in. All the medicine and food will be provided. And Nurse Caldwell will be here full-time to look after him. What do you think?”

Dick and Nancy were more than happy. Under Dr. White’s care, Richard had a comfortable home and a consistent routine. She stopped by every morning and then again in the evening, staying for as long as possible. Eighteen hour days were not at all uncommon for her. In the morning, she gave Richard a dose of cortisone and a shot of penicillin. She blended the eggs and cheese and orange juice and ground beef and fed him his breakfast. Then in the evening she read to him from A. A. Milne’s *Winnie the Pooh*. She read until he fell asleep. It rained and it rained and it rained. The Hundred Acre Woods were flooding. Tigger, Roo, and Owl were his special buddies.

At least two days a week she performed the paracentesis procedure, and in the evening Dick and Nancy came by to visit, always wearing the mask and gloves and gown that were required to enter the room. Though by this time Richard was nearly five, he could not speak. In addition to causing moon face and edema, the nephrosis (and the massive doses of cortisone) had stimulated a layer of hair growth on his tongue—a soft, fine, almost crystalline nimbus of fur, not unlike the kind one finds on a mushy fruit—thus numbing his speech.

But nevertheless, Dick and Nancy still felt they had a sense of Richard’s inner life. Every evening, they spent nearly two hours with him, and though he never spoke a word, they always left feeling as though they had just confided in someone close to them.

*

Dr. White did not live at the house on Regester Avenue. She lived alone in an apartment on the first floor of a clinker-brick building in downtown Baltimore.

A woman of relentless self-discipline, she woke without alarm at four-thirty in the morning, pulled the cord on the desk lamp beside her bed, and in less than forty-five minutes she was dressed and out the door.

It was just after six when she arrived at Regester Avenue. She parked and got out the car. But on this morning, she felt a strange sensation, as though she were lost or had somehow driven to the wrong house. The windows were unlighted. No one moved inside. Nor were there any voices.

She went up the stairs and opened the door.

Inside it was quiet. The front room was dim with the curtains drawn against the light. On the coffee table lay a few green surgical masks and it just so happened that a pair of latex gloves had fallen onto the floor. Dr. White bent over and picked them up.

Now normally on any other day like this she would have been greeted by Beth Caldwell. Hearing the front door open, Beth would appear in the kitchen archway, they'd say their greetings, and then Dr. White would join her in the kitchen, where she would wash her hands and blend together Richard's breakfast.

But something must have happened, because today the house was unearthly quiet.

"Hello?" Dr. White called. And then after a moment: "Beth?"

She stood in the gloom of the room and listened. But there was no sound save the ticking of the air conditioner.

Well, she must not be awake yet, thought Dr. White, all the while aware of how odd—how uncharacteristic—this was.

She went into the kitchen, washed her hands, blended Richard's breakfast, and then carried it down the hallway to the isolated bedroom.

"There's my handsome little boy," she said as she came around the side of Richard's bed.

Richard hardly acknowledged her, so lost was he in his own little world. He lay propped up on pillows against the headboard of the bed, preoccupied behind a pair of large, black-rimmed glasses—borrowed from Beth Caldwell, Dr. White assumed. His fingers, thick with abdominal fluid, fumbled as he tried to place the end of a stethoscope over the stomach of a toy monkey.

Removing a needle from the pocket of her coat, Dr. White said, "Time to get tapped," and Richard suddenly forgot his examination and raised his eyes.

They looked almost bovine behind the lens of the black-rimmed glasses.

Within minutes, his stomach, which beforehand had the strained appearance of an overripe berry, the skin stretched thin and almost transparent, like opaque tissue paper—within minutes, all of this had been diminished, and Richard lay deflated.

Tapped and fed, he fell asleep, and Dr. White, with a moment to spare, went upstairs.

In the hallway, she gave Beth's door a ceremonious knock.

“Hello?”

She knocked again, this time louder, and then went inside.

You don't forget certain details. They get trapped in your memory, still-frame almost, with a little motion, like a scene in a snowglobe. The room was streaked with light, submerged in shadow. On the nightstand stood a glass of untouched orange juice. The wood around the bottom was ringmarked white—a detail that would have upset Beth, so scrupulous was she about such things.

She was sitting up in bed. Her legs were stretched out in front of her and her hair was pulled back in a ponytail. As always, she was dressed very plainly, today wearing a wool tweed jacket, a blouse of some mute, indistinct color, and a knee-length skirt. But her body did not stir. She lay still under the bedclothes, her hands resting delicately on top.

Dr. White went over and checked her pulse. There was none. She sat down on the bed. She was shaking. Her bony little fingers quivered. Beth Caldwell was dead. Twenty-nine years old, eyes wide open, mouth slouched like an apoplectic's, the skin around her lips rimmed with what looked like sugar glaze but wasn't.

Dr. White didn't cry. In her profession and personal history she had seen many deaths. But this one shook her deeply.

After awhile, she went downstairs and called the police. And while she waited she went down the hall to the isolated bedroom, almost forgetting to put on the mask and gloves before she entered.

After Beth had been removed, Dr. White called Dick and Nancy and asked if there was any way they would consider moving into the house on Regester Avenue, to help with the “mortgage and maintenance,” as she put it.

They were more than happy to. The house on Regester Avenue was much nicer than the little apartment they were renting, and also there was the advantage of being near their son, even in isolation. So they moved into the upstairs bedroom, where Beth had died. Which was a bit off-putting, but they soon got used to it.

The first thing Dick did—with Dr. White’s approval—was install a plexiglass window in the door of the isolated bedroom. That way, he and Nancy could look into the room and see Richard without having to go through the grim ritual of putting on a mask and gloves and gown every time they wanted to check up on him.

Richard never got out of bed. He had lost his ability to walk. Whenever he so much as touched ground, a trembling took hold of his knees and he fell.

But is there no room for levity?

No rain on the way, no sky clouded gray?

It is a fine April day. Sprinklers twirl in the yards across the street, wind combs through the leaves of the trees.

Dr. White is at the house already. She is there much earlier than usual, her powder-blue Falcon parked under the shade of a tree.

Dick has just returned from work, and as he gets out of his car, he hears screams and shrieks and clapping hands. He doesn't know whether this is a good or bad sign, but he feels that something terrible has happened. He is by now accustomed to trouble. It is his predominant state of mind.

As he steps inside, the wind sucks the door shut behind him and Dr. White comes tumbling into the room, her eyes gleaming—with happiness or grief, he can't tell.

“Is everything okay?”

She stops midstride. “Go and see,” she says and hurries upstairs.

He does nothing hurriedly. His nerves are steady. He unlaces his shoes and trees his coat; and then slowly he crosses the front room and walks down the dark hallway towards the lighted bedroom window. When he gets there, he sees Richard in bed and Nancy sitting in a chair next to him. There seems to be nothing wrong with him, although Richard does look a bit confused, as though he doesn't know what's hit him.

Dick taps on the glass and when Nancy turns and sees him she abruptly stands and hurries towards the door. He can't read her expression because of the mask on her face, and the quickness of her pace doesn't tell him whether she is happy or anguished.

“What is it?” he asks as she closes the door behind her.

With quivering hands she removes the mask from over her mouth.

A weary smile. "Richard just wet the bed," she says. And then: "This thing is ruined."

She holds up Richard's record player. "He peed on it."

Dr. White enters the hallway then, carrying a bundle of Beth's old bedclothes. She slips the mask over her mouth and shuffles past them. And Dick can still remember, some sixty years later, Richard standing at the side of his bed, smiling as though he could get better.

A BUCKET, A SWITCH, A POND OF FROZEN FISH

As a kid you hear stories told over and over again. Like the time my sister and I mixed up a big bucket of sugar and vinegar on the kitchen floor and when my mom walked in and caught us doing it she started to cry.

At the time we couldn't have been much older than three, maybe four. Mom must have been next door, scrubbing or sewing for extra money. We did some pretty bad things when she was at the neighbor's doing housework.

I can't honestly say I remember the incident, but it's been told so many times I've got a mental picture of it. There's Mom, standing on the kitchen linoleum. Gertrude is sitting on the floor with the bucket between her knees. And then there's me, who I see as if in a dream, at once outside and within myself. I'm standing on a chair over by the kitchen counter, trying to reach into a cabinet for more ingredients.

"Look, Mom!" Gertrude says. "We're making a cake!"

It was Mom's birthday. We thought we were doing good. But this was a devastating loss. Back then, sugar and vinegar were worth a couple bucks, not to mention the cost of another trip to the country, where her parents had a farm. This was during the Depression, and she couldn't afford to just go out and buy some more.

Another time—one winter several years later—we started a fire in the basement, and when my father came home he sent me out back to pick a switch. I remember

standing at the edge of the yard, where the grass thinned into bramble and overgrowth, sorting through the various options. Some of them were broad, some of them were hard, some of them were soft and flexible, like cane, and some of them were flat, like a paddle.

This was perhaps the worst part of it—the decision-making. You couldn't do yourself a favor. God forbid the switch break. Then you'd have to go outside and get another. And that simply prolonged the punishment.

I don't remember Gertrude ever getting beat—for that incident or any other one like it. My father never hit the girls—neither Gertrude nor Eleanor, who was his favorite.

But later on, when Gertrude started to get acne, he did become verbally abusive. He'd say things like, "Why don't you go and take a shower," or, "Clean your face"—joking apparently. But this, she claimed, played a hand in her going crazy. She was sent to a sanatorium when she was fourteen or thereabouts, and she never was the same after that.

One more time I remember going to pick a switch. Again it was winter and I was trekking through the snow. I don't remember what I'd done to get in trouble. Maybe this was after the whole "Ethel/asshole" incident.

Ethel was a neighborhood girl we played after school with. Come evening, when it was time for her to go inside, her mother would stick her head out the door and yell, "Ethel!" And there was nothing special about this, except for the fact that she must have had a lisp or something, because it always sounded as though she was yelling, "Asshole!"

We all laughed about it. Even Ethel. But she must have gotten fed up and told her mother we were making fun of her, because I remember one day I got in trouble.

In any event, there I was, plodding through the snow towards the bramble and overgrowth, when all of the sudden I decided, to hell with this.

I stole down the back alley, past the chicken house and hutches I raised rabbits in, and ducked into the pine woods. The path was snow-covered and strewn with fallen limbs, but even now I could tell you all the old routes.

For instance, one went past the French teacher's house. Miss Lephart was her name. Years ago, I ran into an old classmate of mine, and he told me that Miss Lephart used to invite the boys over for French lessons. Or so she said. Instead she got them wine drunk and into bed.

She was built like a brick shithouse. But that has nothing to do with the story I'm telling. I mention it merely because I remember it.

Somehow I got lost in the woods, and when I came out I found myself in an unfamiliar yard. In the grass over by the fence was a small, round decorative pond, and as I went past it I saw something that made me stop.

The water was frozen solid, and trapped inside was a school of orange and silver fish. The scales of their fins and tails glinted brilliant in the sunlight, and that night, I got a whipping so severe I couldn't go to school the next day. My legs were all torn up and I was still wearing short pants then.

Gertrude called the other day. I was out back when my wife brought me the cordless.

“Who is it?” I asked.

“Your sister,” she said, and then turned and walked back towards the house.

I watched her pass under the patchy shade of the garden arbor, and then, needing a moment to cool and collect myself, I stood up and carried the cordless across the back patio and into the screened gazebo.

Now here is a playground of boyhood obsessions—a refuge in the twilight of life. Just inside stands an oak table where some nights my wife and I like to eat dinner by the light of a kerosene lamp. In a corner near the back of the room I’ve installed a cast-iron replica of the black-and-nickel furnace that piped heat up from the cellar through the hot air registers and into the freezing attic space where I slept as a boy. And on a bent nail beside the door hangs a mahogany brown rotary phone.

These are just a few examples. I could go on.

The inner dark was made darker by the fact that I’d left my prescription glasses inside, on the marble end table beside the recliner. I felt around for the carriage bench I’d recently transformed into a proper seat, and when I found it, I sat down, moving only to readjust the pain that gathered in my stomach, making everything feel grown together down there.

This has been going on for some time now—this secret, glandular pressure—but I have a knack for shrugging off disaster.

The cordless in my hand reminded me of this. I brought the phone up to my ear, expecting to hear wheezing. But I didn't hear a thing—just the whirring draft of the ceiling fan above me.

I said, "Hello?"

And with a rasp she said, "Hello."

"How are you?" I asked.

She had taken a tumble down the cellar stairs, she told me. One that had landed her in Union Memorial, the hospital in Baltimore where we'd both been born, not even a year apart, just eleven months and sixteen days.

There was a time when we had been inseparable. But that was years ago. Decades.

God how long it had been.

Over the years, I had allowed the comforts and demands of the unknowable future to banish whatever shadow the past cast over me. And that included Gertrude, with her real or imagined illness. My thinking had always been, "Sure, important connections were burned through, but you gave up, Gertrude, and I didn't, and that's why I'm here, and you're there, alone and forever doomed to the subsidy stocking shelves for Montgomery Ward will afford you."

But time has a way of drawing you further and further from these moments of indignant relief. Clarity is more elusive, as most things are.

That afternoon, as I sat listening to my sister desperately try to unscramble her recent tumble down the cellar stairs, I felt a wash of guilt, a cold emptiness.

“So how’d you get back upstairs?” I asked her.

“I have one of those...”

“Emergency response gadgets?”

“No... one of those, you know—one of those things kids carry around these days.”

“A cell phone?”

“Yes!” she said, and the landscape of her voice changed dramatically. “A cell phone!”

“You don’t have a cell phone!” I said. “No way.”

She laughed long and good; then she coughed terribly.

“So, how is everything?” I asked, after she had cleared her throat.

But this was perhaps a bit too vague, for her voice crackled back, a thousand miles away, “Up here?”

“No, Gertrude. Your innards. How are your organs?”

“Oh,” she laughed. “I’m all beaten and bruised. But I’m okay. I’m all right.”

I should have questioned this—asked which tests were run and what the results had been. I should’ve cross-examined the nurse and pushed for a word or two from the horse’s mouth, that untrustworthy doctor. And once I had my answers, I should have suggested she move down south, to my house in Florida, perhaps, where the water table prevents the hazards of a cellar. At least until she got back on her feet.

But I would’ve regretted my offer the moment she accepted it.

This is my life, that is hers.

And so her flimsy explanation stood.

How could I have known that three days later, while lying in bed watching the Late Show, that I would get a call from Union Memorial informing me that my sister—yes, Gertrude—was brain dead. The fall nicked her colon. They don't know how they overlooked it. It won't be long, the nurse said.

SYDNEY THORTON

Sydney Thorton was a thin, sallow-skinned man, with pale coiled hair and the dark startled eyes of a nervous wreck. At the time of which I'm writing, he was young—twenty-seven at the latest—had a lean narrow face, and spoke with an accent that I perceived to be of some Germanic strain, though I never asked him.

Little else is known about him. He didn't reveal much about himself. Aside from the fact that he was recently married and attending classes at a Baltimore night school—where he was working towards some kind of advanced degree in, I think, geology—he told us nothing about himself. I honestly don't know how he got involved in our carpool. He had absolutely nothing in common with the rest of us, except the same working hours at the Martin Company.

Everyone dreaded Syd's day in the carpool rotation. Despite the fact that we were all young and poor, Syd, at least going based on his transportation, had it the worst. His car was what you'd call a jalopy. Back then, we called it a rattle-trap, a rust-bucket. In the winter there was no heat, the floor had holes in it, and you could feel the cold coming in on your feet. On the days when he drove us to work, we all just wanted to get to the office as soon as possible, to thaw off. But on this cold November morning, Sydney Thorton came to a complete stop at a green light. Dave Byers, who had stolen the front

seat from me that morning, was the first one to say something. He leaned forward and with the cigarette between his fingers pointed out the windshield into the foggy morning.

“Syd,” he said, “what’re you doing? It’s a green light.”

But Syd didn’t say anything. He just kept his eyes directed on the intersection. And then, with both hands gripping the wheel, he started edging over to the side of the road. The car bumped and swayed onto the low gravel shoulder, and the long ends of our cigarettes dropped into our laps.

That’s when Frank Deland, a childhood friend of mine and my partner on the Martin Company Men’s Bowling League, asked Syd if he was okay.

“Shh,” he said, and touched his ear. “You not hear that?”

“What?”

“That siren.”

The car was silent as everyone listened and looked around. But the intersection was empty. There was nothing to see and nothing to hear, not even another car, nothing but fog.

Finally convinced of this, Syd apologized in his thick mysterious accent, pulled the car back onto the road, and we continued on to work without incident, joking with Syd that his mind must have been playing tricks on him.

Of course, Syd was embarrassed. He kept on saying things about how his sinuses had been acting up on him, and explained that whenever there was bad weather on the way, his imagination, as he awkwardly put it, caused confusion for him.

Well, Syd must have had a barometer in his head, because as soon as the fog cleared, a set of heavy clouds rolled in, and then all day the weather remained fixed in a strange paralysis, the sky a ceiling of dark gray threatening rain, while down below the air was thick and drenched with light, giving one the impression of living trapped beneath a dome.

But on the ride home, the swollen clouds broke and the rain started coming down so hard the wipers could hardly keep the windshield clear.

By then, we were all pretty angry with Syd. At 3:48, when it came time for us to leave for the day, we all went out into the parking lot to meet Syd, but the spot where he had parked his car was empty.

So, thinking maybe we were remembering incorrectly (and joking that maybe our own brains were going a bit crazy), we went searching up and down a couple other rows in the general vicinity. But Syd's old jalopy was nowhere to be seen, and when the wind picked up and it started to drizzle, we went back inside to ask the secretary if she knew anything.

"Syd?" the old lady said, and with her painted nails began to flip through the pages of some notebook. "Oh yeah, Sydney. He went home a little while ago. Just after lunch. He said he had a headache, but that he'd be back to pick you guys up."

So we waited in the lobby.

But when half an hour passed and there was still no sign of Sydney, the secretary, who looked as if she was getting ready to leave, suggested we try calling his house. So

Dave Byers got up and went over and dialed the number she read out to him. But after three tries there was still no answer, and when our boss, Mr. Hollie, came into the lobby and heard that we were waiting, he offered to give us a ride.

Now as I've mentioned, the rain cut loose as soon as we started home, so when traffic, which had been moving along steadily, began to slow down, it wasn't immediately clear why. The rain was coming down in sheets, the windows were foggy, and all you could see were the blurred red of brake lights.

But as we came into the intersection of Northern and Hartley (where Syd had stopped his car that morning), it became clear that an accident had occurred. A policeman with a wilted mustache and rain slicker stood in the middle of the intersection, waving traffic across the road.

"My God," Frank said, craning his neck as we drove past the wreckage. "Is that Syd's car?"

I leaned over and looked through the hole he'd cleared in the fogged glass. In the middle of the intersection were a pair of fire engines, one with its lights twirling in odd slow motion, the other turned over on its side, and—God please don't let me die like this—a car cut in half on the street between them.

"Who?" Mr. Hollie asked, speaking loudly over the drumming rain.

"Syd," Frank said. "The guy we rode to work with this morning. I think that's his car in the road."

“Well, I guess we’d better stop and have a talk with the police,” Mr. Hollie said.

“No!” we all broke out. “We have to get home. We have our dinner waiting.

Anyway, we don’t know a thing about him.”

And so Mr. Hollie continued on through the intersection, and we rode home in complete silence, stunned by the mysteriousness of that morning’s premonition.

LIARS

It was a Wednesday afternoon, the one time of day and week that has always seemed to me to stand unbearably still, at a tipping point.

We were in the middle of a spelling quiz and I was hung up on the word “lair.” Unlike the previous words, lair did not immediately appear, fully-formed, before my mind’s eye. I tried projecting the letters onto the classroom’s bumpy concrete wall, but the trouble was, our teacher, Ms. Mero, pronounced the words intentionally monotone, without the slightest hint of enunciation. You simply couldn’t decipher clues about a word like lair. She could mean layer, as in layers of the truth; or lair, as in a secret lair beneath the ground. And even then, how did you spell it: liar, lair, or layer? Homographs, I guess, were her way of separating the effortlessly gifted from those who actually studied, hard work being a virtue she must have admired, her own life so full of tribulation.

Ms. Mero was a plump, bespectacled lady with cheeks like red apples. And squat wouldn’t be the most accurate way to describe her height, so I’ll say simply this: she was not a midget. She wore her copper-red hair cropped short, in a bob, the exact same way my mother wore hers before it went all frizzy and blond with dye. But I remember thinking even then that Ms. Mero’s hair was somehow different than any other I’d ever seen. It didn’t bounce, but just slid around her head like a loose helmet until finally she

was forced to fix it, and it's only many years later now, looking back on it, that I realize Ms. Mero wore a wig and that in all likelihood this humiliation stripped her daily of her youth, vanity, and pride—of any and all romance—and turned her instead into the very mean and bitter lady who weaved between our desks, inspecting for a “ruler's length” space, before then waddling up to the front of the classroom to begin her notoriously difficult spelling quiz.

That afternoon I tried various different spellings of the word lair, erased and rewrote, but in the end nothing looked right, and when Ms. Mero barked out the next word, I just scribbled down the first interpretation that came to mind, beginning to feel then (as I often do now) the heavy, hopeless weight of failure.

But then, just as my eyes began to glaze over, blurring the putty-colored wall into something that looked like a chocolate milkshake, Mrs. Tammy, the fat front-office lady, came on over the intercom, her buoyant voice, for the first time, something like sweet redemption.

You could hear it all around the room, each and every pencil and pen coming to a halt and falling. There was a brief commotion of rearrangement, and then silence fell as we waited to hear whose lucky day it was.

When Mrs. Tammy finally spoke, I could hardly understand her words.

“Myers to the front office to check out please.”

Ms. Mero pursed her lips and looked up at the intercom. Only one of her eyes moved; the other, made of glass, remained fixed on the classroom and us pupils of her tutelage.

“We’re kind of busy,” she said. “Can it wait a few minutes?”

“No ma’am, I’m sorry. We need him right away.”

I can’t recall now the moments that followed immediately thereafter. Presumably they were spent running down the hall to the front office, where I scribbled my name on a spreadsheet, and then waited, heart ticking, for my two sisters to appear in the lobby.

What I do remember is the goose-bumped texture of the khaki-colored concrete wall I was staring at when suddenly my name was called. And then my memory jump-cuts to an image—still-frame in its quality and exactness—of my father’s white Lexus parked beneath the overhang out front, idling in a cloud of exhaust made thick in the cold, gunmetal air of March.

I followed my sisters outside, into the backseat, and we sat side-by-side on the cracked, tan leather, breathing heavily, cheeks flushed and dizzy with excitement. But I should’ve known it then. Neither of my parents had so much as turned around. I can see them now: the bulb-shaped backs of their heads, silhouettes in the seats ahead, necks tense.

Without a word, my father slowly—and dreadfully so—maneuvered us into an empty spot, parked, and after a moment of absolute silence, turned around.

He was frowning. Now you couldn’t just work your face into a shape this solemn. No, this frown was different. It refused to relent, to twitch or hide the truth. It was a deeply contoured, unflinching frown that sagged under the grim weight of news, and I remember suppressing then an urge to dig my fingers into the peppery stubble of his goatee and literally remold his lips into a shape more pleasant.

Anything but that frown.

I had to turn away.

And it was then that I saw my mother's reflection in the passenger's side-view mirror. Her face was heavily-made, especially above her eyes, where she'd caked loads of purple shadow, and I'll never forget the way her hair looked that afternoon. It was as though she'd come across a light socket. Her hair was a wiry shock, thick and coarse.

Such would be the way of things from then on.

I don't remember exactly how she said it, because the moment she opened her mouth the back seat filled with the strong smell of alcohol. But one way or another, she told us that our father—yes, that man sitting up there in the front seat, silently frowning at the floorboard—that man had lost his job.

Candidly, she then went on to describe the reason.

“The sexual harassment charges are, of course, false,” she said.

And I really think she believed this. But I didn't. I was at the time deeply suspicious of her intentions. In all moments she seemed to be acting out some different, more pleasant version of our reality, and all throughout the summer of our decline she maintained this unbearable half-grin, her round, freckly face flush and shiny with the lotion she wore to church.

“We're gonna fight this,” she said that afternoon.

But it was then that the truth began to unfold in layers.

THE COLD GRASS

He saw her as the sprinklers came on over the produce. She was standing amid the husbands, wives, and kids who clattered past. Reflexively, he looked away. When he glanced back, face hot, she was coming up from the fridge with a bottle of pomegranate juice. She shivered, pulled a yellow cardigan tight around her chest, and came towards him swinging a basket.

“Hey,” he said, and tucked his hands into the front pocket of his apron.

She took a step back, startled. She looked confused, then frightened; then finally her lips pursed into a smile.

Her mouth was thin and she, too, was very thin.

“Jeez,” she said, and dipped a little to the side, as though relieving herself of a heavy burden, “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Neither did I,” he didn’t say.

Instead, he glanced at the basket draped over her arm, at the pomegranate juice sliding around, turning frothy.

“Is that all?” he asked.

“Oh, no, I’ve got a list around here somewhere,” she said, and began rummaging through the big, black purse slung over her shoulder.

“I see not much has changed,” he wanted to say. She still had that same little girl’s face—skin moon-white and luminous; long dark hair, tangled and pulled back in a ponytail, a shock of gray running through the front of it.

A strand fell across her eyes and she brushed it aside.

“I put the list in this pocket,” she said, “because I knew I’d lose it otherwise. But now...” She sighed. “Now it’s gone.”

He shook his head mournfully. “You never could remember anything without a list...”

“I know! And then I just go out and lose it—that’s just like me!” She laughed. “Well, I guess it doesn’t matter anyway. I can always come back up here. We live right around the corner.”

“Oh—where?” he asked.

She gestured in the direction of the neighborhood behind the store.

He knew the one she was talking about. He’d driven past those big brick homes, past the tall white columns and manicured yards, striped light-and-dark green, like finely-cut fairways, each of them, the grass cold now in the evening shadows.

“You mind?” she asked.

She was sorting through the bin of avocados.

“No, no, go ahead,” he said. “Here, I’ll get you a bag.”

But as he moved to walk away, she grabbed his arm. The palm of her hand was dry, and it sent a thrill up his spine that raised the stubble along the back of his neck.

He turned and looked at her.

“Sorry,” she said, and returned her hand to her basket. “It’s just that Geoff’s a real freak about sustainability. So yeah, no bag. But thanks.”

There was a hint of despair there; a weariness that seemed to be for his benefit.

“Yeah, no problem,” he said.

But he felt all the sudden hot and vaguely nauseous. The sound of this man—this Geoff’s—name had plucked a high note: one that registered first in his pounding heart, then in his gut.

The old impulse flared-up. He found himself remembering the lamplight; her living room, strewn with piles of books and marked-up manuscripts; the evening they saw John Updike together, standing in the glow of a street corner, his coat lapel flapping in the wind, snow flurries.

He was there again. Was she?

No. She was sorting through the avocados like a greedy child.

“So,” he said after awhile, “what’ve you been up to? Still teaching?”

“Yup, still teaching. Though I won’t be this fall—I’m taking a sabbatical.” She touched her stomach. “I’m pregnant.”

“Wow, congratulations,” he managed to say. “I mean, you’d never know it.”

He wanted to reach out and touch her, feel her skin beneath him again, damp and goose-bumped. Instead, he fingered a loose thread in the pocket of his apron.

“We have three,” he said. “Three little boys.”

“Really?”

She looked at him with inquisitive eyes. Lines had gathered. Time had passed, naturally. But the blue. He did not recall such brilliant, sparkling blue.

“You with kids.” She laughed. “I would’ve never guessed.” She shook her head. “I distinctly remember you saying you’d never have kids.”

“Well...” He couldn’t help but smile. “You know how it goes.”

“I do,” she said. “I do.”

The truth of this shocked him silent. He couldn’t think of anything to say. His thoughts skipped wildly, like scraps of paper in the wind.

She went around the aisle to another bin, and he could never remember exactly when it happened, but at some point they began to move together, the bins of peaches, avocados, tomatoes, and watermelons appearing on the verge of bursting now, whereas fifteen minutes before, they’d appeared as drab and dirty as the earth they came from.

And all at once, the past was on him—on him like some winged, dead thing. He saw the two of them as they’d once been; heard vaguely their morning talk. He imagined himself—not this Geoff—turning over on the cool sheets of a bed to snap the straps of her bra together. She had twin moles on her back. He remembered that. He’d adored them. He’d adored her. But he’d lost nearly everything, and even then he’d known he would lose her, too.

He remembered them at this grocery store.

“Can I ask you something?”

“What?”

“Should we get a cart or a basket?”

“I don’t know, probably neither. We’re not gonna buy anything.”

“Well, let’s get a basket—just in case,” she always said.

It was a favorite pastime of theirs. They liked to go to the grocery store just to look at things.

“Ohhh, why don’t you get me some of these?” she’d ask, bending over to examine the flowers as they passed through the floral section.

And he would turn and make a show of exhaustion.

“Come on,” he’d say, and then wait for her to catch up, so that they could walk together.

He remembered the way she used to lean over the bins, forehead creased, eyes scanning the assortment.

“How ‘bout this one?” she’d ask, pinching the skin of a fruit. “You think it’s too ripe?”

She was standing across from him with a plump green mango poised on the palm of her hand. The diamond on her ring finger caught what little light there was and glinted brilliantly.

BIOGRAPHY

Matthew Oglesby was born in 1986.