THE DIVINE AND MISS JOHANNA

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The Divine and Miss Johanna is a novel that began as a first-person tale of a spiritual woman who fell in love with someone else and left her husband. Her parents took the husband’s side in the messy break up. Its title has varied from Blue to Runaway Wife to The Silver Lake. Should a reviewer classify the book as it was in its early stages, it would have been classified as “women’s literature.” The author’s journey as a writer has been at least as profound as the influences that created an entirely different novel—the study of modernism, postmodernism, gothic, magic realism, and the sublime as well as the effect professors’ and writers’ comments had on the author and her writing. The Divine and Miss Johanna evolved into a novel that blurs the boundaries between the American gothic tradition and the lush, lyrical world of magic. It is a book that questions what it means to be a Christian and the meaning of spirituality. Told in different voices, all of the characters move in spaces that a reader might interpret as real, as a projection of the character’s unconscious, or, perhaps, as a space of deep denial. In turn, The Divine and Miss Johanna is negotiating the territory between American gothic and Latin American and African magic realism in a uniquely American way. The novel also explores the hypocrisy of Christianity and the import of faith. The author believes that the book now is literature—not “women’s literature.” The critical introduction establishes the context in both the author’s life and her readings and scholarly research for such hybridity.
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If you want to go where the wild things are, you have to leave your map behind.

—Laura Miller. *Washington Post Book World*

In reviewing T. Coraghessan Boyle’s latest book of short stories, *Tooth and Claw*, for the *New York Times Book Review* on September 11, Laura Miller writes that many of the stories are accomplished but obvious (8). She asks herself why so many stories in this collection fall short of being satisfying and concludes that it is because “Boyle’s stories strike an unhappy medium in which the characters lack nuance and the narrative lacks surprise” (8). However, Miller goes on to say that “now and again, [Boyle], delivers a hint of the sublime, that sensation of brushing against the pelt of something wild and unfathomable” (8). “Sublime”, “wild”, and “unfathomable”—such wonderful words to describe literature—words with which all authors would like to hear our work described.

“Wild and unfathomable” strikes me as something out of control, and “unfathomable” makes me think of spirituality tossed together with gothic grotesqueries. And “sublime”—to me—is that which transcends the human experience in whatever form, thus creating a certain magic. In her review’s conclusion, Miller states:

> These two stories [“Tooth and Claw” and “The Doubtfulness of Water: Madam Knight’s Journey to New York, 1702”] allow a little room for mystery to seep in, and so elude what is a nagging flaw in Boyle’s short (sometimes his long) fiction, a certain patness. If you want to go where the wild things are you have to leave your map behind you. (8)

Miller sums up all that good literature must have—“a hint of the sublime, at least an illusion of mystery, an ending with a certain ambiguity that might lead to a haunting note
of communion, and maybe, the wildness that comes from discovery as opposed to
preconceived knowledge” (8).

“Accomplished”, “a certain patness”—words Miller uses to describe many of the
stories in Tooth and Claw are similar to the words that triggered the poet James Wright’s
struggle with depression and alcoholism. Elizabeth Hoover in the July/August, 2005
Poets and Writers writes that he viewed himself as unable to rise above competence in his
poetry (21). He wrote copious letters over the years to other poets, which Farrar, Strauss
and Giroux recently published under the title Wild Perfection: The Selected Letters of
James Wright. “Wild”—why does that word make me think of freedom, of dancing under
the stars, of tossing one’s clothes to the wind and sailing off into the unknown?

I recently published a reworked chapter of my dissertation novel as a short story
entitled “The Yellow Bathrobe” in an anthology, Grace and Gravity. Here is a clip from
Barbara Simon’s review of the book in Pedestal Magazine:

The authors take chances, not so much from form, […], but from plot and
theme.

An example of the “wildness” inherent in Grace and Gravity is “The
Yellow Bathrobe” by Elly Williams. Slightly longer than most of the
stories, “The Yellow Bathrobe” roams all over the landscape of
womanhood. We are inside the head of Frances, mother of a grown
daughter, grandmother, wife of Leon. Are we to sympathize with Frances,
woman whose husband has cheated on her throughout their marriage with
a series of “incidents,” or are we to dislike her, woman who is jealous of
her daughter? Perhaps, we are to feel sorry for her. She has a lump in her
breast, tried to commit suicide, had a baby succumb to SIDS and is
incapable of feeling happiness. Williams doesn’t tell us what to feel—or
even if we should feel.

That sort of restraint from an author makes for a good read and Grace
and Gravity is full of other great stories.
(http://www.thepedestalmagazine.com/Secure/content/cb.asp?cbid=4596)
Here a reviewer is writing about my wildness—a great compliment to my way of thinking. Given that this story is a chapter from *The Divine and Miss Johanna*, being singled out for an example of wildness could not be more to my liking. That kind of praise for my work has been a long time coming.

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*From the moment of my birth, the angels of anxiety, worry, and death stood at my side, followed me out when I played, followed me in the sun of springtime and in the glories of summer. They stood at my side in the evening when I closed my eyes, and intimidated me with death, hell, and eternal damnation. And I would often wake up at night and stare widely into the room: Am I in Hell?*

—Edvard Munch, painter of *The Scream, The Rescue Artist*

Growing up, my brothers and sisters and parents played the perfect family. My father, the Harvard-educated doctor, my mother, a housewife wealthy in her own right, my elder sister, Janet, and elder brother, Peter, smart, attractive, clearly on the road to success. Me, the dumb, boy-crazy blonde. Charlie, my gay twin brother, who, one, is not really my twin, and, two, no one in the family admitted for years was gay. Cari, the baby, blonde curls and blue eyes, coming along six years after Charlie, the rest of us eighteen months apart.

*FYI: Charlie and I have always thought we were twins. We call each other Twin.*

Having so much money and defined roles such as doctor, doctor’s wife, doctor’s children was the perfect camouflage for a family with secrets like mine. We had two
homes—the city house in Binghamton, New York and the farm in Pennsylvania—one thousand acres in the isolated Endless Mountains of the Steam Hollow Valley. No one lived anywhere near us out in the country. Loaded guns filled both homes—always at the ready. In the city my father had his practice, we went to school, my mother had her glittery luncheon friends, and we went to the Episcopal Church. In the early days, we followed my mother down the long aisle—it was a huge church—ducklings dressed in the finest clothing from the long-defunct Best & Company in New York City. Matching velveteen-collared coats, beribboned hats. Plaid suits for the boys. Bowties. I could hear the buzz—look at her. Can you believe she gets all those children ready? Look at her. She’s beautiful. And she was. She rustled when she walked down the aisle, her mink stole a casual accoutrement, no different than her perfume, or her clicking alligator high heels. Later, just before the surface—look—I wrote surface when I meant to write service—but no, this has to read just before the service began, my father would arrive in a flurry, having done his hospital rounds prior to church. Sometimes, midway through the service, two helmeted policeman arrived and escorted him from church. No, he hadn’t committed a crime that they knew about; he needed a police escort to the hospital to deliver a baby. A motorcycle on each side of his Bronco. Zoom.

Once he told us at dinner about a headless baby he had delivered that day. Another time he told us about an armless, legless baby he delivered. We heard about the double genitalia babies, too. And fat women. His nurses could not weigh them on the office scales. They had to go to the railroad depot to be weighed. I don’t know if it is true. I never thought about it until right now as I sit at my desk writing this essay. Do fat people have to be weighed at railroad depots? His favorite topic, though, was pregnant,
unwed girls. Sluts. His face would turn red and shiny, a vein pop from his forehead. Sluts, he would say, spittle forming at the corners of his mouth.

So there we were—the seven of us—and a series of purebred-hunting dogs, Duke the First and Duke the Second, Helga the First and Helga the Second, Weimeraners, and Ben, a German Shorthair, Reddy, a Redbone Hound—in the city—smart and polished and known. Everybody knew us—either because of my father’s profession or because of my mother’s father’s fame as president of the First City National Bank and Chancellor of the New York State Board of Regents and founder of SUNY Binghamton. An old Binghamton chum of mine was reminiscing with me about the time I ran away from home to her house. Neither my friend nor her mother nor my mother, who eventually picked me up, asked why I had run away. But that is not what my friend remembers. She remembers that she never, not in twelve years of going to school and church with me, had ever set foot in our house.

We were not allowed friends at the house. At the time, I did not wonder why. I find it odd now to realize I did not think about the fact that we never had friends visit. I connected friends’ absence to the farm. We were always going to the farm. How could friends come over?

But that is not it at all. It is the secrets. They didn’t want the secrets escaping. The fact that my father walked around naked. Upstairs and down. He prayed naked right out in the open, on his knees, hands clasped, head down. My mother did, too. Naked. In the early years when I shared a room with my sister Janet and we woke up early and played rock, paper, scissors, swinging our hands between the twin beds, my mother would stomp into the room naked and tall and terrifying. Her nipples appeared huge and orange and so
did her pubic hair, which was right in my face. She would pull down my pants and spank me. Not Janet. Me. With a hard-bristled hairbrush.

*Something for you to know:* My parents repeatedly told us that they were the same height. Black is white. My mother towered over my father. As a little kid I believed their story despite what my eyes told me. Later, I realized that they were not the same size. She stood maybe three inches taller, and she probably weighed more, too.

They did other things to me with my pants down. They did things to Twin, too. My mother fondled his penis until he was five or six years old, my father played with Twin’s penis and made him play with his and later sodomized him. I do not know about my other siblings, and I did not know about Twin until we were grown-ups. We never talked about the secrets when we were children. Never. Any of us. We buried them. My parents did what I called the worm patrol. In the dark of night, they crept into my room, which by that time was just mine and my beloved doll’s, Holly Bell’s, and made me roll over on my stomach and pull down my pajamas. Then my mother used a flashlight while my father poked up my butt checking for worms. I have never told anyone this before. Only Twin. I can smell their excitement. Like castor oil. Like someone—look, I did it again—I meant to write something—but I wrote *someone*—but it has to read *something* fetid. Like someone was dead.

Someone being dead makes me think of a story Twin told me not so long ago. For twenty years he was a funeral director. What he told me is this: he used to pretend the bodies he was embalming were our parents. He said you could abuse the bodies, and it did not show. If you took a belt, a hanger, a hairbrush and beat the bodies, no bruising or
swelling showed. No welts. He said if he had not been a funeral director, he thinks he might have been a serial killer.

\textit{Just so you know: I am and have always been an avid true-crime reader. I especially like psychological studies of crime—books about parents who kill their children, children who kill their parents, husbands who kill their wives. And now that the television carries such shows as \textit{Forensic Files} and \textit{American Justice} and the original \textit{Cold Case Files}, I can see some of the murderers I have studied—Ted Bundy, the Green River Killer, Charles Manson, and my favorite, Dr. Jeffrey MacDonald. He is the doctor convicted of killing his pregnant wife and their two young daughters. He went to Princeton, not Harvard.}

When R, my first husband—I cannot write his name—it makes me sick—and I divorced, he tried to get a restraining order against me based on my “morbid fascination with true crime.” The judge threw that out. When that reason did not work, R claimed I represented a danger to him and the children because I had been in the Psychiatric Institute for clinical depression. The odd part about this claim was that my terror of R was so great, my depression at the tactics he and his lawyers were using so profound, that my therapist, who was going on vacation, wanted me hospitalized so that I could feel safe.

I had reason not to feel safe. For years of our relationship he had beaten me up. It began three months after we started dating. I never told anyone. I blamed one black eye on my horse. She swung her jaw into my eye. I knew how to keep a secret. I had never told anyone about the violence at my parents’ city house, much less at the isolated farm. Twin and I ran away a lot, but we never told anyone what was happening to us at home.
No one asked. Not even the Pennsylvania State Troopers who dragged the ponds for us. The buggy whip, my father’s left hand, my mother’s hairbrush. The way I hid, curled in a fetal position, between my twin beds the second I heard the garage door go up. My father was home.

*An inhuman story: One day my mother was driving me and three other little girls to the YWCA for a swimming lesson. Those were the days before seatbelts, and I remember feeling ugly and dirty standing in the backseat behind her with my friends. It was the same feeling I had years later after taking LSD and trying to tear off my face—all I saw when I looked in the mirror was a hideous monster, pustuled and empty of any human goodness. On that car ride, I wanted to die. I was six years old. I knew I was different from those girls, but I didn’t know how or why. Buried knowledge.*

My mother explained the emergency room trips to others as accidents. The bleeding mouths, the broken noses, my shattered eyeglasses, and black eyes. The doctors and nurses obsequiously helpful to the chief of staff’s family. “Your children have their share of mishaps, don’t they, Mrs. Doctor?” one nurse said. Indeed certain ones of us—me, Twin, and Peter—did. Why would I not marry a guy who beat me? After my father beat me up, he always made me sit on his lap, and caress him—he had had to beat me because he loved me. Life with R was similar. He would say, “You’ve got to understand how bad I feel about this.” Of course I had to, and I did—that’s the thing—I did—I did feel bad for these men—I did not want to be responsible for them feeling bad about themselves—and I desperately wanted to please my mother who wanted me married and out of her house, so why wouldn’t R’s and my wedding be an elegant evening wedding, me in my mother’s sized-down satin wedding dress, my grandmother’s mousseline veil,
my great-grandmother’s tiara headpiece, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, sipping champagne and smiling? Role-playing. All of them. I know it today as I write this that the whole family was not real. The wedding was a fake.

Not then.

I did not know it then. I knew nothing. I was a blackout of a person. The morning of the wedding while my family was at church and for once did not make me go, I told R that I did not want to get married. I sobbed. Please don’t make me. That was real, wasn’t it? Those tears. Those feelings. Weren’t they? I do not know. But the show had to go on. I knew that much. My mother would never forgive me if I did not get married so that she could play the lead role as mother-of-the-bride. Now I relate the term “blackout” to drinking. A lot of drinking in my family. More than I care to remember or think about.

A fact: I looked through my mother and father’s wedding book to make sure I had replicated her look. I knew implicitly that this was expected. My mother wore dark nail polish, easy to see in the black-and-white photos. I painted mine that morning after R left. Later, when I was dressed, my parents entered my bedroom together to see how I looked. My father stared at my painted fingernails and said, “You look like a slut.” Spittle formed at the corners of his mouth. “Slut.”

R and I got married as college undergraduates and lived in on-campus housing. He liked to sit on me, knees pinning my arms, and punch me in the face. I screamed. No one helped. I only recently realized that people had to have heard me beg for help. I did not tell anyone. Even myself.

FYI: R was a Golden Gloves boxer.
Now, in the divorce proceedings, as R attempted to get a restraining order against me, my son was fourteen-years-old, my daughter four. I sure put in my blackout time, didn’t I? But I do not think you can undo years of beatings and what that does to the recipient’s psyche. However unconscious.

*I’ve always grown up around music without always being aware of it—just like you grow up around the sun or the fields and the rain. You aren’t totally aware of it at the time, but it kind of sinks into you.*

—Ernest Gaines, *Poets and Writers*

The judge took the idea of my being dangerous due to the hospitalization seriously. My lawyer brought me into chambers so the judge could get a look at me—five-feet-six, one-hundred-and-twelve pounds. He had the judge speak with my therapist. We convinced the man that I was not dangerous to either R or the children. Funny thing about the “morbid fascination with true crime.” All the true crime I read focused on men who killed their wives or other women or parents who killed their parents or on children who killed their parents. One winter fifteen years ago, I was in Michigan visiting a friend and I picked up a true-crime book entitled *A Deadly Silence: The Ordeal of Cheryl Pierson: a Case of Incest and Murder*. Cheryl hires a fellow student in her high-school class to murder her father because he is committing incest with her, and she is afraid that he is going to do the same to her younger sister. Her mother, dying of cancer, knows about the incest but does nothing. I could not put down this book, but I did not know why. I loved this girl—her courage to face what was happening—and I hated her father. I loved the scene when the school friend blew him away with a shotgun. Splat. Skittering
around the edges of my blackout self I sensed that this story had to do with that filthy little girl riding around in the backseat of her mother’s car.


Explicitly R and I were divorcing because I had met someone else. R hired a private detective to follow me. Maryland is one of three states left in the United States where one can be sued for adultery. I was. And for everything that we owned as well as all my family antiques and monetary inheritances and my children. MY children. I always thought of them as mine because I took care of them. Diapers. Softball games. Art lessons. Piano lessons. Homework. Tucking them in at night. Protecting them. Two events sent me over the edge and into the Psychiatric Institute of Montgomery County, Maryland—the thought of losing my children and the terror that surfaced by getting caught in an illicit sexual relationship—a secretive, frightening, guilt-ridden affair that nevertheless made me feel loved. It brought out long-buried feelings that I did not understand. Feelings that left me shuddering, curled in a fetal position between the twin beds in the hospital room. The feeling of being that filthy little girl. The feeling that
something horrible had happened to me as a child. Something much worse than the worm patrol. Something I had hidden from myself. Something unspeakable.

During the weeks I spent hospitalized, I realized that furtive adultery was the only way my marriage could have ended. Imprinted on me from early childhood. Illicit sex. Secret rendezvous. Secret. Secret. Secret. The flashbacks began. The terror. The guilt. The shame. I did not save Twin or Cari. I was not Cheryl Pierson. I was a slut.

Important: I won sole custody of both children. R denied on the stand—we had a three-day, eighty-thousand-dollar trial, my parents taking his side on the custody issue and paying his bills—that he had ever hit me. Afterward he called me up and laughed, “Don’t think the judge didn’t believe me. He did.” He laughed again, low. “I never hit you,” he said. When I demanded from my mother how she could have tried to take away my children, how she could have given R all that money—I only found that out in the trial—and not offer to help me with one single penny, she said, “We were afraid you might not let us see the children if you got custody.” R purposely bankrupted his company to make sure I did not get anything. It was the fear of the secrets escaping that drove my parents to champion R. R had seen some of the beatings of Twin. But he would never tell. No, my parents had too much money. I am not making this up. If I could out-of-the-blue claim R had beaten me, that he had tried to force me into wife-swapping encounters, that in the dark of night he slashed the tires of business competitors, who knows what I might say next? I was written out of the family. Interesting choice of words, eh? Now I exist as a person within a family context only for my children and Twin and my sister Cari. To all others I am dead, disinherited. As are Twin and Cari for standing by my side.
The farm in the summertime was safe when my father was not there. My father stayed in Binghamton to practice and only showed up every other weekend. Janet and Cari are shadow figures. Twin, Peter, and I had the run of the place. We had horses and ponds and secret pools. We had fallen-down houses and abandoned barns and stone foundations with old mason jars lying about. We had creeks within which we created cities for our toy trucks and cars and fire engines. We had a dog cemetery.

Something to consider: I think about the dead dogs scattered in graves across the farm’s backyard. Maybe their bodies are the clue to Twin’s wanting to be a serial killer, to my “morbid fascination with true crime.” Did other families have ten or twelve dead dogs buried in the backyard? Even poor Helga the Second, who died of a stomach obstruction while alone at the farm with my dad. And Duke the First who died in what my father said was a hunting accident. Or maybe it was just the dead raccoons and woodchucks and deer and beavers and turkey and grouse and pheasant that clotted the landscape of our childhood that made me and Twin think about killing. Maybe.

My mother let us run free at the farm, and we did. We played Robin Hood and cider mill and the island game at the upper pond. We played games on a huge wooden swing that hung from the oak tree, its branches arched over the gravelly driveway. We played the H-Man: one of us had to be this scary creature known to everyone in the Steam Hollow Valley. According to local legend, the H-Man rose from the grave twice a year, always in the rain, it was said, an H burned across his heart, haunting the
mountains. Everyone said it was children he was after, his own killed in the fire that blazed his H and destroyed his house.

An old horse-drawn carriage sat in the upper meadow, and we played stagecoach. We never played games that involved being ourselves like tag or softball. Our games were games that emerged from our imaginations.

One day Twin and I killed and crucified my doll Holly Bell when we were nine, maybe ten years old. My mother watched out the kitchen window. She had never stopped Twin and Peter burning and torturing snakes and frogs. Why get upset over the demise of a doll I had loved and nurtured for years as if she were me?

_I know Twin has Holly Bell. I saw him leave the farmhouse with her. The minute I set foot in the backyard, I realize it’s been raining, but the weather has started to clear, the sun’s shining. No more rain, not even a thin drizzle. Just the dampness that comes after a warm summer’s shower and the dank humidity that feels like fog. My hair starts bushing around my head like a springboard. Where is Twin?

He’s in the woods behind the house and he’s gathering tinder. He’s going to build a fire. Holly Bell lies face down on the ground. I snatch her up and use my hand to wipe her damp face. She’s wearing her pajamas, a pink snap-up suit, bluebells sprinkled over it.

“She’ll get a chill if you leave her on the ground.” I’m mad at Twin. “She’s mine. You shouldn’t have taken her.”

He looks at me and it’s a look I’ve seen before—empty. Holly Bell has more life in her eyes than he does in his. He keeps gathering wood. He’s got a stone circle set up at
the left-hand edge of the yard just before the woods begin, and I see what looks to be a cross nailed to a maple tree nearby. What’s going on? My blackout self settles into place. Thick, wet air clogs my lungs. I sit on a rock.

Twin gets the fire going and it’s a good, strong blaze. There’s half-damp leaves piled in his fire, too, and there’s a gentle wind blowing so it almost looks as if the leaves are skipping and the crispy smell of autumn on its way is in the air. Twin takes off his T-shirt and throws it on the ground, his skinny chest shiny. I watch as he runs inside the house. He’s back in seconds and he’s got a jar filled with thick, red glop. “Blood,” he says. “From the turkey hanging upside down in the basement. The one Dad got with his bow and arrow.”

The sky is darkening again. The sun’s hiding behind a pouf of gray cloud.

Twin snatches Holly Bell and tears off her clothes. She’s got a hole down between her legs that she can pee from if I give her a bottle of water. I never do. I only pretend. I don’t like the idea of between her legs.

Next thing I know Holly Bell has a pitchfork poked up inside her, and Twin’s roasting her over the fire like a hotdog. A holiday feel dances in the air around him. He’s holding the stick and her and bobbing up and down like a jack-in-the-box, and he’s smiling and I think I might be, too.

Twin pauses, sets down Holly Bell on the ground, grabs the turkey blood and pours it over the leaves until a dense, heavy odor like tomato juice fills the air. He takes hold of the pitchfork again and holds my baby over the fire.

I don’t feel anything as I watch Holly Bell drip in front of me. She and Twin are on a movie screen. I’m watching, and neither one has anything to do with me. When he
sets her on the ground and rushes toward the house, I do nothing to save her. He’s back, this time with a battered tin of gasoline and within seconds he’s dousing Holly Bell from head to toe, her hair matted, and as soon as Twin shoves her over the flame, her hair’s burned off in a blaze of orange. Her eyes melt open, eyelashes smoosh against their hot glaze.

Gray shadows leap from beyond the trees like ghosts. Twin takes Holly Bell’s oozing body and smashes it against a rock, hands me the pitchfork and I know he wants me to bash her, too. I don’t feel the heat on the pitchfork. I smash her once, then again against the rock until she breaks off from the stick and she’s a blob of plastic at my feet, one eye open and staring, the other a glob of eyelashes and blue slime.

Twin vanishes to the house once more, returning with a bucket of water. I’m kicking my doll baby now, a right to the legs, a left to the tummy, a right, a left, just like my mother does to me, and Twin yanks her melting body from the ground and dunks her in the bucket of water. When he pulls her out, she’s a chunk of caramel taffy and he motions me to hang onto her feet and he’s got her arms and we begin to pull her apart, the smoky plastic smearing our hands with soot. Together, we nail her torn remains to the cross he’s fastened to the tree and he’s got a hammer and I’ve got a hammer and pound, pound, pound, Holly Bell is crucified.

Now Twin grabs the jar with the leftover turkey blood and splashes it over Holly Bell and the tomatoey smell of blood and burned baby is swirling above and beyond me and suddenly Twin and I are laughing and dancing. I’m crying, but I don’t know why.

“Eleanor! Charlie! Supper.” It’s my mother in the frame of the backdoor. She says nothing about the smoky blob nailed to a cross in the backyard.

My parents taught us five children that my father was God. In our worlds, he was. Right now my heart is pounding in fear from thinking about that childhood father, a man who terrified me right up until my mother and elder brother and sister forced him into a nursing home. A locked ward like mine at the Psych Institute. The family story is that he has Alzheimer’s. But nursing home containment does not stop flashbacks or memories or racing hearts.

Every other weekend during the school year, we went to the farm. Sometimes we got snowed in. The snow piled up high as the second-story windows, a glorious white whirl that trapped the seven of us together. We had a church we attended when we were at the farm, and on these snowed-in weekends my father insisted we go to church. Only church would be in our living room, and he would be the preacher, my mother the organist. My memories of these church services are ones of intense degradation. That whatever spirituality existed in my heart had to be shaped to suit his demands makes me sick. Sometimes I cannot believe those services with the kneeling in front of him and my mother and the hymn singing and the sermons really happened. All I can think of is Robert Mitchum in The Night of the Hunter, a frightening noir film in which a pseudo-preacher terrorizes two children. An eerie music gives the movie a surrealist effect—one similar to the surrealist sensation of praying to your own father as your mother plays the organ and your siblings surround you—and not one of us comments on the absurdity of the situation because we are too afraid.
Information: Flashbacks are when you relive an event that traumatized you.

Vietnam veterans have flashbacks. Abused children have flashbacks. My flashbacks did not begin until I was thirty-eight years old and in the psychiatric institute in a locked ward. A place I loved for its safety, the first safety I can ever remember feeling. The safety that allowed me to make a small clearing in the blackout—the burned, crucified little girl—who is me. Only now in the writing of this essay do I see the metaphorical implications of what I let happen to Holly Bell.

Here is a silver bullet of flashback: I am at the farmhouse alone with my father. I am lying on my back naked on the bathroom floor. My hair flows down to my waist, so I know that I am sixteen. All I see is my face—the face of Eleanor—and it is the ugliest face in the world and whatever it is that still survives as me sees that flash and knows I am the embodiment of disgusting ugliness. My father is dressed. Brown pants. Camel-colored Viella shirt. He is down on one knee beside me. He smells of the farm, that priming-the-pump smell that comes from spring water. He has that acrid, excited smell of his, too. He holds a three-fifty-seven magnum to the left side of my head. He says, spittle at the corners of his mouth, “If you tell anyone, I will kill you.”

That is all.

Whenever I let myself remember that much, my ears buzz, my hands grow damp, I want to curl into a fetal position and die. Because, of course, I know what happens next. It is not a fiction. But I do not want it to be true. I cannot bear for any of this to be true.
I learned from the age of two or three that any room in our house, at any time of day, was there to read in, or to be read to. My mother read to me. She’d read to me in the big bedroom in the mornings, when we were in her rocker together, which ticked in rhythm as we rocked, as though we had a cricket accompanying the story. She’d read to me in the diningroom on winter afternoons in front of the coal fire, with our cuckoo clock ending the story with “Cuckoo,” and at night when I’d got in my own bed.

—Eudora Welty, One Writer’s Beginning

I cannot remember if it was Flannery O’Connor or Eudora Welty—and I have carefully re-examined O’Connor’s *Mystery and Manners* and Welty’s *The Eye of the Story* and *One Writer’s Beginnings* and cannot find the quote—but one of the writers said something along the lines of this: to write fiction all you need to draw on is the first ten years of childhood and you will have enough material to last a lifetime. For me, the first twenty-some years provide most of my material, but discovery keeps knocking at my door—through literature, in particular. When I was a child, both my parents were eclectic and prolific readers, and books lay scattered around both houses from the attics to the basements. I gravitated toward such books as *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier and all the books in the Mary Stewart early gothic series. I read Perry Mason and Agatha Christie and John D. MacDonald. I read *The Passover Plot* and *Ben-Hur*. I read the *St. James Bible* and Agnes Sligh Turnbull’s works and *Peyton Place*. I read *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*. I read every comic book I could lay my hands on, but I especially liked to read scary ones liked *Eerie* or *Creepy*. I also read Isaac Asimov and H.G. Wells and
Ray Bradbury. My favorite Bradbury story is one called “Something Wicked This Way Comes,” whose ideas you will see inform The Divine and Miss Johanna. In this story, Bradbury suggests that the ability to accept oneself is not simply a trait that people have; it is a quality that people must develop. The story is about human connections and about good and evil; most of all, I would say, it is about magic: when you do not believe in magic it does not work. This idea ties directly to my character Grace’s belief in the magic of faith in the living form of Jesus Christ and her son Theo’s belief in magic through the world of Superman. As I wrote the book, I had no idea that I was drawing an analogy between magic and spirituality or Jesus and Superman—I was only writing what in many ways had long ago been imprinted on my soul—just as Welty or O’Connor suggested. And just as Ernest Gaines says in the earlier quote.

Like my Grace, the main character of “Something Wicked This Way Comes,” Charles Holloway, learns that what matters in life is feeling alive, having a love of life—a life that is yours, not the life someone else chooses for you. My character, Jonathan, Grace’s husband, learns something along those same lines. But let me be clear here: I never once sat down at the computer and said, “Okay, today I will write a scene where Jonathan discovers what matters in life.” The book was a six-and-a-half-year process—a process that I journeyed as well.

To return to childhood readings that influence my writing, I would say that our family had a plethora of random books to choose from—but my favorites tended to be the dark, mysterious ones like Rebecca or du Maurier’s book My Cousin Rachel, which was far more ambiguous in its outcome than Rebecca. Both books explore morality, but My Cousin Rachel’s palpable ambiguity has caused me to remember the
story to this day, and even as I write this, it makes me wonder if that is why The Divine
and Miss Johanna has so much subtle ambiguity in it—because the ambiguous is what I
am naturally drawn to? What could possibly be more ambiguous than the concept of faith
or spirituality? There is labyrinthine quality to the books I loved—characters entered
moral labyrinths and took their readers with them. Looking back on my main characters,
Grace, Jonathan, Frances, and Leon, I see that I have invited my readers on just such a
roller-coaster ride—not with deliberate intent—rather with the imprints on my brain
through life experiences and readings—much like Laura Miller discusses in the first
section of this paper in reference to T. C. Boyle’s work.

On Sunday, October 9, 2005, I came across a huge ad in the New York Times
Book Review for a book entitled The End of Faith by Sam Harris. Natalie Angier, writing
for the NYTBR says, “The End of Faith articulates the dangers and absurdities of
organized religion so fiercely and so fearlessly that I felt relieved as I read it, vindicated,
almost personally understood” (7). This reminded me of my own deep aversion to
organized religion and its hypocrisies as I see them. Certainly a childhood like mine
creates an adult who wishes never to set foot in a church again—or any other organized
house of religion. Yet Jesus remains deeply imprinted on my soul and despite my
intellectual desire to abandon the idea of faith, my heart offers itself up to spirituality
every single day, and it is an underlying theme in my writing—not on purpose, not with
explicit awareness, but because it is part of who I am. Writing in reaction to a Life
editorial that demanded that American novelists show us the redeeming quality of
spiritual purpose, Flannery O’Connor says,
What these editorial writers fail to realize is that the writer who emphasizes spiritual values is very likely to take the darkest view of all of what he sees in this country today. For him, the fact that we are the most powerful and wealthiest nation in the world doesn’t mean a thing in any positive sense. The sharper the light of faith, the more glaring are apt to be the distortions the writer sees in the life around him. (O’Connor 26)

A devout Catholic, yet a Southern gothic writer of the grotesque, O’Connor vigorously defends her writerly visions of mass murderers and Bible salesmen who steal prostheses:

“My own feeling is that writers who see by the light of their Christian faith will have, in these times, the sharpest eyes for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable” (32). I believe that she is correct because as she also states:

The novelist with Christian concerns will find modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience. (33)

Although I have written five novels, three in a drawer, one published, and now the one that you are about to read, I never considered myself as a writer concerned with organized religion or spirituality.

Before examining the interwoven threads of my life, my gothic readings, the sublime, and magic realism in this introduction, I want to share two stories that reflect the ideas about Jesus that inform *The Divine and Miss Johanna*. These stories constantly rub against my intellectual and emotional rejection of organized religion—unlike Flannery O’Connor, a practicing Catholic. However, as I write this essay, I am realizing that the friction between my intellectual self and my spiritual self propelled much of the friction in *The Divine and Miss Johanna* without my being aware of it.
The first story happened when I was twenty-two, and I had an infant son named Joshua David. His father was Jewish, which is an important part of this story. One evening I was home alone at dusk. Josh was with his father. While they were gone, Jesus visited me—not in the flesh the way he visits my character Grace—but in the center of my being. He told me to go all around the house and light candles in joyous recognition that my son was someone special who would make a difference in the world. Joy uplifted me, and I took his vision of Josh to the next level—what if what Jesus was really telling me was that Josh was the second coming? After all, he was part Jewish and part lapsed Episcopalian—would that not be the embodiment of a second Messiah? I know this sounds crazy, but Josh is now twenty-nine years old and that feeling that Jesus brought that evening has never left me. I believe it, and I believe that through his art—Josh is a painter—he will bring change to the world. I have never doubted his talent or his drive. For me, it is part of his mission. I know that I believe this partly because of my Night of the Hunter childhood. But why does not matter; what matters is that I believe it.

On another occasion about ten years ago, I was in the hospital emergency room with a migraine headache so severe that the doctors gave me shots of Demerol and kept me in the hospital overnight. I had had headaches ever since childhood, and as an adult they grew worse. Despite headache clinics and preventative medications, migraines were taking over my life. I spent any number of nights in the hospital in a Demerol-induced sleep. On this particular occasion, I lay on a crisp, white hospital bed, tears of pain dripping down my face. My second husband, Jim, had come with me, and I thought he was beside me. Someone took hold of my hand and held it close and warm. I squeezed the hand in mine, and it squeezed back. I turned to look at Jim, but no one at all was
there. Not a nurse, not a doctor, not an orderly, not a husband. I took this to mean that Jesus had once again paid me a visit and that his warm hand was his promise that never again would I have a headache so severe I would be hospitalized. I have continued to have headaches, but I have never had to go to the hospital since that time. Dr. Oliver Sachs in his book *Migraines* documents the fact that migraines can induce such hallucinatory experiences as does Donald Kalsched in his psychological book *Inner World of Trauma: Archetypal Defenses of the Human Spirit*. Mark Salzman in his novel *Lying Awake*, however, presents the headache/spiritual hallucinations the most forcefully. He tells of a nun who experiences excruciating headaches, but during their duration has spiritually ecstatic visions. After a certain number of years, the pain is beginning to cycle out of control. The doctor presents the nun with a devastating choice: a surgical cure for the headaches versus what she has always deemed her spiritual grace. Will a “cure” mean the end of her visions and a soul left dry and searching? Lauren Slater in her book *Lying: An Autobiographical Memoir* uses the metaphor of epilepsy and its hallucinatory grace to tell a tale of harrowing neglect. Both epilepsy and migraines have similar drug treatments, and both have the “aura” that often accompanies spiritual visions. The neurological system plays tricks on scientists and laymen alike—such a delightful ambiguity accompanies it. One must ask the question: Does a person have migraines or epilepsy because he or she is more spiritual than someone else or are these painful maladies mere neurological games due to pressures on certain parts of the brain? No clear-cut answer has presented itself. I do not know if my own experiences (there are more than I shared here) are a result of neurological malfunctioning or a true brush with grace, and I do not care.
To return to Flannery O’Connor and her defense of the Southern grotesque working in conjunction with the Christian faith, she says,

Whenever I’m asked why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks, I say it is because we are still able to recognize one. [. . .] But in approaching the subject from the standpoint of the writer, I think it is safe to say that while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted. (44)

Christ-haunted—it’s a delicious expression. It captures what my life experiences and readings have done to me. In a New York Times Book Review review of Joyce Carol Oates’s most recent book, Missing Mom, Stacy D’Erasmo writes, “Whether writing realism or fable or some hybrid, Oates is always at heart, a Goth” (8). One might say something similar about O’Connor; it does not matter that faith is vital to her own vision of herself as a writer, O’Connor is invariably labeled a Southern gothic writer.

This idea of the gothic—Goth—and what it encompasses became important to me when I published my first novel (third one written) This Never Happened in 1998.

A dazzling novel of psychological suspense
—Murder Ink

Family secrets and horrors of the soul
—Sunday Republican

Richard has to face the past in order to bear the present
—News-Leader
And when we make every attempt to forget, suppress, or ignore the “home” that we carry with us, as does the main character of This Never Happened, life can become a complicated emotional hell on Earth

—The Free Lance-Star

We were in a place that was neither night nor day. I felt inside the heart of the farm, as if my childhood surrounded me in the blue-black of the mountains, the hiss of the fire, the dark splotch of barn behind my father. It was a timeless moment as if I’d stepped into a chapter of Revelation where nothing exists but a realm of the nether world.

—quoted from cover of UK version of This Never Happened.

Crazy Think

Review after review of my book This Never Happened talked about the shattered past affecting all events in the present, the isolated farm, the vicious parents, the haunted darkness of the mountains, the need to face past secrets in order to go on with life. I know now that I wrote a classic modern-day gothic novel, replete with isolated home, dark family secrets, a psychiatric institute—or lunatic asylum in gothic parlance—an evil villain, and a hero. None of this was intentional. I had a story to tell—or rather Richard Cory Hayes had a story to tell, and I had to tell it. Out of many reviews only one reviewer got what to me was the point: nothing is what it seems. A rich family, high in society, churchgoing, was not what it appeared to be—just like Richard Cory in E.A. Robinson’s famous poem. I thought everyone would understand my main character’s name represented the story’s meaning. But as far as I know, only one person, one lone reviewer, got it. For the most part, reviews were good, but my book was labeled a thriller or mystery—a genre-suspense story. Genre—the label literary writers scorn. One
reviewer said it “descended into the sensational” and I had yet to learn about “sensational popular literature” such as Poe’s portraits of psychopaths” (Reynolds 169) or Hawthorne’s “probings into the psyche of social outcasts” (169). The word “sensational” also brings to mind the rise of the sensational penny newspapers in the early 1830s—the equivalent of today’s National Enquirer or Star. I never once envisioned my book in this way, nor understood that gothic sensationalism was what I was writing. Ernest Gaines, whom I admire tremendously, wrote on the book jacket:

Ms. Summers really knows how to hold the reader’s attention. I read the book in just one sitting. The story is so well balanced between present and past events. I was just as impressed by the structure of her novel as I was by its content, which held my interest from the first page to the last sentence.

Zakes Mda, another writer whose work enchants me, wrote to me that he enjoyed This Never Happened, that it was skillfully crafted psychological suspense. One of my best friends, the writer Ann Hood, said on my book jacket that “E.W. Summers’s first novel should come with a warning label: Don’t even think of starting This Never Happened at night—unless you don’t mind staying up until you finished it!”

I understand now that these people were right—I had written a suspenseful novel that did not break new ground. No one labeled it gothic, but perhaps they were as unaware as I was as to what was meant by the term gothic. What I do know is that despite the joy of selling a “first” novel to Random House, I was disappointed in myself. I wanted the review that said, “This is a writer to watch” or “This devastating debut novel is brilliant and engaging.” I wanted to be nominated for a Pen/Faulkner Award; I wanted my book to be made into a movie; I wanted to be a better writer than I was.
I was competent, and according to Flannery O’Connor “competence by itself is deadly. What is needed is a vision to go with it” (86).

I lacked a broad vision. I had not gone where the wild things are; I had taken a map and a compass. I knew the ending before I began the book. I knew the beginning. I did not know how I would reach the planned ending, but the fact is I did not discover the end—I reached it.

Meanwhile, I wrote another psychological thriller that did not sell. It was the fictionalized story of Susan Smith, the woman who drowned her little boys in a lake in South Carolina, entitled *Sonny Maxwell Wants Her Babies Back*. Nibbles, no bites. Too sensational. I started a brand-new book—the embryo of *The Divine and Miss Johanna*. It was a first-person narrative told from a repressed woman’s point-of-view, a woman who meets with Jesus on a regular basis. A woman who has an affair and leaves her controlling husband. I wrote three drafts. My friend Ann Hood told me one more draft and the book would be there. But I knew in my heart that that next-draft book was not a book of which I would be proud. It fell into the category of “chick-lit,” and I knew that I was better than that. Ann said something else—in passing—she said, “You know, Grace doesn’t have to leave her husband.” I never forgot this comment because it changed the way I thought—I realized I could start the book and not know what was going to happen. Alice McDermott in a workshop at the Sewanee Writers’ Conference (1997) said she never knew what she was going to write about—she just sat down and started writing.

I had reached a plateau, however. Dead man’s land. I was miserable and did not know how to reach what I knew I had inside me to write. It took a violent divorce and custody battle before I wrote *This Never Happened*. I decided a major change had to take
place in my life in order for me to grow. I made the choice to enroll as a PhD candidate in Creative Writing at Ohio University, quitting my job, living apart from my second husband, jumping into the unknown.

I consider myself a scientist. When I paint, I ask myself what I can discover. If the results don’t surprise me, it ends up in the trash.

—Joshua Abelow, Bon Remixed

My first academic year at Ohio University, I shared an office with a literature PhD named John Pruitt. He was teaching English 201: Critical Approaches to Fiction. I knew that I was going to have to be writing this introduction I am now writing—a critical analysis that related my novel to the ideas and texts of other writers, particularly those who have been especially important to my creative process. In my MA writing program at The Johns Hopkins University the focus had been totally on the workshops—not theory or analysis or literature. John Pruitt focused on the gothic novel's eighteenth-century British origins. Given that many readers in the twenty-first century find the gothic genre predictable, John also required his students to forecast where they thought the gothic genre is currently heading.

At the same time that I was examining John's syllabus, a novelist friend of mine, Lisa, was reading a partial draft of The Divine and Miss Johanna. By this time I had had several workshops, and despite the fact that my book had evolved into something completely surprising and new to me, no longer a first-person female narrative, but a
series of points of view, it did not meet with great approbation in workshop. One instructor called it “mainstream” in the most derogatory of tones; another suggested I cut out all the voices save one. While I appreciated the thoughts, I had discovered that I had some strong opinions myself about The Divine and Miss Johanna. The book I failed to sell after This Never Happened, Sonny Maxwell Wants Her Babies Back, I wrote andrewrote to other people’s specifications until I barely recognized it, killing any chance of discovery or surprise. This time, though, I not only made discoveries within my novel’s text, I made discoveries within myself. While still open to others’ ideas and suggestions, bottom line I was going to let the characters dictate what would happen under my guidance. I did not know how the characters were going to end up, but I did know I was not going to throw away my “mainstream” fiction and I was going to keep all the voices. Lisa, my writer friend who was reading a draft of my novel, said she could not believe that I was writing "Northeastern Gothic."

It took her remark, combined with John's literary influence, for me to realize that Northeastern Gothic was exactly what I was writing. Set in the Northeast, my book has many of the traditional gothic conventions as set out by John in his Winter, 2002 syllabus: tyranny of the past; stifled hopes of the present; physical, psychological, or ideological claustrophobia; grotesque exaggeration of character and location; and sickening descent into disintegration. Not only did this knowledge give impetus and direction to my novel, but it also created the exact foundation I needed to build the reading list for my exams, which, in turn, shaped the content of The Divine and Miss Johanna. More important than ever was my understanding of the tradition and influences of the gothic and also John’s push for students of the gothic to examine what direction it
is taking today. This was a very different prospect than unintentionally writing a gothic novel.

While a study of British literature is necessary to contextualize American literature, it is the American gothic tradition that intrigues me the most. When I first read Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* in high school, I entered a new and exciting world—mysterious and ghostly—that left me questioning my own perception of reality. I discovered Conrad Aiken's "Silent Snow, Secret Snow" in high school, too, a story that may or may not, depending on the reader, be about a child's descent into schizophrenia. I read Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, a melancholy tale of one man's conscience—again, a story open to reader interpretation. And then I came upon William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily." Everything I longed for as a reader I found in this one short story: mystery, death, a gloomy mansion, a decaying society, and "a long strand of iron-gray hair" on a pillowcase that proved Miss Emily not only a murderer but also a necrophiliac.

Thus began my own writing context—unbeknownst to me. In addition to Aiken, Faulkner, Wharton, and James, I have now discovered postmodern writers in the gothic tradition: Mary Gaitskill, Donna Tartt, Alice Sebold, Shirley Jackson, Edward Cary, Phillip McGrath, Mark Danielewski, to name but a few. Further, I have found books of literary theory that use Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* to create their theoretical arguments concerning temporal time and story time: Leon Edel in *The Modern Psychological Novel* and Peter Messant in *New Readings of the American Novel*.

How exciting I discovered the process of writing a more focused novel, how rewarding I found contemplating how *The Divine and Miss Johanna* fit into the gothic tradition. Some textual changes were basic: the main character Grace’s parents’ cottage
was no longer a cottage in a community of cottages, but an isolated cottage on a hill. I also worked the weather in as a portent of evil to come (think *Wuthering Heights*), and I made up a psychic gypsy grandmother. In addition, I laced in a psychiatric institute known to the locals as the lunatic asylum (think *Jane Eyre* and Rochester’s crazy wife or anything by Phillip McGrath or think about The Ridges overlooking Athens and its dark history).

In order to better understand the American gothic tradition, however, I took Dr. Paul Jones’s class entitled American Gothic. We began with the gothic form’s origin—a European genre, designed to exploit the anxieties and concerns of a specifically European audience. In Great Britain the earliest gothic novel, Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, was published in 1764. It questioned the status quo of the aristocracy and primogeniture, and it used what were to become common gothic tropes in Britain: a ruined castle, the supernatural, subterranean labyrinthine passages, family secrets, a complicated plot, victimized young women, the evils of patriarchy and primogeniture. The gothic form reached its heyday in England with the writings of Walpole, Anne Radcliffé, Monk Lewis, Godwin, Hogg, Maturin, and Mary Shelley during the years 1764 – 1820. Fred Botting in his book *Gothic* writes of this literature

Gothic signifies a writing of excess. It appears in the awful obscurity that haunted eighteenth-century rationality and morality. It shadows the despairing ecstasies of Romantic idealism and the uncanny dualities of Victorian realism and decadence. Gothic atmospheres—gloomy and mysterious—have repeatedly signaled the disturbing return of pasts upon presents and evoked emotions of terror and laughter. (1)

It is this last sentence that is key to a true understanding of the gothic narrative—that its conventions are used to evoke the past and to show that without addressing this past, the
present and future will remain haunted. For Britain, then, the decaying aristocracy and the cultural concerns of the rise of the middleclass, the juxtaposition of rationalism versus religion, provided fears and anxieties for its gothic writers to explore through the dark and brooding narratives.

America, however, was a fresh, new country—a land founded on freedom. How could we possibly have a dark past (and even a dark present) with which to come to terms? Teresa Goddu in her book *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* presents a convincing argument that America did indeed have its own dark past, its own cultural fears and anxieties that only a gothic narrative could convey. Her thesis is that the gothic must be read within its cultural context and that often an official narrative has as its subtext the gothic metanarrative—the subtext that is informing the supposedly “true” main narrative—only it is the gothic that is the real “truth.” In this way, one can certainly read gothic as subversive. For Goddu, the specter of racism—the treatment of the Native American and the African-American slave—is the true past that haunts America. She believes that the “truth” of this hideous past can only be revealed through gothic narrative—and the author may or may not be aware of what he or she is actually revealing. Paul Jones in his spring 2004 American Gothic class stated that in looking at gothic literature one must always ask on what cultural fear is the gothic playing? Fear and politics go hand in hand, thus this genre must have political bent. Having a political agenda, it must then also either be rooting for the status quo or pushing for change.

An example that proves Goddu’s notion of the raison d être of American gothic is Charles Brockden Brown’s *Edgar Huntly Or, Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker* published in 1799. This text also supports Jones’s contentions of a political agenda. In 1799, America
was an America that was far different than Britain. Its landscape alone differentiated it from its mother country. The idea of the landscape going on forever with an untold wilderness filled with caves, and waterfalls, and views never seen before imprinted itself on the American mind. Brown emphasizes that his characters live in a world—America—where people can go anywhere. It is very much a book about mobility and the subsequent disorientation. In addition, we have a focus on the domestic situation—and a key factor to the domestic situation outside of the city was the fear of the Native American. *Edgar Huntly* is, in fact, considered the beginning of American literature addressing the Native American. Americans also feared and distrusted “aliens”—immigrants from other countries, in particular the Irish, or the black Irish, as they were called. The article “Alien Nation: Edgar Huntly’s Savage Awakening” by Jared Gardner discusses at length the inner political wars in this country concerning the question of aliens—he talks about the Alien and Sedition Acts and the fears underlying such laws. Ultimately, it is clear, all identity needs an Other to identify against.

Brown’s treatment of these cultural fears leaves little doubt as to whether he’s advocating the status quo or change. The only change he seems to be interested in enforcing is the old adage that “the only good Indian is a dead Indian.” Goddu in *Gothic America* explores this issue. She says that John Neal, America’s first literary critic, attempts to found a national literature upon a literature of blood. His goal in *Logan* (1822), Goddu argues, is to use a tale of “race relations gone wrong, of white encroachment, and Indian revenge” to write of a national peace that can only be found at the “price of extermination” (61). The novel itself “participates in its culture’s discourse, turning the Indian into a fiend whose demise is foreordained as a way to consolidate
national identity and found an exceptional American literature” (63). Brown’s Edgar Huntly argues through its gothic narrative for the same extermination. In addition, Brown argues, as the Alien and Sedition Acts do, that aliens cannot and should not survive in America.

Edgar Huntly, Brown’s white American hero, sets off on two-fold mission: he is going to find out who killed his friend, Waldegrave, and he’s going to follow Clithero, an Irishman, and help him because he is distraught and disoriented. Clithero may also be the murderer of Waldegrave. The plot itself is a labyrinth in which Edgar winds himself this way and that, sometimes awake, sometimes sleepwalking, always in search of Clithero, but in the course of his adventures, he comes across numerous Native Americans—referred to as savages. Edgar puts into words the gothic convention of the past informing the present: “Most men are haunted by some species of terror or antipathy, which they are, for the most part, able to trace to some incident which befell them in their early years” (166). For Edgar, it is the death of his parents and an infant sibling at the hands of the Indians—murdered in their beds, their house burned to the ground:

You will not be surprised that the fate of my parents, and the sight of the body of one of this savage band, who, in the pursuit that was made after them, was overtaken and killed, should produce lasting and terrific images in my fancy. I never looked upon, or called up the image of a savage without shuddering. (166)

At the time in the book in which Edgar reveals his past to us, he is in a dangerous position. During a sleepwalking adventure, he ends up in the wilderness and he sees a fire. He heads toward it for warmth and help. However, what he encounters is not help but “savages”:
The legs were naked, and scored into uncouth figures. The *moccasins* which lay beside them, and which were adorned in a grotesque manner, in addition to other incidents, immediately suggested the suspicion that they were Indians. No spectacle was more adapted than this to excite wonder and alarm[. . .].I now gained a view of four brawny and terrific figures, stretched upon the ground. (164-65)

Poor Edgar is worried about warning the white folks, who include his friends and relatives, of the red danger lurking nearby, but he has no way to get around them. He tells us “the slumber of an Indian is broken by the slightest noise; but if all noise be precluded, it is commonly profound” (167). His racist discourse continues:

> Their supine posture assured me that they were asleep. Sleep usually comes at their bidding, and if, perchance, they should be wakeful at an unseasonable moment, they always sit upon their haunches, and, leaning their elbows on their knees, consume the tedious hours in smoking. (167)

In this same sequence whereby all Indians have the same traits, which serves as a metaphor for the rest of Edgar’s thoughts, feelings, and interactions with the Indians, Edgar discovers the Indians have kidnapped a girl and tied her up and gagged her:

> “Her features denoted the last degree of fear and anguish, and she moved her limbs in such a manner as shewed that the ligatures by which she was confined, produced, by the tightness, the utmost degree of pain” (168). Nowhere does Edgar say that the “savages” raped her, but it is difficult not to read that as a subtext. He must save her and himself. Although he has told us again and again that he is of the gentlest and kindest disposition, the first chance he gets, he throws a hatchet at the Indian who is awake and standing guard: “The stroke was quick as lightning, and the wound mortal and deep” (172). Edgar has never before taken a human life; in fact, he feels bad about it, but he had to defend himself and the innocent girl. This is just the beginning of Edgar’s amazing abilities to defend himself against the “savages.” By the end of the next chapter, he and the girl have
been accosted by the “savages” in Queen Mab’s hut where they are hiding. The brutal Indians drag the girl shrieking from the hut and, again, rape is suggested, but never mentioned. Edgar, however, manages to kill three of the four savages and later kills the fourth one as well. (Note: Edgar tells us repeatedly he is a gentle soul who does not believe in any type of savagery.) These “savages” are “tawny” colored with “terrific visages.” Furthermore, it must be mentioned that Queen Mab was an Indian woman considered a friend of sorts to the white people—but it is she, it turns out, who set the Indians whom Edgar killed out on their mission of destruction. It is clear that no “savage” can be trusted.

Clithero, the black Irishman whom Edgar is chasing, might also be considered a “savage.” When Edgar first sees him, he describes him thus:

The shape of a man, tall and robust, was now distinguished. Repeated and closer scrutiny enabled me to perceive he was employed in digging the earth. Something like flannel was wrapt round his waist and covered his lower limbs. The rest of his frame was naked. (10)

Very much like a savage. Throughout the text, Brown uses the device of doubling with Clithero and Edgar. Both at times look like “savages”—either red from the sun or red from blood—both are adept in the wildness of the vast landscape and at spelunking, both have hidden manuscripts and are acting as guardians of others’ letters. Both men have a mechanical aptitude, and they share a father figure in Mr. Sarsefield. Each has a secret box, which might serve as a metaphor for holding the secrets of their pasts (America’s past) that they need to resolve in order to move toward a future. However, by the end of the book, it appears that Edgar will emerge an older and wiser man—in fact, one might think of this book as a coming-of-age tale—and Clithero ends up dead. Why is it that
Edgar can emerge from savagery and Clithero cannot? The answer goes back to the idea that all identity needs an Other to identify against. Simply put, American Edgar is good; Irish Clithero is bad. He can’t be other than he is—black Irish. Alien. Savage.

Brown presents a strong case via his gothic narrative that Americans need to be fearful of the Indians and the aliens. Brown, it might be pointed out, lived in the Philadelphia area—a hotbed for politics—and after his eighteen-month spree of four gothic novels, turned to political writing, writing that in a nonfiction context underlined the ideas put forth in *Edgar Huntly*.

Charles Brockden Brown also wrote a book called *Weiland* (1798) where his emphasis is on family—but family as allegory for the early American republic according to Shirley Samuels in her article “*Weiland*: Alien and Infidel.” The main idea of this article centers on the concept that in the early republic the rhetoric of sexuality and the family became nearly interchangeable with that of religion and politics. Such interchangeability is a direct concern of the early American novel—so while concentrating on gothic sensationalism and sentimental seduction, the novel displays contemporary social and political anxiety about the stability of the family and its freedom from unfaithfulness—often figured as contamination of the outside world. In addition the binary of deism vs. revivalism with its excessive belief can be equally destructive to the family.

Samuels’s thesis is that the idea of good and evil are repeatedly linked in *Wieland*. This linking is done through the narrator Clara, who views her brother Wieland as good and Carwin, an interloper in the family, as bad. Clara sees Wieland as godlike and Carwin as Satanic. Wieland’s antinomian beliefs—meaning one may be freed from
moral law by the virtue of grace and her father’s Albigensian beliefs—that God and Satan are manifestations of the same force—link Wieland and Carwin for Clara. However, Samuels’s central argument is that both men undergo transformations and are both thus interchangeable by the end of the book—Carwin, the alien who represents deism and radical politics that upset the carefully contained family system set up by Wieland, and Wieland, the formerly faithful brother and family man who becomes an infidel—the men are interchangeable; the alien and the infidel are one and the same. Although Samuels does not put it this way, it certainly seems that she believe that the gothic trope of doubling is at work. Clara’s inability to see the two men as both aliens and infidels leads Samuels to conclude that what Brown is suggesting is that in order for the family to keep its identity as an “asylum,” the outside world must be posited as a threat—at the same time, without any outside social institutions to supplement the family’s functions, the family will collapse under its own insular tensions. She sees this as allegory for the early American republic. I find the gendered discourse astounding—and this is the discourse that shaped our country. It is laced throughout the gothic with incest, patriarchy and the fears of losing one’s chastity—not so different from the gothic overtones of my own family in the 1950s and 1960s. For my writing, it is the gendered discourse that shows up as an underlying concern. This is true of all five books that I have written.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, on the other hand, is far more subtle than Brown in his depiction of the cultural anxieties of his time. He wrote The House of the Seven Gables in 1851 while living in Massachusetts, a state quite solidly in the North. Although the Civil War is creeping closer and closer, one must make a close examination of this text to decide if the specter of slavery is one of its ghosts. To return to Goddu’s text Gothic
America, she points out that Toni Morrison writing in *Playing in the Dark* (1992) “reveals how race haunts American literature. Once specified in historical rather than symbolic terms, *darkness* emblematizes the gothic’s disruptive potential instead of replacing the term [darkness] as a more palatable term” (8). Goddu stresses that when we replace the term “gothic” with “dark” this signifies the critical displacement of the category of gothic American literature, thus making us complicit in erasing the gothic’s importance in the national narrative. Thus, it might be that despite Hawthorne’s Northerness, his dark and gloomy book (until the end) is revealing the undercurrents of the fear of slavery. In fact, one might read the entire novel with its past of stolen land (by Colonel Pyncheon) and stolen identity (Clifford’s) so devastatingly encroaching on the present that Hepzibah and Clifford are literally paralyzed as a metaphor for what slavery did to the African-American and American imperialism did to the Native American. Hepzibah and Clifford are prematurely buried in that grave of a house. Perhaps, then, the happy ending could be explained as the result of setting things to right—a Maule (a black) is marrying a Pyncheon (a white) and they are leaving behind the gloom and decay. The stolen land is no longer of any importance or worth. Perhaps on some level this is what Hawthorne was writing about. It is conceivable in the year 1851. Slaves, runaway slaves, and the whole idea of commodities (slavery) in the marketplace were a source of fear. For Hawthorne, the immediate fear was whether or not his books would sell, could he make money writing what he wanted to write; but beneath such a simplistic discourse, the dark side might lurk—a side perhaps not understood by Hawthorne himself.
Although slavery underlies all gothic narratives and they must be considered the national narrative in Goddu’s view, one might also consider that Hawthorne wished to exorcise his own personal past. The Salem witch trials loomed in his consciousness—so much so that he changed the spelling of his last name so that it would differ from the relative who sat in judgment on the “witches” at the Salem witch trials. The reader is led to believe, also, that the whole witch trial escapade may have been about the upper class finding a way to steal the lower class’s property. As in Walpole’s Castle of Otranto, we see the idea of “the sins of the father being visited unto the seventh generation.” In addition, Hawthorne seems to be addressing the regional past of the Native Americans and the way we stole their land. Is it not the papers giving old Colonel Pyncheon the vast lands in Maine, which remain hidden until the very end of the book—the “darkest” family secret? Woven throughout the text is the idea of families fighting over land and titles. Unlike Walpole’s text, however, Hawthorne’s American version of gothic is very involved with domestic minutiae—as is mine in The Divine and Miss Johanna—as is Rebecca, which is a domestic novel at its heart, the gothic mansion and mystery gothic veils to create tension and narrative drive. Hawthorne’s focus on domestic minutiae may well underlie a new cultural anxiety with the rise of a middle class. Hepzibah, who is living in the decayed inherited family mansion, is forced at last to work for a living. To her this represents the concept that she is no longer gentility—she has lowered herself on the social class ladder. She enters trade, long considered the mark of the middle class as opposed to the upper class. If one were to see the Seven Gables House as symbolic of a way of life, then Hepzibah’s entering the world of trade is indicative of the decay of an entire class system. For Hawthorne, this decay may well have meant the end of the stain
of the Salem witch trials. But it also marked the end of a way of life—the end of primogeniture, the idea of class related to property ownership and not needing to work, as identifying some people as “better” than others—at least in terms of class. Individuals are now evaluated as individuals. Although the mansion does not collapse or burn or disappear at the end of the book, the main characters ride away from it without looking back.

Perhaps the closest comparison might be the way William Faulkner in “A Rose for Emily” utilizes the crumbling Grierson mansion to represent the demise of the Southern way of life. Emily Grierson, like Hepzibah, is entombed in her mansion and prematurely buried by clinging to the “old ways” as set forth by generations that came before her. The two women are ghosts to the town and ghosts to themselves. Homer Baron, a Yankee laborer, holds out hope to Emily for a new way of life—a life that includes love. For Hepzibah, Clifford her falsely imprisoned brother, returning home after thirty years, embodies her hope that all will be as it once was. Both women are disappointed. Homer becomes a literal ghost and Clifford a virtual ghost. All these characters are prematurely buried in the dark narratives of their pasts in a uniquely American way. Only America had the South and all that entails, and only the Northeast had the backdrop of the Salem witch trials—both these dark histories involve the stealing of land and the stealing of identities—to be labeled a slave is to become a non-person; to be labeled a witch is to be murdered. Clifford’s identity as an honorable man is stolen when his cousin Judge Pyncheon lies about him and has him sent to prison for murder.

Despite the myriad of possible readings of The House of the Seven Gables, Teresa Goddu’s stark pronouncement that while the transformation of the marketplace is one site
of cultural contradiction—one that Hawthorne, in particular, battled with throughout his publishing history—“scribbling women”—his nemesis—it is the specter of racism—the treatment of the Native American but especially the reality of slavery—that haunts American gothic. Reading The House of the Seven Gables through Toni Morrison’s lens of how darkness emblematizes the gothic’s disruptive potential is imperative. Hawthorne could not have lived in America in the 1850s and been unaware of the dark currents of slavery. If one examines The House of the Seven Gables beginning with the first chapter, one will see that it is the most gothic in terms of the play of darkness (the italics are mine for emphasis): “With a brief sketch, therefore, of the circumstances amid which the foundation of the house was laid, and a rapid glimpse at its quaint exterior, as it grew black in the prevalent east wind” (2); “that the act of the passing generation is the germ which may and must produce good or evil fruit in a far-distant time; that together with the seed of the merely temporary crop, which mortals term expediency, they inevitably sow the acorns of a more enduring growth, which may darkly overshadow their posterity” (2); “The terror and ugliness of Maule’s crime, and the wretchedness of his punishment, would darken the freshly plastered walls” (5); “throwing its shadow from side to side of the street, overtopping the seven gables, and sweeping the whole black roof with its pendent foliage” (25); “But, last in the procession, came Matthew Maule, gnashing his teeth, as if he would have bitten his own heart in twain—the darkest and woefullest man that ever walked behind a corpse! (223). The text is riddled with shadows, grayness, blackness, and darkness—the connotations of each being that dark is bad, light is good. Teresa Goddu is absolutely correct that “given the historical context of the [American] gothic novel (le romain noir) its characteristic blackness needs to be examined in terms of
slavery” (74). Hawthorne—but more generally—that the idea of black and white, light and dark, slave and free underlines our entire history as Americans and continues to do so today.

Both *Edgar Huntly* and *The House of the Seven Gables* are quintessentially representations of the American gothic by virtue of their dependence on cultural fears and anxieties only found in America: the Native American, the Salem witch trials, and slavery. In exploring American gothic texts, one might keep in mind Robert Hemenway’s statement that

> the gothic’s oppositional symbolism carries a sociological burden even when there is no conscious intention of racial statement. Since the gothic’s color imagery... coincides with the mythology of race prevalent in Western culture, it leaves “racial fantasies” to reverberate in the gothic effect. (113)

It should be clear from the above discussion that both texts argue for a change in the status quo.

While the roots of gothic narratives are important to contextualize current gothic texts, John Pruitt’s student requirement to forecast where they thought the gothic genre is currently heading is vital to contextualizing my new novel and examining whether or not it discovers something fresh or, perhaps, carves out a new niche in American literature.

> In general we are reminded that the word “heimlich” is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which, without being contradictory, are yet very different: on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and
kept out of sight [. . .] everything is “unheimlich” that ought to have remained secret or hidden that ought to have come to light.

—Sigmund Freud, The Uncanny

According to Fred Botting’s Gothic, one of the central concerns of gothic in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been the nature of the self. As he says,

psychological rather than supernatural forces become the prime movers in worlds where individuals could be sure neither of others nor of themselves [. . .] Gothic subjects were alienated, divided from themselves, no longer in control of those passions, desires, and fantasies, that had been policed and partly expunged in the eighteenth century. (11)

In other words, the monsters—think Frankenstein and Dracula—in many gothic works are ourselves and the effect of horror comes from the fear that we may not be able to control or even know ourselves.

As I worked on The Divine and Miss Johanna, I saw that while gothic in the traditional sense of the tropes I was developing—darkness, isolation, secrets, domestic minutia, and gendered discourse—the novel was also an intensely psychological text. In that sense, I would agree with Botting’s ideas that knowledge or lack of self-knowledge began driving the gothic. Now that I am writing in the twenty-first century, I would say that my book has nothing to do with underlying cultural concerns such as slavery, but rather with the past intruding on the present, society’s underlying tensions about Christianity, fears about family fragmentation, and roles of women within the family and church. Family secrets and marriage, characters’ lack of self-knowledge, a need for an Other to identify against and the fundamental import of what it means to be Christian or spiritual drive my book. Given my own childhood gothic background sated by isolation, ghosts/monsters (the H-Man, my father), Twin’s and my labyrinthine imaginations, and
the ever-looming pseudo-goodness in the guise of Christianity with my father as God, this comes as no surprise. The most recent gothic book that explores the notion that family and marriage and the psychological are the heart of gothic concerns is Mark Danlewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000).

*House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski is similar to the film *The Matrix*. *The Matrix* to date is the seminal hybrid of technological wizardry. It is a philosophical film that has cut through this generation. *House of Leaves* is a hybrid of literary wizardry, replete with two on-going stories, graphics, use of space in the text as meaning, and a creation of what feels like fiction but is presented as a footnoted scholarly text. The psychological and psychoanalytical drive the book.

*House of Leaves* presents the reader with the same problems as the viewer of *The Matrix*: how do I enter this world? Art, be it film, photography, painting, or literature seeks a transcendental principle, a sense of wholeness that has been lost in the fragmentation, inequality, and alienation of contemporary urban society and its discursive and technological practices. So the question with *House of Leaves* becomes How do I enter this fragmented text? As a modernist reader? Or a postmodernist? Brian McHale says that modernist texts are grounded in an epistemological dominant, but at the same time they pose questions of alienation and paranoia (9). Iserhagen, however, claims the modernist text will question the self, the truth, lost frames of reference for identity, but ultimately the reader may be able to piece together a metanarrative that conveys meaning for him or her, that “the basis of the predominantly modernists texts […] rely most importantly on the pragmatic dimension of the text […] in reading the text is the reconstruction of a ‘hidden’ referent for the text—a referent, moreover, to which a degree
or kind of reality is ascribed that tends to transcend that of our everyday world” (26). Postmodern fiction, which McHale says has an ontological dominant (10), “is supposed to rely primarily on the syntagmatic dimension, reveling in verbal play and refusing both the reader’s involvement in the text and the reconstruction of a referent” (Iserhagen 27).

*House of Leaves* complicates these two ways of labeling literature because a metanarrative does emerge, the reader is able to engage with the story and reconstruct a referent for meaning and is grounded in an epistemological world. However, the story reveals itself in postmodern fashion, utilizing textual space as part of the book’s meaning, as well as using color, photographs, footnotes, graphics, and parallel narratives. In addition, the text repeatedly brings up the postmodern concept of authenticity, leaving the reader flummoxed as how to read the book. Paul Jones, Professor of American Literature at Ohio University, says, “The central anxiety underlying postmodernism is that there is no truth. How can we ever have knowledge if it is being called into question” (class notes 2004). Jones claims that in *House of Leaves* “underneath everything we’ve constructed is nothing, that the book is playing with everyone’s constructing his own truth but there is no truth” (Jones). This postmodernist reading is supported by the use of time and space as abstracts so that the reader can no more get a foothold on what is real than the characters can. Blank space on the pages is used in the same way—to both convey the void the characters move in, but also to disorient and dislocate the reader just as the characters experience such feelings.

However, if the text is read carefully, it becomes clear that there is one narrative and one “everybody” and the question of how to read this book no longer remains. The answer lies in the gothic specters of an unstable society: concerns of family dissolution;
the concept of marriage, which theorist Stephen Bernstein says is the ultimate gothic concern; the past intruding on the present in such a way that characters cannot get beyond the present until they deal with the past—the haunted house and the dark abyss the characters must traverse in their searches for peace of mind. Bernstein answers some of the questions posed above:

Gothic narratives are frequently termed convoluted or labyrinth, assessments often enough fairly accurate. This tendency arises chiefly from the concerns gothic novels have with the revelation and setting right of hidden wrongs from the past, and the slow way in which these wrongs are exposed over time [. . .]. Gothic narrative is thus usually what Tzvevetan Todorov terms a “Double narrative,” similar to the detective novel, which, he says, “contains not one but two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation.” (151)

This is exactly what happens in the House of Leaves. The originality lies in the fact that the victim of the crime is also the detective of the transgression unbeknownst to himself.

The mystery he is unraveling is his own labyrinthine past. Johnny Truant, the protagonist, even refers to his “bad-off labrinthian brain” (51). Bernstein further underscores the correctness of this reading of House of Leaves when he says,

When the gothic narrative structure is seen in conjunction with the Freudian model of neurosis, the leap is not too great to see the genre taking part in the transmission [. . .]. The subject formation demands a rectified personal history, guaranteeing social integration only at the point when the skeletons are, indeed, out of the closet. (155)

According to Bernstein, it is the marriage in which these narratives need to be constructed, that that familial construction is the underlying anxiety of the gothic novel. Bernstein’s article “Form and Ideology in the Gothic Novel” refers primarily to the patriarchal system of the earlier gothic works from The Castle of Otranto (1764) to Melmoth the Wanderer (1820), but the same underlying cultural fears and anxieties are at
the unstable foundation of *House of Leaves* to a far more psychologically intense extent. The title itself reflects that this is a domestic novel centered on the home, the deeply personal. The cultural fear at the heart of this text is the fear of the idea of the self and the fear of the self. What might knowledge of the self reveal? Who is one’s Other? What is anyone’s personal truth? These same ideas lie at the heart of *The Divine and Miss Johanna*—but they came to be there through my subconscious.

This is not to say that Professor Jones’s reading of *House of Leaves* or the ideas of modernism and postmodernism are not valid. Thus his concerns and others surface: What is real? If real includes one of the senses like feel, touch, taste, hear or smell, then talking about what is real is caused by an electrical charge to our brain. Which narrative do I accept as the privileged storyline? Whom do I believe? What is knowable? The trademark gothic ambiguity is present in both the modernist reading of the text and the postmodernist interpretation as well. Again, you will see that *The Divine and Miss Johanna* plays with these ideas. Note that I was not particularly aware that I was doing so at the time of the writing of my novel. However, as my knowledge and understanding of gothic narratives grew, they could not help but influence my work. As you continue to read about *House of Leaves*, keep in mind that *The Divine and Miss Johanna* has between four and six voices—depending on one’s reading of it—each telling a different story and one has to read closely to determine whose voice to privilege and why.

While accepting *House of Leaves* as a gothic text puts one on firm ground in one respect, the reader must also establish whether or not he or she is going to believe whether or not either of the two tales are “real”? Does either convince us of its authenticity? Or is this strictly a postmodern text that leaves not only the characters
alienated and isolated, left with a feeling of no closure, but the readers, too? The reader
has to decide. Modern theorists claim that

the desire for renewal and redemption, to be born again, to tap a primeval
origin, to return to the real, to be seduced by the *punctum* (the unexpected
sublime flash that disturbs, wounds, or punctuates the banal studium or
artful representations of the work, and in so doing draws the [reader] into a
dynamic field of re-created subjectivity), or however modern theorists
have tried to describe this singular desire, [...] drives the psychic desire
for New Worlds. (McLean 14)

Because this text can be read as a standard modernist gothic fiction, a fiction where the
desire for the return to the real can be satisfied, then the reader must determine which of
the two narratives to privilege. On the one hand, there is *The Navidson Record*, a story
about a film, which may or may not exist, created by Will “Navy” Navidson, Pulitzer
Prize-winning photographer. This narration, for the most part, is straightforward and
convincing in tone. Navidson produces this film after he and his partner Karen Hill, in an
attempt to work on their relationship, move with their two children, Daisy and Chad, into
what they soon realize is a “haunted house” on Ash Tree Lane in a pleasant Virginia
suburb. Various engineers enter this narration as does Navy’s twin brother, Tom. This
recounting is not only disrupted by the house itself, but also by the mysterious ghost of
Delial, a name Navy mentions to Karen but will not explain. He even talks of Delial in
his sleep, making Karen extremely angry about this mysterious other woman: “I’ve
warned him if he’s not going to tell me who she is, he better damn not bring her up. Part
of this move south was supposed to be about putting the past and all that behind us” (17).

The second narration is that of Johnny Truant, a young man, who presents himself
as an uneducated orphan (classic gothic trope). He tells us that when he was ten years old,
his father died when the Mack truck he was in swerved into a ditch and caught fire—
reportedly the driver had fallen asleep at the wheel (585), and that his mother committed unspeakable acts of abuse upon him and was then incarcerated in a mental institution when he was seven years old. According to Johnny, she died a suicide when he was nineteen (639). He spent years in horrific foster care and now works in a tattoo parlor. His social world is that of the L.A. night scene. He drinks, drugs, womanizes, and hangs out in an underworld reminiscent of the darker terrains of Scott Ridley’s film *Blade Runner*. He claims to have found *The Navidson Record* in the bleak, dark apartment of a dead man named Zampano. Zampano leaves a blur of words behind that are *The Navidson Record*, words on napkins, bits of papers, leaves, anything on which he found to write.

In terms of deciding whose narrative to privilege, we have two choices: *The Navidson Record* or Johnny. *The Navidson Record* is written more formally than Johnny’s narrative, giving it an authority that Johnny’s lacks, a power the reader is apt to accept as “the truth” because the people who inhabit it are educated professionals and the material is presented as a third-person Record, a document. However, Johnny writes the Introduction. Johnny begins the story and explains and comments on the third-person narrative of *The Navidson Record*. His narrative is foregrounded in four important ways: one, his story comes first, a standard fictional device to foreground a character, and it is through his eyes we get the other stories; second, Johnny’s story is told in first person, another standard fiction device for foregrounding a character’s story; third, Johnny is self-reflexive throughout his narration; fourth, despite claiming he himself is “clueless,” he provides important clues throughout as to how the reader is to read the text. Hence, Johnny is our privileged narrator. *The Navidson Record* is his mind employing
prosopopoeia to survive the discovery of his truth. Because this is his story—all of it, the settings, the characters, the footnotes, Zampano, the Navidsons, and his own dark life of tattoos and the night—the following provides the most vital clue as to how he wants his story told:

The house as vagina: The adolescent boy’s primary identification lies with the mother. The subsequent realization that he is unlike her (he has a penis; she doesn’t; he is different) results in an intense feeling of displacement and loss. The boy must seek out a new identity (the father). . . Navidson explores that loss, that which he first identified with the vagina, the womb, the mother. (358)

Johnny attributes this quote to Melissa Schemell and her book Absent Identification. However, this book (Schemell’s) exists only within House of Leaves, thus within Johnny’s mind, and informs the reader that that is how he sees Navy’s exploration of the house. It is not chance that he has given us his last name as Truant and named this book the Absent Identification. The entire book is Johnny’s search for self. One might also take note of the fact that in all the years Johnny’s mother is in a mental institution, he visits her once—as a teenage boy—i.e., adolescent boy (603). This is not coincidence. In addition, Johnny gives the reader another false quote regarding the house from imaginary writer Eric Keplard’s contemplations in his text, Maternal Intrusions: “Navidson’s house is an incarnation of his own mother. In other words: absent” (358). On the next page, Johnny goes to some length to explain (in the voice of Harold Bloom talking to Karen Hill, Navidson’s partner and mother of their children) Freud’s cases of anxiety among which belong the uncanny “in which the anxiety can be shown to come from something repressed which recurs.” But this “unhomely” might as well be call “the homely” […] for this uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression. (359)
It is in this same interview Karen has with Harold Bloom that Bloom comments to Karen on her story of the house with the black void at its center: “My dear girl, are you so lonely that you had to create this?” (360). The reader at this point in the text understands that Johnny is not only lonely enough to create *The Navidson Record*, he is driven to it by his own peculiar psyche and repressions that he can no longer keep denying. Key to the length of Johnny’s journal—which is what this book after all is, is that Johnny’s biggest question and biggest fear is: Do I want to know the truth?

In Johnny’s introduction he says that one day before Zampano dies, he leaves this note:

> January 5, 1997
> Whatever finds and publishes this work shall be entitled to all proceeds. I ask only that my name take its rightful place. Perhaps you will end up prosperous. If, however, you discover that readers are less than sympathetic and choose to dismiss this enterprise out of hand, then may I suggest you drink plenty of wine and dance in the sheets of your wedding night, for whether you know it or not, now you truly are prosperous. They say the truth stands the test of time. I can think of no greater comfort than knowing this document failed such a test. (xix)

Johnny does not know what this means, but he realizes that “the irony is that it makes no difference that the documentary at the heart of this book is fiction. Zampano knew from the get go that what’s real or isn’t real doesn’t matter here. The consequences are the same” (xx). Note that Johnny never says his own story is not true—it is *The Navidson Record* that is a fiction. This does not necessarily mean that the reader knows to read Johnny’s narrative as reality, as such. For the reader, Johnny’s quote from Zampano translates into the fact that emotional truths are far different than “factual” truths—and in the end, it is the emotional truths that are our reality as human beings. I would like to think that this is in part what is going on in *The Divine and Miss Johanna*. Keep this
quote from Johnny Truant’s introduction that “what’s real or isn’t real doesn’t matter here. The consequences are the same” (xx) in mind throughout reading The Divine and Miss Johanna. Reality and whose narrative is privileged are both in question. Is Jesus a “real” person? Is Jonathan’s narrative privileged because it is in the first person? Does it matter if Jesus is real or if he is a Navidson Record, so to speak? Is Miss Johanna real or is Jonathan real? Is the H-Man real? Do these questions matter? Do the answers add meaning to the narrative—or to the reader’s understanding of the book? Just how close are Grace and Frances to Emily Grierson and Hepzibah in their social milieu? Different readers may interpret all these questions differently.

Several months after I took Paul Jones’ American gothic class and became immersed in gothic tropes, Zakes Mda was reading a draft of the first eight chapters of The Divine and Miss Johanna. Here is an excerpt from his notes to me:

At first I found the change of narrative voice from third person limited omniscient point-of-view to first person rather curious. This was more so because the other characters in whose voices we get to follow the story (Grace and Frances) were not granted the benefit of a first person narrative voice. I wondered what you were up to. [...] The curious question was why Jonathan was given a first person point-of-view, and what effect that was supposed to lend to the story. Does this, for instance, make him more of a reliable narrator than Grace and Frances? Does this give primacy to his characterization that even Grace does not enjoy? Whose story is this anyway?

The first person narrative voice tended to foreground this character, giving him a more authoritative voice. For a long time the purpose for this was not clear to me. Then as I read on I discovered how clever you have been! When I got to the vicinity of page 300 it became obvious why Jonathan was being foregrounded with a subjective narrative voice. This is his story as much as it is Grace’s. Both are title characters of this novel. Whereas Grace is foregrounded by the series of events in the prologue (she therefore has a stronger history), Jonathan foregrounds himself with his first person narrative voice. Very clever! Very clever! (Mda notes, January 2005)
At this point—January 2006—Zakes has read the book in its entirety—as the rest of you will soon be doing—and I wonder if he still draws the same conclusion or sees that conclusion complicated in important ways? Other than in *House of Leaves* where the changing points of view are used to complicate and extend the meaning of the text—Johnny and *The Navidson Record* as explained above—gothic labyrinthine complexity in its changes and postmodern use of the paper itself—I am not aware of other gothic texts using this experimental method with point of view. In fact, the only story that I can think of that utilizes point of view to complicate and extend meaning is in a short story I read for the first time two days ago—“Blow Up” by Julius Cortazar. In this story the point of view is third person and first person and somehow omniscient as well, but it is all the same person telling the tale (I think). It is hard to read, and if I had not seen the film *Blow Up* directed by Antonioni, I am not sure I would have been able to piece together the story. I cannot claim that this story influenced my own work with point of view, but it is a story I shall use in future classes to show students how sophisticated one can be if one understands the concept of point of view. I would like to think that I have added something to the gothic genre by my experimental use of point of view; better yet, I would like to think the point-of-view shifts takes *The Divine and Miss Johanna* out of the realm of the gothic genre despite its isolated cottage, family secrets, “insanity,” use of weather portents, and underlying family and religious tensions.

In about the same time period that I was reading and studying gothic texts, I was reading Zakes’ book *Ways of Dying*. Finuala Dowling in *The Sunday Independent* (Dublin) wrote in praise of *Ways of Dying*
Once you have finished Ways of Dying, you won’t know whether you read the novel or dreamt it. Zakes Mda has gathered up all the human waste and political detritus of South African Life and distilled it into a magic realist text of great beauty, humour, and pathos. (book jacket Heart of Redness by Zakes Mda)

Even after finishing the book, I did not know what was meant by magical realism. With Zakes’ guidance, I read Marquez, Rushdie, Grass, Okri, and Esquirel. I saw connections between magic realism and gothic literature: both have underlying political issues; both concern family and all that that word entails; both often have ghosts, doubling, the uncanny, and the sublime.

Like the gothic, magic realism emerged within a special historical context and if one examines the way different authors utilize this phenomenon one will discover it is a literary term filled with hybrid aesthetics. Magic realism is one of the points of conjunction of postmodernism and postcolonialism, thus one sees it developing primarily in Latin America and Africa. (One also sees it developing in Germany and India with Grass and Rushdie—I am thinking that may be because of the repressive politics of those countries and their subsequent breakdown.) Another point regarding magic realism is that in Latin American cultures and African cultures, a great deal of the writing is coming out of a long history of oral storytelling—unlike the gothic genre or American literature in general (excepting the Native American). Zakes Mda in an interview in The Missouri Review says that in South African literature, the sources of magic come from their oral traditions, and he adds

the world of the supernatural and that of objective reality exist side by side in the same context. You do not find a line of demarcation between what is in the West is called magic and what is empirical reality. In the olden days, the people did not have that line of demarcation. Oral traditions were passed from generation to generation. But it is still the case
If you go to the remaining South African rural areas, you’ll find these oral literatures, and you’ll find an environment where people do not have that border between what is magical and what might be referred to as objective reality in the way they go about their lives in general. (71)

While I was still struggling to understand what made a literary work magic realism, I happened to read John Fowles’s The French Lieutenant’s Woman. I questioned Zakes as to whether or not this particular book was a magic realist text due to its two endings.

Zakes expanded my understanding of magic realism by discussing this particular literary label and The French Lieutenant’s Woman:

It seems to me most critics label this novel magical realism on the basis of its metafiction. Indeed metafiction is used a great deal in magic realism, but metafiction is also found in modes that are far removed from magic realism. Most of J.M. Coutzee’s allegories, which are not magic realism at all, are highly metafictional. What is important to note is that in magic realism metafiction undercuts and questions its own realism. Remember that metafictional narrative is self-reflexive. The writer simultaneously creates a fiction and then proceeds to make a statement about the creation of that fiction—assimilating perspectives of criticism into the concepts of “interpretation” and “deconstruction.” This is the simple definition of metafiction. [. . .] You can tell Fowles was really having a great time writing this novel. The whole idea of two different endings is a metafictional device. The author is telling the reader “this is a fiction, for crying out loud. It is not real life. It is my creation. I am God of the world I create, and I can do what I like with it.” (Mda notes 2005)

Zakes explained more characteristics that belong to the literary category of magic realism:

1. Does not emphasize psychological analysis of characters since it does not try to find reasons for their actions
2. Defamiliarization—new ways of seeing and depicting the familiar, so that we see it anew, afresh. The strange and the unfamiliar existing in the same context as objective reality—magic realist texts have a strong presence of the phenomenal world, existing side by side with empirical reality—wonders are recounted without comment as if they do not contradict objective reality—that is why magic realism has been
referred to as deadpan mischief—the characters in the narrative, and therefore the reader, do not find the supernatural—or the strange, the unusual—disconcerting. They accept phenomena that cannot be explained according to the laws of the universe as we know them.

3. Melancholy is found a great deal in Latin American modes of magic realism

4. Metamorphosis and transformations

5. Carnivalesque spirit: this relates to the ideological thrust of Bakhtin’s argument—his preferences for “low language” over “high” realized in the comic overturning of official systems of life and thought by unofficial folk culture and the energies with which it is associated. Note also that carnival is associated with masquerade, an upsetting of the firm structures and the strict rankings of the “official” life by an assumption of masks, false identities, which blurs any boundaries between high and low. (Messant 212)* Not from Zakes’s notes but an extension thereof

6. Textualization: this is when a metaphor is made real such as in the expression “blood is thicker than water” and sure enough, in One Hundred Years of Solitude, when José Arcadio Buendía shoots himself, a trickle of his blood “came out under the door, . . .went out into the streets, . . .went down the steps and climbed over the curbs,” etc. (Faris 176) Not from Zakes’s notes but an extension thereof

7. Transcendence: above and independent of the material universe. (Mda notes 2005)

Zakes indicated that a magic realist text will not have all these characteristics, but it has to have most of them to have the label “magic realist literature”. He also pointed me toward a text called Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community edited by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris. He showed me how certain magical realist characteristics worked in The French Lieutenant’s Woman, but also clarified that perhaps enough of them were not present—it was up to me to decide.

That ugly word “genre” is associated with magical realism just as it is with the gothic. However, the gothic literature of today tends to be categorized as mystery or suspense—whereas magical realist texts are accorded literary status. In the Zamora and Faris book magic realism is also called magical spirituality or the miracle of existence—it
is about looking inward to the magic that already exists—this according to Franz Roh, one of the genre’s conceptualizers (1925)—though he was referring to painting:

To designate the pictorial output of the Postexpressionist period beginning around 1925, Roh explains the origin of the term by saying that with the word “magical,” as opposed to “mystical,” he wished to emphasize that “the mystery does not descend to the represented world but rather hides and palpitates behind it.” (16).

One of his contemporaries, Alejo Carpentier, called such magic a kind of return to the ancient mythologies underlying a modern world which thinks it has outlived their uses—again, referring both to Roh’s thoughts about painting. I came across a definition of metanarrative in an article called “The ‘Real Worlds’ of Fiction: The French Lieutenant’s Woman” by Linda Hutcheon:

what first appears as merely self-conscious literary introversion functions as the means by which new connections are forged between art and life. And the most significant of these lies in the act of creating—by the reader as well as the novelist—“worlds as real as, but other than the world that is.” (132)

I am still thinking about this definition and its relationship to both gothic and magic realism. But I also think it relates to a down-to-earth comment made by Ernest Gaines—“I try to create characters with character to help develop my own character and maybe the character of the reader who might read me” (Mozart and Leadbelly 51). Gothic, magic realism, just plain literary fiction such as Gaines’s A Lesson Before Dying—it seems the goal is the same—to spark something in the reader even as your own writing provides the delight of discovery and surprise for you, the writer.

Right now I am thinking about what revisions I might make in The Divine and Miss Johanna, but I am also thinking about how sections of the first eight chapters might be considered by some as magic realism—and this before I knew what magic realism
was. For example, in his January 8 New York Times Book Review of Zakes’s book *The Whale Caller*, Madison Smartt Bell writes,

As practiced by Garcia Marquez and his numerous followers, magical realism resembles “real” mythology in its organized references to submerged patterns of meaning whose source might be the divine creators of the universe or the archetypes of the collective unconscious or simply the imagination of the storyteller. (9)

An example from my own book that relates to Bell’s thoughts is the idea of a metanarrative that undercuts and questions its own realism, which I believe to be present in my book. However, I have not used it in the traditional Latin American and African ways but in conjunction with what Alex Carpentier or Madison Smartt Bell might refer to as a return to the ancient mythologies underlying a modern world. For me, the myth is the story of Christ, which still underlies our modern/postmodern world. One only has to pick the latest New York Times Book Review and read the prominently placed essay by Judith Shulevitz entitled “When Cosmologies Collide—if Darwinism is Such a Powerful Explanation, Why Won’t Creationism Go Away?” (10)—or read in any of the major newspapers that we are still fighting over doctor-assisted suicide with terminally ill patients all the way to our right-wing Supreme Court—or read that the law banning same-sex marriage has been struck down in Maryland—to know that biblical mythologies are still heavily underlying societal concerns. So I see my character Grace, who talks with an objective-reality Christ, as a certain kind of magic—the magic of looking inward to the magic that already exists—for Grace, the magic of spirituality. It does not matter that no other characters see or hear him—the other characters juxtapose Grace’s magic spirituality with their own pedantic religion. It is in the other characters’ churchgoing that I see a metanarrative on Grace’s relationship with Jesus—or perhaps it is the other way
around. Again, I was not thinking about any of these ideas as I wrote my book. It is only now that I am aware of what magic realism entails that I can see how I used the ideas of metamorphosis and transformations, melancholy, and transcendence. It is not my task in this paper to analyze how I employed these techniques however, it is my task to contextualize my work, and so it is only after writing the book and studying with Zakes, that I deliberately employed a magic realist episode or two in the final chapter where Grace’s car actually becomes the Batmobile and neither she nor her son, Theo, see this as extraordinary.

To return to the notes that Zakes gave me regarding his reading of the first eight chapters, he writes,

Oh, the sublime runs through the novel. It is a stroke of genius to have Grace be orgasmic just as she tells Minette of her plans for Grace’s Own. And the sun comes out from the cloud and Jesus waves! Costume, both of the playworld of the superheroes and of the empirical world of the characters as palliative! I laughed when I noted that macaroni and cheese is the comfort food of some of your characters. It is the comfort food of my characters in The Whale Caller too! The novel takes my breath away at those moments when Jesus makes his appearance. Oh, the sublime runs through the novel. Perhaps you should investigate The Sublime as a mode of fiction that has been compared and contrasted with Magic Realism. [. . .] Oh, there are so many glorious moments! A lasting one is that of Grace with Jesus on the swings. Swinging naked with Jesus and demanding to be fucked by him, while he advises “listen to your heart,” is as sublime an image as you can get. We cannot get enough of her subtly flirtatious relationship with Jesus. It is brilliant that at one stage she communicates with him with her panties off. Something like that is always glorious. (Mda notes 2005)

At the time I received these notes, as I mentioned before, I was not knowledgeable about magic realism, and now Zakes was throwing in the concept of the sublime. I understood the word sublime on a pedestrian level—a piece of chocolate cheesecake melting on your tongue is sublime; an ecstatic sexual moment is sublime; the joy that filled my heart
when Jesus entered it to tell me my son was special was sublime—but I did not know the meaning of the word in an historical or magic realistic context. I set off to explore its meanings.


It is the phantom of our own Self, whose intimate relationship with, and deep affect upon, our spirit casts us into hell or transports us into Heaven.

—E.T.A. Hoffman (no source cited)

For many scholars, the sublime, the uncanny, and doublings function together to create the sublime effect. This research is important in the contextualizing of The Divine and Miss Johanna because it refers back to the concept of self, marriage, and the psychological as concerns of the modern gothic. At the same time doublings and family play a large part in magic realism while psychological exploration does not—but my book is a psychological drama, whatever else it might be. Reading carefully, you will notice doublings in the psychological tradition—watch for mirroring, a form of doubling.

Otto Rank, a renowned German psychoanalyst in the early 1900s, wrote The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study, a text many consider the definite account of doubling. Rank saw the gothic trope of doubling as a way of uncovering deeply buried and significant psychic material, on occasion proceeding from the manifest surface evidence (3). He used literary works such as Poe’s “William Wilson,” Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray, and the Hanns Heinz Ewers’s film The Student of Prague to make a case that sometimes literature or film might best be used to uncover psychological problems whose sources and implications are not obvious. Rank’s argument is that “by no means
can psychoanalysis consider it as a mere accident that the death significance of the double appears closely related to its narcissistic meaning” (69). Repeatedly the double is killed in the literature Rank reviews: Poe, Wilde, Dostoyevsky, Hoffman, Musset, and Maupassant among others. This confirms Freud’s theory of the narcissistic disposition toward the paranoid (74). In addition, Freud’s theory of the uncanny plays an important part in the discussion of the double or doppelganger: “The uncanny is anything we experience in adulthood that reminds us of earlier psychic stages, of aspects of our unconscious life, or of the primitive experience of the human species” (“The Uncanny” 4). As part of his thesis, Freud includes the following fears/coping mechanisms: castration, doubling, involuntary repetition as a structure of the unconscious, and animistic conceptions of the universe, meaning the psyche perceives itself as stronger than reality (4). In addition, Freud says, “The uncanny arises as the recurrence of something long forgotten and repressed, something superceded in our psychic life—a reminder of our psychic past” (4). Subconsciously some of these ideas found their way into The Divine and Miss Johanna as I continued writing and rewriting.

The idea of the sublime dates back as far as the philosophical theories of Longinus from the third century B.C. In his essay he expresses the idea that

sublimity consists of a certain excellence and distinction in expression, and that it is from this source alone that the greatest poets and historians have acquired their preeminence and an eternity of fame. For the effect of elevated language is, not to persuade readers, but to elevate them; and at all times, and in every way, what transports us with wonder is more telling than what merely persuades or gratifies us. (100)

John Bailles, writing in 1747, takes a sensationist approach; he is concerned with the kind of sensory experience stimulated by the sublime object. John Dennis, too, in 1704 wrote
of the sublime, concerned with objects of religious ideas—God and the obscurity surrounding the limits of His power and His capacity to inflict pain. However, it is Edmund Burke, writing in the 1770s, and Immanuel Kant writing a decade later, that most scholars focus on when exploring the sublime. Burke wrote a book entitled *Burke’s Enquiry Into the Sublime and the Beautiful*. While many scholars believe that the sublime has solely to do with the awe of the beauty of nature or lack of boundaries, Burke brings up many issues, which are now considered gothic tropes: the concerns with light and dark, of pain, of terror, the question of aesthetic distance from the experience. Burke’s ideas about pain and danger and obscurity and ambiguousness are integral to understanding his ideas of the sublime. He says,

> No passion so effectively robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear. For fear being an apprehension of pain or death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain. Whatever is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime, too, whether this cause of terror, be endued with greatness of dimensions or not. [. . .] Indeed terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently the ruling principle of the sublime. (57-58)

Burke also believes that to make anything “very terrible that obscurity seems in general to be necessary” (58). By obscurity, he is referring to sight—what we can see and what we cannot see—how much more frightening something is in the dark than in the light (59).

Kant’s ideas regarding the sublime are expressed in his *Critique of Judgment*: “beauty rises from ideas; sublimity from emotions” (252). He states: “Beauty in nature is connected with the form of an object, and form here means limitation; whereas sublimity is found in formless objects, whose formlessness suggests boundlessness [. . .]” (252). He goes on to say, “the broad ocean in a raging storm cannot be called sublime. Its
appearance may be horrible, but the pressure of ideas evoked by the horror must be high indeed to make one feel that such a scene is sublime; it could be sublime only if one forgets the actual scene and is occupied with ideas suggested by the storm but reaching far beyond it” (253). It is the imagination that is important. How can I not think of Twin’s and my imaginary games that probably resulted in our survival as intact human beings?

Coleridge wrote of sublimity, too, and his beliefs include the religious—God in his obscure limitlessness (161). Wordsworth writes in relation to the mountains of Langdale Pike, “if our minds not be perverted by false theories, unless those mountains be seen under some accidents of nature, we shall receive from them a grand impression, and nothing more. But if they be looked at from a point which has brought us so near that the mountain is almost the sole object before our eyes, yet not so near but that the whole of it is visible, we shall be impressed with a sensation of sublimity (“The Sublime” 2-3).

Fred Botting in his book *Gothic* suggests, however, that the 18th century was consumed by the sublime and that this interest in the sublime is crucial in the reappraisal of artifacts from the Gothic ages. Implicated in the transformation of ideas concerning nature and its relation to art, both Gothic and sublime objects also participated in a transformation of notions of individuality, in the mind’s relation to itself as well as to natural, cultural and metaphysical worlds. [...] The vastness that had been glimpsed in the natural sublime became the mirror of the immensity of the human mind. Elevating and expanding mental powers to an almost divine extent signified the displacement of religious authority and mystery by the sublimity of nature and human imagination. Sacred nature, glimpsed in sublime settings and evoked by old poetry and buildings, ceded to the genius and creative power of a sacred self. By means of natural and cultural objects of sublimity the human mind began its transcendence. In its imaginary ascendancy over nature, it discovered a grander scale and new sense of power and freedom for itself. (40-41)

While Botting feels that the gothic sublime is not inherently different from Burke’s sublime, David Morris in his article “Gothic Sublimity” says that Burke’s ideas are
deeply inadequate when discussing gothic literature such as *House of Leaves*. According to Morris, Burke “proves deficient for an understanding of the Gothic novel because he rests his theory of terror on a narrow, mechanical account of bodily processes. For Burke, terror derives simply and directly from whatever evokes in us ‘an apprehension of pain or death’” (301). Morris says, “The Gothic novel stands as an implicit critique of Burke—a testament to how much he and his age were unable to explain about the sublime” (302). For Morris, other conditions must be present to create the gothic sublime: exaggeration or hyperbole and repetition—sheer excess (302). Using *The Castle of Otranto* as an example, Morris points out that crime escalates into villainy; innocence is never merely virtuous, but immaculate and virginal; devils and demigods, imagined or unimagined, mix with giants, ghosts, and groaning portraits. In fact, says Morris, the “impossible” (Pope’s synonym for hyperbole) controls *The Castle of Otranto* from its opening scene, when young Conrad expires beneath ‘an enormous helmet, an hundred time more large than any casque ever made for human being’” (302-03).

Morris’s article articulates the importance of repetition and exaggeration in creating terror. His main point, however, is that the gothic sublime moves from language to action. Furthermore, he writes that Walpole’s book was written as a subversive response to the politics of the time. In addition, Morris says that it is in the gothic that one finds doubling (he calls it repetition) and the concept of the unknowable—that people are unknowable. Still discussing *The Castle of Otranto*, Morris writes, “Theodore’s exact resemblance to the portrait of his murdered grandfather not only confuses Matilda and complicates the plot, but, more importantly, it complicates our understanding of who he is—of who anyone is” (304). It is in *The Castle of Otranto* that the trope of incest is
introduced—the “new and often unspoken terror at the heart of Gothic sublimity—incest in the Gothic novel is the visible or secret or absent center of forbidden desire to which terror always, ultimately returns” (305). “Gothic Sublimity” also suggests that Death achieves a new prominence and a new terror in Gothic fiction (309). Morris says, “Death in the Gothic novel is not absorbed into the beauty of sentimental fictions about natural goodness but rather invested with contradictory emotions of desire and loathing. It is sublime because it remains a terrifying mystery, not simply unknowable but linked with human desires we wish to keep unknown” (309). Morris emphasizes that the gothic novel in its revision of the sublime “perfectly illustrates Freud’s view that terror does not depend on a belief in the reality of what frightens us” (310).

And so we return to the sublime mix of Freud and the uncanny, death, fear, doubling, darkness, vastness, hyperbole, the unknowable, and incest. The excess of doubles in the most recent gothic text House of Leaves confirms David Morris’s thoughts on how the gothic has evolved. The endless transmogrifications of the actual house do as well. If one is unwilling to accept Johnny Truant as the anchor character, the entire book would be unknowable—a sublime gothic horror. Even accepting him as the anchor character, the experiencing of this book is sublime. Terry Heller writes in his book The Delights of Terror, “As a particular response to something missing, Gothic fiction allows the expression of that feeling and an attempt that can only be partly successful to supply what is missing” (7). Both Rank’s psychoanalytical study of the double through literature and Freud’s view of the uncanny in literature are vital to the sublime gothic.
Freud sums up the qualities of Uncanny Fiction:

- Focus is on central character—the anchor character, events, people, etc. in the fictional world only have significance in relation to this character.
- External events are seen through the perspective of the anchor character and colored by his or her psyche; they are projections of the psyche of this fictional character.
- The text thus takes on the quality of a dream text, with manifest and latent content. The real and the fantastic (Freud’s required ambivalence) form a unity in the consciousness of the anchor character. This lends some of the events the shimmer of the symbolic because it is undecidable whether they are real or imagined.
- Stylistically, uncanny fiction requires a fusion of objective and subjective narrative styles. We commonly find a realistic frame, which reads like a report or newspaper article, which is suddenly ruptured by fantastic events. But this rupture is also related with the accuracy and detail of objective narration. The reader’s perspective must be that of the anchor character; events must be perceived through his/her eyes, filtered through the psyche of this character.
- Only when all of these conditions are met is the experience of the uncanny transferred from the domain of the fictional world to the receptive experience of the reader. (5)

This leaves me with some questions regarding the sublime—questions to consider when reading modern-day gothic, magic realism, or standard literature: is it in the language itself, is it in the effect on the character, or is it the effect on the reader—or perhaps a combination of all three?

While Longinus, Kant, Burke, Coleridge, and Wordsworth were helpful in my understanding of the sublime—an understanding I wanted in order to push in my own novel once Zakes brought my attention to it—their work does not address Gothic Sublime versus Magic Realist Sublime or Magic Realism as another name for The Sublime. I came the closest to an answer to Zakes’s thought-provoking suggestion to see how magic realism and the sublime coincide in David Sandner’s book The Fantastic Sublime: Romanticism and Transcendence in 19th Century Children’s Fantasy Literature.
Sandner covers Longinus, Kant, Burke, and Coleridge. but he adds some new thoughts. He defines a term called the fantastic sublime as the “tradition of the revelatory moment when the imagination, often in communication with nature, reveals a transcendent purpose” (4). For Sandner that is what the sublime is all about—transcendence. He says that “the apprehension of the spirit in nature has been called the ‘natural sublime’ and that the contemplation of a natural object leads to an aesthetic rapture, which produces an overflow of feeling, revealing the transcendent” (50). I cannot help but connect this to the divine transcendent that my character Grace and I share. Sandner summarizes Coleridge’s ideas as “the great movement of something, not the self, which exists without and within, sweeping the self away in a unity of this world and the world of the spirit” (50). This definition comes the closest to what I consider the sublime in The Divine and Miss Johanna, not just for Grace, but for Jonathan, her husband, as well. This introduction should give my committee room for thought on these different definitions of the sublime and the genres of gothic and magic realism.

Sandner writes, “The actual presence of the unspeakable is sublime. For Coleridge, a natural object, to engender the sublime, must have an incomplete quality that paradoxically leads the mind to seek for more” (50). This statement goes right back to the ambiguity that Laura Miller discusses in her review of Boyle’s book Tooth and Claw that literature “should deliver a hint of the sublime, that sensation of brushing against the pelt of something wild and unfathomable,” and that all good literature must “have a hint of the sublime, at least an illusion of mystery, an ending with a certain ambiguity that might lead to a haunting note of communion, and maybe, the wildness that comes from discovery as opposed to preconceived knowledge” (8). But Coleridge, for Sandner, is
also addressing the idea of ambiguity in the gothic doublings and magic realist doublings. Sandner is convinced that the “sublime is boundless and indefinite—the hidden summit of a mountain behind a cloud is sublime. On a clear day, however, this same scene would simply be grand or majestic” (50). Sandner’s definition of the sublime—boundless and indefinite—is very similar to my character Jesus’s definition of spirituality—ineffable and unprovable. There does not seem to be a definite definition of the sublime anymore than there is one of spirituality. Both are ambiguous terms. In terms of contextualizing my own work, while I am well aware now that the sublime operates in it on several different levels—both gothic and transcendent, I would say my life experiences contextualize my vision far more than this knowledge since it came to me after I wrote most of the book. What was the burning and crucifixion of Holly Bell if not sublime? Or the moment of horror I experienced with the gun to my head? All those years where I never told myself or others of the unspeakable?

In Sandner’s book he quotes Weiskel as dividing the sublime into three stages:

1. Mind is in habitual relationship with contemplated object
2. Overflow of feeling, hence transcendence—a sweeping away of the veil to reach moment of unity—yet loss of self in the moment
3. Release and restoration. (51)

This definition sounds suspiciously like the taking of a communion wafer to me—a woman who was immersed in the Episcopal Church during her formative years—and a child who took the church liturgy literally. It intrigues me that these men are not connecting this sublime discussion to spirituality or the transcendence of Holy Communion. (Although Coleridge does relate the idea to God in His unlimitedness.)
According to Sandner, gothic literature cannot have sublime moments. (I disagree and will show that later in the paper.) Gothic literature fragments and collapses as in “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, and Dorian Gray (55). The gothic will not lead to the second step of the sublime—the apprehension and awe of everything because the fantastic sublime which concerns Sandner requires a visionary to arouse wonder and desire, fear and loss of identity and a sudden rising above (57). Of utmost importance to Sandner is the reader’s imagination—he or she must have a fantastic imagination—to be able to live a moment in an imagined world—thus accepting that the laws of this imaginary world are seen and obeyed by the reader (61). While this sounds much like what magic realist texts invite the reader to do, Sandner makes clear that the fantastic sublime does not need to have political underpinnings—a key factor in magic realism.

Sandner also discusses what he calls the domesticated sublime found in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein. He calls this text a “fantastic Gothic masterpiece” (118). In this case, Sandner reads Frankenstein as a feminine critique of the male Romantic sublime:

In his monumental search for the secret of life, Frankenstein is like a male Romantic poet following the mythopoetic vision that inspired the first generation of Romantic poets and thinkers. The monster created is made manifest in fantastic form—the creature thus represents the confrontation of the human mind with an unknowable nature, with the experience that 18th century philosophers called the sublime. (131)

In addition, Frankenstein is a tale of horror and so is Oscar Wilde’s tale of moral decay in Dorian Gray where the fantastic serves only to baffle and frighten—thus bringing blockage and horror—and unwanted insight into the ravages of desire (132). According to Sandner, Frankenstein’s narrative “reveals a conservative distrust of
romantic extremes, a Victorian longing for security, society and self-command symbolized (as in Jane Eyre) by the domestic hearth” 132). It is only when Frankenstein loses all hope of companionship that he runs “to cold and ice—in a condition of almost philosophical despair to a Romantic synthesis of both in a suicide by fire at the North Pole” (133). Sander writes, “The horror of the blockage of the sublime moment is itself a disease of excessive consciousness, of an extreme realization, without relief and transcendence beyond the self—a death in life” (118).

Because there seems no agreement on the meaning of sublime, this is a good point in this paper to explore my interpretation of how the sublime works in relationship to the narrativity of specific pieces of gothic and magical realist literature. This is important in order to give context to The Divine and Miss Johanna if the sublime is present as Zakes says it is—and I think he is right—and I also know that the framework of the book has a distinctly gothic flair. In addition, I must ask myself how the sublime affects the narrativity of my own novel.

On the surface, comparing and contrasting the effect of sublime moments on magic realist and gothic narratives seems simple. However, all three terms are ambiguous in ongoing theoretical discourse as to their meanings. Scholars do agree that both genres are grounded in political and cultural anxieties. Gothic uses the conventions of the fantastic and terror, while magic realism uses the ontological, combining “realism and the fantastic in such a way that magical elements grow organically out of the reality portrayed” (Faris 164). They share the use of doublings, the uncanny, and the sublime.

Sublimity in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s gothic short story “The Minister’s Dark Veil” (1836) has an equally strong effect upon the narrative as the death of Conrad in The
Castle of Otranto discussed earlier in this paper. In this dark New England tale, Mr. Hooper, a minister in a small town, shows up at church one Sunday with something remarkable:

Swathed about his forehead, and hanging down over his face, so low as to be shaken by his breath, Mr. Hooper had on a black veil. [. . .] two folds of crape, which entirely covered his features, except the mouth and chin [. . .].

‘I don’t like it,’ muttered an old woman, as she hobbled into the meeting house.

‘He has changed himself into something awful, only by hiding his face’” (1281).

Like the theorist Morris earlier examined, Eric Savoy finds in the gothic sublime that there is “nothing so terrifying as the absence of meaning” (6), the unknowable Other. This moment of transformation on the story’s second page drives the narrative. Mr. Hooper becomes ghost-like in his veiling, both present and absent, which costs him his fiancée and joyful situations in the parish such as wedding parties. He creates an impassable gulf between himself and his parishioners except at the time of death: the veil at a wake was “now an appropriate emblem” (1283) and inspired sublime awe in the moment of unknowable Death.

In his book The Delights of Terror, Terry Heller introduces anticlosure as a technique of the gothic sublime—a nonending that leaves the reader entrapped in the story. Mr. Hooper’s dark veil remains a mystery to the “end” of the story where even upon his own deathbed, he refuses to remove the veil:

Mr. Hooper fell back upon his pillow, a veiled corpse [. . .]. Still veiled, they laid him in his coffin, and a veiled corpse they bore him to the grave. [. . .] and good Mr. Hooper’s face is dust; but awful is still the thought, that it mouldered beneath the black veil! (1289)
The reader is left—like the parishioners—facing the fearful unknown Other, the possible human desires we wish to keep hidden. The sublime in these gothic tales is the focalization of the narratives.

Sublime moments in magic realism have little to do with terror—rather they are integral to the magic qualities of limitless imagination in which the Romantics believed—minus the awe because a dominant characteristic of magic realism is the acceptance of the wondrous in a matter-of-fact manner. Although the sublime—as magic—is essential to magic realism, two texts, in particular, illustrate the difference sublime moments can have on the narrative.

The Life of Pi by Yann Martel is a fantastical feat of storytelling by Pi Patel, the sublimely spiritual son of a zookeeper in India. The zoo’s most dangerous animals are the Bengal tigers: “‘Tigers are very dangerous,’” Father shouted. “I want you to understand that you are never—under any circumstances—to touch a tiger, to pet a tiger, to put your hands through the bars of a cage, even to get close to a cage. Is that clear?’” (34). Pi tells us, “I might have anthromorphized the animals till they spoke fluent English [. . .]. I quite deliberately dressed wild animals in tame costumes of my imagination. But I never deluded myself as to the real nature of my playmates” (34).

We learn about the lives of the zookeepers and the animals. We learn that “Escaping animals usually hide in the very first place they find that gives them a sense of security, and they are dangerous only to those who happen to get between them and their reckoned safe spot” (41). Most important we learn that if “you fall into a lion’s pit, the reason the lion will tear you to pieces is not because it’s hungry [. . .] but because you’ve invaded its territory. That is why a circus trainer must “always enter the lion ring first,
and in full sight of the lions” (43)—establishing it as his territory; he is the super alpha-male and “they must submit to his dominance rituals” (43).

Then the story takes off on new tangent. Pi and his family leave India in a cargo ship that meets with catastrophe. Only Pi remains—on a lifeboat with a hyena, zebra, orangutan and Richard Parker, a 450-pound Bengal tiger. Pi doesn’t realize at first that Richard Parker is aboard with him. When he discovers this gruesome news, the zebra, orangutan, and hyena have all fallen prey to the tiger. Now it is Pi and Richard Parker.

From the first, Richard Parker has found his “reckoned safe spot”—out of Pi’s sight. At first the tiger is calm—he eats his fill of the other animals and drinks rainwater. Pi wants Richard Parker alive because he fears being left alone in his despair but understands it is only a matter of time before the tiger will leave his safe space and devour him. Adrift in the middle of the ocean, Pi must devise a way to survive. In a sublime moment of learned recognition Pi does just that. He sees a whistle hanging from a life jacket and realizes that he can tame Richard Parker by playing super-alpha ringmaster by laying claim to his own territory: “Let the trumpets blare. Let the drums roll. Let the show begin” (165) and Pi begins the show of his life, one that Richard Parker understands. “TREEEEEEEE! TREEEEEEEE! TREEEEEEEE!” (166) goes the whistle, and Pi hollers in ringmaster fashion: “WELCOME TO THE PI PATEL, INDO-CANADIAN, TRANS-PACIFIC, FLOATING CIRCUUUUUUSSSSSSSSSSSSS!” (165). Richard Parker understands who the super-alpha ringmaster is and where his territory is. This sublime moment—for both the reader and Pi—changes the course of the narrative. No longer in fear of his life from attack, all that is left is inventing ways to keep the beast alive so that Pi will not be alone and despairing.
Gunther Grass’ magic realist novel *The Tin Drum*, like *Life of Pi*, is sublime in its unlimited fantasy throughout. The narrator, Oskar, has willfully stunted his growth at age three, and he uses his drum and a piercing scream to communicate both on the personal level and an anarchist level in Nazi Germany. However, a particular sublime moment in the text presents itself and its effect on the rest of the story is very different from Pi’s moment of recognition. Oskar has been going to a Catholic church for years with his mother, always bored, always searching for a miracle. He discovers a sculpture of Jesus as a young boy with Mary and John the Baptist. Jesus is the replica of Oskar himself—same size, same cherubic expression, “the little rascal’s posture that of a drummer’s” (356). Oskar attempts many times to get Jesus to play his drum but no miracle occurs.

When Oskar returns to the church as a man (still the size of a three-year-old, drum in hand) he finds that Jesus “still sat pink and naked on the Virgin’s pink thigh” (356). Oskar says he has lost his “idiotic faith” in miracles and wants only “to show him up” (356), so he tries once more: “Cautiously, careful not to harm the painted plaster, I set Oskar’s red and white drum on his pink thighs” (356). He waits: “I’m damned if he doesn’t begin to drum. [. . .]. He started in with his right stick, then a tap or two with the left, then both together” (357). Jesus plays song after song—Oskar’s sublime moment has arrived. But the miraculous does not affect the narrative. The episode could be left out and not change the course of the story.

Both gothic and magic realism use the sublime as a convention in their narratives. In most gothic texts sublime moments directly affect the narrative. In magic realism, though, the sublime is so organic to its definition that it is difficult to draw conclusions as to how its use of specific sublime moments—as a genre—affect narrativity.
To return to the conundrum of investigating the sublime as a mode of fiction that has been compared and contrasted with magic realism, essays by Wendy Faris, Luis Leal, and Amaryll Chanady in the book *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* add to the dialogue. Again, the writers do not agree on definitions of the sublime or magic realism.

The sublime is not indexed as a specific mode of fiction in this text. However, Wendy Faris lists the primary characteristics of magical realism:

1. The text contains an “irreducible element” of magic, something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as we know them.
2. Descriptions detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world—this is the realism in magic realism, distinguishing it from much fantasy and allegory.
3. The reader may hesitate (at one point or another) between two contradictory understandings of events—and hence experience some unsettling doubts. The reader’s primary doubt in most cases is between understanding an event as a character’s hallucination or as a miracle. (Think about this point when reading of Grace’s exploits with Jesus.)
4. We experience the closeness or near-merging of two realms, two worlds. The magic realist vision exists at the intersection of two worlds, at an imaginary point inside a double-sided mirror that reflects in both directions.
5. These fictions question received ideas about time, space, and identity. (167- 73) (Consider *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.)

Note how earlier in this paper Zakes expanded upon these primary characteristics as defined by Faris. Faris goes on to illuminate each of these characteristics and secondary characteristics through discussions of Marquez, Rushdie, Grass, and a particularly interesting analysis of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*—a text some claim is magic realist and others claim is gothic. Morrison—if you read her nonfiction discussions of *Beloved*—clearly sees this book as gothic in all the ways mentioned above by Teresa Goddu.
Luis Leal continues the dialogue regarding magic realism and also the fantastic. He believes that magical realism cannot be identified with either fantastic literature or psychological literature or hermetic literature (121). Unlike superrealism, magic realism does not use the dream motifs associated with both the gothic and the fantastic (121). Leal says, “magical realism is not an aesthetic movement as was modernism, which was interested in creating works dominated by a refined style” (121). Indeed, magical realism is not magic literature, either—its aim unlike that of magic is to express emotions—not evoke them. Magic realism is an attitude toward reality—the writer confronts reality and tries to untangle it, to discover what is mysterious in life. (122-23)

The most important aspect of magical realism to keep in mind for Leal is that “in these magical realist works the author does not need to justify the mystery of events, as the fantastic author has to” (123). The gothic author, too, has to justify the mystery in his or her works. Leal adds that “in fantastic literature the supernatural invades a world ruled by reason” (123). He adds this statement:

In order to seize reality’s mysteries the magical realist writer heightens his sense until he reaches an extreme state that allows him to intuit the imperceptible subtleties of the external world, the multifarious world in which we live. (123)

Leal also feels strongly that magical realism does not derive from Kafka as the theorist Angel Flores does (121). Leal says in the prologue to The Metamorphosis Jorge Luis Borges notes that the basic characteristic of Kafka’s writings is the invention of intolerable situations (121). Leal says Borges himself is a writer of the fantastic, “where the principle is the creation of infinite hierarchies” (121). Neither of these two traits—those of Kafka and Borges—permeates magical realism where the “principal thing is not
the creation of imaginary beings or worlds but the discovery of the mysterious relationship between man and his circumstances” (122).

Amaryll Chanady enters the dialogue as to the meaning of magical realism with her essay “Territorialization of the Imaginary.” Her main point is that what is problematic is the apparent contradiction between the definition of magic realism as “an amalgamation of realism and fantasy” that includes narratives such as The Metamorphosis and the stipulation that the “practitioners of magic realism stick to reality” (129).

Like the gothic theorists, the magic realist theorists’ dialogue is unending, but it cannot be complete without a mention of Kafka and Borges. Are they magic realists? That depends on whose essay one reads. Other writers one might not think of as magical realists are also mentioned in various reviews or essays: Alice Hoffman, John Fowles (remember the earlier discussion in this paper of The French Lieutenant’s Woman), Hilary Mantel, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Lee Smith, Graham Joyce—to name but a few. If you are familiar with these writers’ work, it is obvious that the dialogue will continue. It is no different with the gothic. I have read in varying places that John Knowles, William Gibson, Truman Capote, Grace Metalious, Andre Dubus III, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, H.G Wells, Ray Bradbury, and Neal Stephenson are gothic writers. Toni Morrison shows up on both these lists, and perhaps one could make an argument that Marilynne Robinson’s Housekeeping is gothic or magic realist. What I am seeing is a blurring of gothic, magic realism, fantasy, and science fiction. Underlying many of the texts is what might be called simply the domestic novel. For example, Rebecca is at heart a domestic fiction—a man, his new younger wife, and the ghost of his earlier wife. He has a home
and a sibling, dogs, a domestic hearth. It is the trappings of the villain, the fire, the moral ambiguity of the hero’s actions, the ancient family home looming in the background from page one that give this book the label gothic. But is it not a love story, too? A simple love story complicated by the past? Anyone who has been divorced and remarried can speak to the ghost of prior spouses. Olivia Butler who writes what is termed science fiction is often writing love stories with the trappings of science fiction. Like Water For Chocolate is full of delightful magical realism devices, but, it, too, seems at heart a story of family.

As far as The Divine and Miss Johanna goes, I think, perhaps, it comes closest to being like Housekeeping—domestic, complicated by peculiar family members, mirrorings/doublings and the isolated cottage combined with each of my characters’ isolation. The underlying cultural fears and anxieties go right back to Stephen Bernstein’s article about marriage being at the heart of the gothic. This aspect of our cultural fears and women’s place within the marriage is, indeed, psychologically intense. In an earlier draft that Zakes has read but the rest of you have not because Zakes is my dissertation director, I had a chapter that took the book into the realm of full gothic horror. It was my favorite chapter. I am working on revising that chapter because it throws off the tone of the book—the lyrical magic of Grace’s world and the mundane world of Jonathan—and foregrounds a character who is not meant to be foregrounded. However, I think that my next book will be full-blown gothic—that seems to be the direction I want to go. I see the chapter that I had to tone down due to its undue gothic tone as the seed of my next book. Because I have learned so much about the gothic and magic realism, I can make informed choices about what effects various actions will have on my narrative.
It is my gothic childhood, Christ-haunted, and my early readings of du Maurier, Faulkner, Aiken, James, and Wharton that best contextualize *The Divine and Miss Johanna*. My childhood and all five authors are forever seared on my soul. du Maurier also wrote books that defy categorization such as *Frenchman’s Creek* and *Jamaica Inn*, which I read as a young girl. Given that the heart of my novel is the domestic, a story of a woman who “resists the expected, the traditional, the ‘correct,’ one might say I am dialoging with the literary legacy of Nella Larson” (Larson viii).

Studying American gothic and magic realism certainly affected the story as it evolved but never to the extent my own gothic horror of a childhood did. Twin’s and my endless rehashing of the past and attempts to understand our own deep repressions and suppressions and the psychology underlying my parents’ behavior remind me of Zakes’ description of the first eight chapters he read:

> Up to this point this is a breathtaking story of suppression: suppressed sexuality, suppressed dreams, suppressed ambitions, and most of all suppressed desires. Generations of unfulfilled women, sharply characterized in a deeply psychological drama. (Mda notes 2005)

While the past is mentioned and the psychological, no mention of psychological thriller is in this summary, nor is there any mention of a well crafted suspense drama. No genre label. Underlying cultural issues concerning women are mentioned as they would be in both a gothic genre novel or in magical realist novel—but *The Divine and Miss Johanna* is an odd hybrid of aesthetics.

I would like to think that should Laura Miller review my book, she would write that *The Divine and Miss Johanna* has “a hint of the sublime [that sensation of brushing against the pelt of something wild and unfathomable], at least an illusion of mystery, an
ending with a certain ambiguity that might lead to a haunting note of communion, and maybe, the wildness that comes from discovery as opposed to preconceived knowledge” (8). My book might answer John Pruitt’s question as to what direction his students think the gothic might be headed: The Divine and Miss Johanna is a result of my coming to terms with modernism, postmodernism, and where and how the gothic and magic realism fit into the world of American literature. While being distinctly American, my novel blurs the boundaries of the American gothic tradition and the lush, lyrical world of magic. Told in distinct voices, all of my characters move in spaces that a reader might interpret as real, as a projection of the character’s unconsciousness, or, perhaps, as a space of deep denial. In turn, The Divine and Miss Johanna is negotiating the territory between American gothic and Latin American and African magical realism in a uniquely American way—and in such a way that it is abundantly clear that the story pushes for change—not a maintaining of the status quo. And Underneath lurks the question—who is one’s Other? Do I want to know the truth?

Oh, I hope I have gone where the wild things are.

8

Every new story arrives as a miracle, and to understand that[…] as long as [a writer] writes, he can keep being born again.

—Terrance Rafferty, the New York Times Book Review
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PROLOGUE

Grace is little, no more than six, old enough to sled by herself, not old enough to go out on the lake wearing skates without Mama or Daddy. She’s at the cottage in the Catskills, and it’s cold and gloomy, inside and out. Late December. Christmas Day. No real heat at their summer place, kitchen and living room fireplaces, hand built by her daddy, stone by stone. She’s bundled into a thick gray sweatshirt, bright red letters reading Thayer Insurance across its front, purple snowsuit her mom picked out, tasseled lavender hat and mittens, deep purple scarf her daddy knitted, shades of purple her mom’s favorite color, not Grace’s at all. She glances outside. Snowflakes fall like flannel from a sheet of gray sky.

“Let’s go.” She’s clutching the skates in her hands. A grandfather clock in the living room began striking, a whir of gears, followed by twelve tinny notes. Noon. Her parents sit across from each other at the kitchen table, wineglass in front of her mom, tumbler close by her dad’s right hand. Daddy always waves from the shore or the footbridge leading to the wooden raft, doesn’t skate, doesn’t walk across the ice. First, I’ve got weak ankles, he tells her. Second, I don’t like cold weather. Third, skating’s your mom’s thing. Grace knows when he says things in threes he’s mad or upset or both.

“Mama?” Frances loves to skate, is good at it, can do smooth figure eights backward and forward, the biggest imaginable smile on her face. And her mom needs her to say how great she is. Only yesterday Frances took Grace out onto the ice, to the far end of the lake, the frozen end, held her hand, skating her around and around, talking to her, my
baby, my silly baby, teaching her how to swing her hips to get that just-so backward motion. Frances knelt down in a swift lovely movement, put Grace’s face between her gloved hands, kissed her, said, “Oh, my silly dreamer, you do need me, don’t you?” So loving, oh, so fancy, her white jacket soft, her hat a fluffy puff, hair peeking out from under it, blond, smooth, not curly and out-of-control like Grace’s own. Dreamer because Grace sometimes feels a touch on her face or hears a hymn that awakens her, and she creeps into her parents’ bed to tell them. Or because she dreams of an endless empty black hole that terrifies her. Dreamer because she sometimes remembers events her mother says with a smile, a kiss, a hug, never happened.

And yet for all her Frances’s prettiness, a prettiness that makes Grace want to touch her, put her hand to her mother’s pink cheek, she sees Frances as a woolen sweater—clothing that’s warm but itches you to death all the same. A garment you can’t be sure won’t shrink or unravel. Material you have to take very good care of.

She tugs at Frances’s arm. “C’mon, Mama. Let’s skate.” Her dad, Leon, is unmoving, too, not just slow-mo as he calls his measured way of doing things, but a billowy jacket, thick and pushing Grace away, not cuddling her close like his soft mackinaw self. His face has a strange expression. Dark and angry. Funeral clothes, are the only words Grace has to describe it. Dull black. Like she’s seen in her mother’s old magazine pictures of Jackie Kennedy. Deep lines edge from his nose to his mouth. His dark face turns pasty, the way it does when he’s angry or upset, a slight sheen of dull satin on his forehead, “Daddy,” she says. “Come on. We’ll all go.” Her voice rises on these last three words. She can see his anger, an ugly soiled cloth used to polish his guns.
She can hear her words, thin, wavy, curling around the room. We’ll all go, we’ll all go, we’ll all go.

Grace stands at the end of the table between her parents’ two chairs and takes her mom’s right hand, links her pinky with her dad’s, like she always does. She tilts her head to the side in that way she has, as if listening to what isn’t said.

Her mother looks white, unmoving, her father gray as the flannel sky. Ghosts, she thinks, they’re ghosts, and cries out, “Mama, Daddy” because she knows whatever’s wrong with them has been wrong for a long time. She must not lose them. All we have is each other, Mama tells her at night when she tucks her in with kisses on the forehead, nose, and lips and a soft sweep of her hand across Grace’s hair, her smell of minty lavender swelling around them both. Daddy is Grace’s special friend, he listens, hears all about her teacher, Miss Davies. Last night he sat by her bed, binding off the sleeve of a sweater he’d knitted for her mom, and she told him how Miss Davies failed her in spelling. “Do you want me to talk to her?” Daddy asked, and Grace both did want him to and didn’t, so she shook her head, no, and wiped away tears when he held her hand tight and said, “I can’t spell, either. Never could.”

Grace listens to him, too. He needs her to know how hard he tries to help out at her mom’s insurance business. She always says, “You do fine, Daddy, fine,” even though she’s not at all sure that he does.

“Come on,” Grace says now. “Please.”

But Frances is up and out of her chair. One shove and the chair slams beneath the table. She puts her face in Leon’s, a breath away. “Are you satisfied?” she hisses at him. “Look at your daughter, how happy she is. Is that what you want?” Grace has seen
her itchy mother turn shiny red, seen her press her lips together, heard her say,

“We’re not opening that can of worms.” And she’s shuddered, pictured gross, wiggling
worms squirming out of the can and coming after her. She’s seen the way her mother’s
face flushes when she’s angry or hurt, but she has never seen her wild. Blond hair flying.
Slender hands clenched into tight fists. Frances yanks her chair from under the table. She
rams it against a wooden counter top, saying, “I wish this was you.” Frances starts to
cry, covers her face with her hands. “How could you after all we’ve been through?”

Baby Nathan thrums through the cottage and Grace’s heart.

Leon snatches up his knitting bag from beside his chair, yanks out two thick
needles, casts on blood-red yarn. Grace’s heart skips one beat, two, three. He’s humming
now, her father’s a hummer, Johnny Cash, always Johnny Cash. No need to say the
words, the whole family knows them: “At the door the leaves are falling, A cold wild
wind has come. . . .”

Gripping her skates, she’s running out of the cottage, rattle rrattle, rrattle across
the pine-planked porch and steps, past her beloved wide wooden swing hanging lonely
from the naked maple tree, down the snow-studded path to Silver Lake. She loves to sway
in the air, high on the swing her daddy put up, but she’s afraid to jump off into the wild
blue yonder—being sent through a vast space— the way her best friend Minette Trow
does—for Grace it’s a jump into the emptiness of her bad dreams, not that she tells
anyone—so her daddy always catches her. Now she falls to her butt on the path and
slides past the row of desolate tamaracks, down the last few yards to the lake’s edge
where she unbuckles her boots, takes off her mittens, and hauls on her skates. Mama
always helps her, tugs them on, ties them tight. Kisses her, once on the forehead, on the
nose, on the lips. Not this time. I love you, Mama, Grace thinks. She puts her hands over her ears, over her lavender hat. She wraps her scarf over her ears, but their voices seep inside her the way the snow seeps through the flannel sky. She runs her index finger up and down the knitted scarf until her skin burns. She puts on her mittens. She looks up toward the cottage, high and alone on the hill, no other cottages anywhere close, leafless tree branches stretching out menacing, twisted fingers. The H-Man story her father told her comes to her, and she trembles. Long ago, in these very mountains, the H-Man lived in a house with his wife and children, a baby boy and one quiet little girl. The baby never stops crying. One night a fire breaks out in their cabin. Flames shoot, orange and blue and red and yellow like Leon’s yarn, and they blast across the dark, night sky. The wife and the little girl get out but not the baby. Others in the town say that the H-Man rises from the grave twice a year, always in the rain, haunting the mountains, the cottages. Snow swirls around her, seeming to fall up as well as down.

The lake is silver mesh stretching out in front of her, sky overhead gray, too, a shadowy smear. The footbridge and raft appear gray as dusky veils. Using the tip of her right skate to push at the ice, Grace is off and moving across a smooth space toward the middle, toward a place as far away from the cottage as she can get. She has a good idea what they’re fighting about. An indiscretion. But she doesn’t know what an indiscretion is.

Grace skates farther out onto the silvery web of ice, right foot, left, skirting a scary point, a place where the spring drains off the lake, the water always moving, until she is dead center in the lake. She can see dead cattails near the shallow shoreline, the stalks burlap brown, and what she thinks of as the “toilet paper” tops have loosened
from the stalks and flown off into the wind. Leon uses the dried leaves to weave furniture and mats.

The ice is clumpy now, chunks of gray and yellowy white. It’s rough, jagged. She has never been alone on the ice. She has never carved her own path, only skated in her mom’s swirling circles. Something’s soaring inside her. She flings her arms high in the air over her head. Hurray, she cries. Hurray, hurray, hurray.

Her mother’s voice, her father’s. She turns in a wild swing, faces the shore. They walk on ice toward her, tiptoeing, hands outstretched, Leon carrying one of his long-barreled rifles, her mother a broomstick. How odd. Who is he going to shoot? A muskrat? Will his weak ankles give way? Will her mother sweep the ice with her broom? Grace laughs and laughs. Loud. Echoey. The crunch becomes a crack and she’s slipping, sliding, sinking into the black cold of nothingness. Her parents are beside her, Daddy on his stomach, stretching out the rifle, slow-mo, Mama pulling her from danger, one on either side. All she sees is whiteness edging her mother’s face, gray covering her father’s like a cloud’s silver lining. The gun barrel is beside her, against her shoulder, and she feels as if it’s pushing her down, down, down into the water. No, her daddy wouldn’t do that.

A ghostly figure nearby? A warm breeze? For an instant, Grace has a sense of cozy familiarity, as if someone is enfolding her in his arms, saving her from empty desolation. She wants to fall into the warmth. A silk slip of a feeling slides over her. This has happened before. She sticks out her tongue. No snow. A sign.
She’s in the dank cottage now, a thick scratchy woolen blanket around her, her mother’s arms binding Grace so tight she can’t move. Frances’s breath is everywhere, suffocating, hot on her neck, her face.

And there is her father, same day as the fall through the ice, only it’s night and dark, the cottage gone. She’s home at their Mitford house, the redbrick ranch, her nonnie, a small safe square of blanket smelling of powdery babyhood, in her arms, and he’s pulled up a chair in the shadowy dark beside her bed. He’s humming, a soft murmuring song she knows the words to because he hums it all the time, “And it took me back to somethin’. . . That I’d lost somehow somewhere along the line. . .”

She holds her nonnie closer. She hears another voice, the words too faint for meaning. Yes? she wants to say. Yes? And then she’s so warm inside it’s as if a down comforter has taken up residence in her heart, and she folds into its familiar heat. She’s been here before. It’s one of her secret spaces hidden deep within her, silent places to store words or events she doesn’t understand.

Her father takes her hand and brings it to his mouth and kisses it. He kisses her forehead once and each cheek twice. She pretends to be asleep, but she’s more wide-awake than she’s ever been. Her dad links his pinky with hers and pulls his chair closer. She hears the thunk of his knitting bag as it hits the floor. He lets go of her finger and leans toward her, cradling his head in his hands. He cries, a quiet, desperate sound. He’s whispering, an eerie, creepy hiss to his dead mother, Mama Essie, a fortuneteller, whose prophecies and weather portents people had come from all over the county to hear.

Grace knew her Grandma Essie hadn’t foretold anything good for her dad or his brother Charlie. Something Wicked This Way Comes, that’s all she’d say. Sometimes Grace
could feel her dead grandma’s presence. You’re wrong, her father’s saying now. I’d never let Gracie get hurt. She hears his sobs rumbling up from his heart, him saying, That was an accident and then a humming of pain that has no words. He lifts his head and takes hold of her pinky again. “The H-Man’s wife lost her mind,” he whispers to Grace. “His little girl did, too. They had to lock them away in the insane asylum.”

Grace’s ears buzz. She keeps her eyes closed. She doesn’t want to hear about the H-Man. “He tried to save that baby. He went back into the flaming house, vanishing into the blue-orange blur. Everyone is waiting for him to show up with the baby, but in a rushing roar of heat and flame the house collapses. The basement melts, bars on the windows oozing in upon themselves. And then the crowd sees him in one of the windows—bars pressed to his chest, hair-aflame, mouth one round circle of pain.”

Grace tries to pull away her pinky, but Leon holds it tight with his. His voice keeps whispering, a slick, wet sound: “He comes out through the melting basement bars, an H emblazoned on his chest. He disappears into the cold dark night, forever after haunting men with children, sighing into their ears, “Look at me. First, I’m free. Second, I’m free. Third, I’m free.”

Grace hears the rustle of another movement, more sound. A slight warm whistle of wind. Like at the lake. A whisper of voice: Amazing Grace. She puts out a tentative, shaking hand, the hand free from Leon’s clutch, as if to reach someone completely different from her father.

She sits and presses her thumb hard against the teddy bear embroidered on her pajama top. “Jesus?” she says out loud. “It’s You, isn’t it?” and her father straightens himself, wipes his eyes, let’s go of her finger, and says, “You’re dreaming, baby girl.”
A sliver of heat runs through her. Are warnings warm? Are signs?

Grace is ten, maybe eleven years old, and Minette is visiting her family’s Mitford house. It’s a Saturday afternoon in October. Frances has gone to work, and Leon is at the Rod and Gun Club. The girls troop inside to play Barbies. Her mom thinks Grace’s favorite doll is Hollerina, a chubby baby doll who needs a bottle, burping and a diaper change, but Grace hates Hollerina. It’s Barbie Grace loves. All she has to do for Barbie is design and sew her clothes.

The crisp, cider-like odor of leaves trails into Grace’s bedroom. Grace lifts her head, sniffs. “Burnt umber,” she says, the name on the color of one of her paints.

The girls sit cross-legged on the floor of Grace’s bedroom in the space between her twin beds, a zillion swatches of material spread out around them. Grace has a sketchpad in front of her, and she’s drawing a wedding dress. Minette’s hair is teased and sprayed and has lots of clip-on bows—red, blue, yellow, orange. She’s got Frances’ lavender feather boa draped around her neck. She’s shorter than Grace, a little plump, cozy hints of pudge around her waist. Like a pair of worn Levis, Grace thinks. A perfect fit for me.

“I wonder if my mom sewed her own Barbie clothes?” Grace says. She wears her favorite outfit—an old party dress of her mother’s, a shiny brown dress with built-in crinoline and a black velveteen collar she can touch whenever she likes. What she likes best about the dress is the noise it makes when she moves. She changes positions,
listening to its crinkle. “It’s more than a rustle,” she tells Minette. “It’s the sound of
feet crunching dried leaves. Crrr un un ch ch.”

Grace and Minette wear pale-pink lipstick from a tube they found in the bathroom
wastebasket. A bowl of Clementines sits on the floor between them. Her mother knows the
girls love those oranges, but anyone who knows Grace, knows glazed doughnuts are her
favorite food, that she loves their soft sweet stickiness, the slick, sugary glaze on her
tongue.

Grace has a Barbie with a long black ponytail, and Minette has Bubblecut
Barbie. Both Barbies belonged to their moms when they were little girls. Grace likes
knowing her mom once held this same doll in her hands, that Barbie wore the same
black-and-white-striped swimsuit she has on at this very moment. Grace has had to
tighten the seams and sew a teeny-tiny patch on the back, but no one can tell. It looks like
new.

“I doubt if your mom did any sewing.” Minette smooths her Barbie’s fancy black
dress, fluffs the stiff ruffle that skims the floor. “She was too busy telling Ken what to
do.” She doesn’t look at Grace as she says this. She yanks a comb through her Bubblecut
Barbie’s pale puff of ash-blond hair. The doll’s head pops off.

Grace keeps her eyes on her own Barbie, strokes her ponytail, says, “My mom
sewed all Baby Nathan’s clothes.”

Minette grabs her doll’s head and pushes it back on.

Grace glances at Ken. He’s lying on the floor, the drape of one of the twin bed’s
pink-flowered chenille coverlets sweeping down over his bottom half, leaving only his
head and shoulders and one raised arm sticking out. His hand looks as if it’s curled into a fist.

Minette’s Barbie’s head pops off again and lands between Grace’s legs. At first neither girl makes a sound. Then Grace laughs. Minette does, too. Grace holds out the head to Minette, but Minette says, “No, you try.” Grace puts it on, careful to get all of Barbie’s rubbery neck inside the empty head.

“I think satin would be perfect, don’t you?” Grace gestures toward her drawing. The wedding gown stretches to the floor, and a train trails far behind it.

“Are you really going to be able to sew that?”

“Of course. It’s easy.”

“For you.” Minette pushes plastic stiletto heels onto her Barbie’s feet. “Where are you going to get any satin?”

“Baby Nathan’s dresser. There’s a pillowcase. It’s not white, more a faded lavender, but that’s okay.”

Minette stares at her friend. “How do you know what’s inside the dresser?”

Grace shrugs her shoulders. “I go into his room when she’s not home.”

Minette’s eyes grow big. “Can we look right now?”

Grace chews her baby fingernail. She’s not supposed to go into Baby Nathan’s room without her mom, but now Minette knows that she’s been in the nursery alone. She goes to his room every day and runs her index finger over the crib and basinet, over the small white dresser and the three stuffed bears atop it. She touches the blue baby lamb painted on the second drawer, the small blue rocking chair, the curtains with the faded
Mickey Mouse design, the blue baby blanket lying in the crib, even the dirty diaper in the diaper pail. The room smells of poopy baby powder.

“Let’s go.” Minette’s standing, clutching her doll. “Before your mom gets home.”

Grace touches her velveteen collar. She gets up, her skirt crrr un un ch ch ing. Down the hall she tiptoes, holding Barbie tight in her hand, Minette close behind her. The rustle of Grace’s dress is the only sound. They stop at Frances and Leon’s bedroom. A lavender scent flows out of the room. Grace thinks of this smell as sheer, long and graceful like a negligee. A smell like no other. Grace walks inside and opens a heart-shaped jewelry box on her mother’s dresser. Scattered bobby pins dot its surface. She senses Minette staring at her father’s gleaming gun collection in its glass cabinet. She takes a key from the box. The girls reach Baby Nathan’s bedroom, and Grace unlocks the door. She stands in front of the closed door, unmoving. Minette reaches around her and pushes it open. The girls stand side-by-side in the doorway. Minette moves closer to Grace and takes her hand. Both girls are silent. Grace can smell her friend, not an odor she can label the way she does her mother’s lavender, a smell she thinks of as eau de Minette. Dust bunnies float through the air.

“It’s a ghost room,” Minette says at last. “A stinky ghost room.” She tugs at Grace, yanks shut the door. “There’s something wrong in this house,” she says. “Really wrong.” A red clip-on bow falls to the floor, its metal clasp making a small ding against the hardwood.
Grace tilts her head to the side. She holds her Barbie close to her breast like she would a baby doll. “My mom went to the store special to get those Clementines,” she says.

Minette tries to hold Grace’s hand, but Grace won’t let her. She walks back to her bedroom, the key to Baby Nathan’s room tucked inside a velveteen pocket on her dress. She tosses Barbie onto her bed and picks up a Clementine. Standing in the center of the room, she pulls off the orange’s top, rips off the peel, one strip at a time. Her dress rustles each time she tugs at the orange.

Minette sits beside Grace’s Barbie. She puts her own Barbie on top of the pillow. “It’s sick,” she says.

Grace walks over to the wastebasket and throws in the orange peel. She bites into an orange slice, hard. She puts up her hand in a familiar gesture, like a traffic cop.

“My mom says he’s been dead for years.” Minette pulls Grace’s Barbie’s ponytail. Grace runs to the bed and snatches the doll. “Don’t you touch her,” she says. Tears well in her eyes.

Minette leaves the bed and goes to Grace. She puts her arms around her. Frances’s feather boa tickles Grace’s nose, and Grace pushes Minette away. She grabs Minette’s Barbie from the pillow and snaps off her head. She runs down the hallway to the bathroom and tosses the head into the toilet. She slams shut the door and sags into the corner. Her dress is a pouf of crinoline and brown sheen spread out around her. She touches her velveteen collar. She twists a strand of hair around the index finger on her other hand.
“Grace,” calls Minette. She thrusts open the bathroom door. Grace has her knees up against her chest, her arms pressed against them. Her whole body trembles. Minette sits beside Grace. Eau de Minette mists them. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

Grace can’t explain how terrified she is or why. It takes her a long time to stop shaking, for her heart to stop racing.

Later, after Grace and Minette have retrieved the Barbie head from the toilet and blow-dried her hair, Minette’s mom beeps her horn from the driveway. Grace puts a finger to her lips, nods toward Baby Nathan’s room, and makes a zipper motion. “Not a word,” Minette says. The front door shuts with a dull thud behind her. Grace pushes her nose to the front window and watches Minette climb into her mom’s station wagon and disappear into a flat evening sky. She presses her collar between her thumb and forefinger. She gathers the feather boa from her bedroom.

Grace creeps through the shadowy house to her parents’ bedroom. Crrr un un ch ch goes her dress, and the lone sound in the empty house makes her want to cry. She snaps on the overhead light. It shines down on her mother’s hope chest sitting at the end of the queen-sized bed. A velvet darkness gleams through the windows. It’s already half past five o’clock.

Grace ignores the shiny glass gun cabinet, goes right to her mother’s dresser, a waist-high bureau with an antique mirror above it. She drapes the boa across the mirror. She opens the jewelry box and lays Baby Nathan’s key in its nest of bracelets. Lilac sachet seeps out into the room. She touches the white lace dresser scarf, the bottles lined up in front of the mirror—beauty aids, the family calls them, the pictures of Frances and Leon stuck into the mirror, the picture of Baby Nathan in his coffin, the jewelry box, the
bobby pins. She breathes in the lavender smell, sweet and minty, like her mother. It’s a color and a scent that make Grace think of the Iris flower, its long graceful stalk, its silk-like flowers. Grace knows she could make something for Barbie out of this fragrant color.

Bottles of eau de cologne have been there as long as Grace can remember. Grace pretends that she has stepped into a lilac grove, a lovely safe place with Bradford pear trees and a wooden swing hanging from a maple tree, lilacs blooming, lush and fragrant, Iris flowers arching their lovely necks all around, an area without fighting or indiscretions.

She picks up lipsticks, smells them, runs a finger down their smooth slickness. She has just opened a peach-colored tube when Frances walks into the room. Grace stands still, the lipstick in her right hand. She stares at her mother. Will she be angry? Will she turn red and yell, yell, yell? Will Grace be sent to the dark closet in her own bedroom? Grace chews on her left baby fingernail. She doesn’t take her eyes from her mother’s. Frances sets down a box from the Clarke Stone Hearth Bakery on the bed.

“You bought doughnuts.” Grace’s words sail around the room, floaty as Frances’s feather boa.

“Has Daddy been home?” Frances’s voice is light, steady.

Grace tilts her head to the side. She keeps her eyes on her mother’s. “No,” Grace says, carefully.

Frances’ face flushes. Grace tenses. Her mother’s scratchy wool is in her eyes, her nose, her mouth.

“Did he call?”
Grace knows what to say this time. “Yes, Mama.” Her voice is high.

Suddenly Frances‘ whole body slumps. She lets out a loud sigh. “I love it when you call me Mama,” she says. “Just like Baby Nathan would have.”

Grace lets out a sigh, too. Whew. She knows what to say, the exact intonation to use. “I love it when you talk about Baby Nathan,” she says, her voice no more than a whisper. “I can feel him. He’s here.”

“We’ll visit his room tomorrow.”

“We can wear the white tunics I made. Like angels.”

Frances wipes away a tear. “He smells so good. Apples. He smells of apples from the lake orchard, not baby powder at all.”

Grace pats her mother’s hand. Apples?

“You’ll never leave me, my precious silly baby, will you?”

“Never.” The word comes out of Grace’s mouth, she can almost see it, but she doesn’t recognize her voice. To her, it sounds like someone else’s voice, someone very young. Baby Nathan?

Frances pulls two chairs over to the dresser. Together, she and Grace make up their faces. The silky feel of foundation and powder, a hint of rouge, sliding onto her skin feels so good. Frances sprinkles lavender perfume onto Grace, little daubs behind her ears, behind her knees, in the crease of her elbow.

“I’m glad you’re here, Mama,” Grace says. “I was lonely.”

“No, you weren’t,” Frances says. “Minette was with you. You weren’t lonely at all.” She pulls up Grace’s crinkly dress, takes off her socks, and dusts lavender onto Grace’s toes, tickling her.

Grace laughs and laughs.
Grace has just turned thirteen years old. She and her mother are at their cottage on the hill heading down the path to Silver Lake. It’s a hot summer night, and the moon glimmers in the inky sky. Leon is working on the Times crossword puzzle sitting out on the back porch in one of the cattail chairs he’s woven from their dry leaves. Only a few stars shine. Frances teeters, clutching a bottle of wine in one hand, fluted glass in the other. Grace trails behind her, grasping the edge of her mother’s long bathrobe, a flutter of pink quilted fabric. When they reach the shoreline, Grace’s mother stands close to the edge amongst a summertime cluster of cattails’ long slender leaves and pokes her high-heeled foot into the water. High heels. How odd. In the faint moonlight, Grace sees a gentle, silvery lapping soak her mother’s shoe. Frances moves to the sandy shore and sits, long legs curved to one side, bathrobe spreading out around her. “Here, Grace La Lace.” Her scratchy endearment makes Grace’s eyes water. Grace La Lace? Her mother has never called her that before. Frances gestures, her hand dusts the sand, the pebbles. The two sit in an unnatural hush, a hush that’s mothballed wool, thick, unpleasant, eye watering.

Someone across the lake puts on a Scott Joplin record. Crazy ragtime notes sway through the hot night air, a pulsing life all their own. Grace’s mother pours herself a glass of wine and drinks it, a little swallow at a time. Another glass of wine. Some sloshes over the side onto Frances’ hand. “The blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.” she says. Grace shudders. “Don’t say that, Mom.” Frances laughs and says, “Whooeee. Cold.” She
shivers. “Mama,” Grace whispers, “let’s go home.” She looks up the hill toward the cottage, but in the dark it looks like nothing more than a crumbling ruin. No silhouette of her father. A faint crackling chink comes from the porch wind chimes.

Frances stands, wobbling, and puts her whole foot into the lake. What starts out as no more than a dim shimmer from the stars turns to a golden glitter. Grace can see everything her mother does. One leg, the other, her thighs, her chest, her bathrobe floating like a lily pad gone wild around her waist. Frances turns to Grace, the moonlight catching the wild glow of her eyes. Grace stands in the water herself, up to her knees. She can’t bear her mother’s laughter soaring above Scott Joplin’s jolting dance-hall music, splintering the calm lake into jagged glass. She puts her hands over her ears. Frances’ wails stop. She turns toward Grace, her face blank. She collapses, a lily pad sucked inward, disappearing under the water, her hair a floating silver cloud. Grace wants to vanish herself. Whatever she’s done to her mother that has made her want to die must be so bad that she, too, must sink beneath the lake.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Grace screams and screams.

Grace is seventeen, almost eighteen years old. It’s a warm early April afternoon, three-fifteen, classes have just let out. Spring break at Mitford High begins the next day. Grace is a senior, and she’s rooting around the third floor of the old brick building looking for the drama club costumes she has to hem. Dust motes flicker thick in the close air.

“Grace Thayer.” Her name comes over the loudspeakers. “Report to Guidance.”
Grace puts her index finger in her mouth. She glances out the window. The grass is green and lush, the sky a cloudless pale blue. A cluster of senior girls clumps together at the lone picnic table beneath a giant oak tree. In their pastel T-shirts and shorts they look like sherbety bridesmaids’ dresses, swollen scoops of raspberry and melon and lime. Minette sits beside Mary Sanfilipo.


Grace can barely hear the voice over the pulsing in her ears. She heads for the dark stairwell. She swallows, her mouth dry, tasting of the school’s cheesy pizza. When she reaches the guidance office, Ms. Povolo stands in the reception area. Grace likes this woman, but she reminds her of an acrylic turtleneck sweater, not quite genuine.

“Look what I’ve got for you.” Ms. Povolo’s tapping a thick letter against the palm of her hand. She gestures for Grace to precede her into her office. They settle into chairs pulled close. Grace’s legs feel slick and damp as she presses them together beneath her skirt. She chews on her baby fingernail.

“Did you open it?” she asks.

“Of course not. It’s addressed to you.” Ms. Povolo smiles. “But thick letters are a good sign.” She squints her eyes, pinches her mouth. “What on earth is that you’re wearing?”

“I made it out of a tablecloth. Two tablecloths.” She loves this red-and-white-checked dress. It’s short and tight and very retro Jackie Kennedy, if Jackie had worn those boxy dresses of hers shorter and tighter and cut low enough for cleavage to show.

“You’re something, Grace Thayer,” Ms. Povolo says. “It’s not everyone who would dare wear that dress.” She pushes the letter into Grace’s hand.
A trickle of sweat dribbles down Grace’s back. She has trouble opening the envelope. When she does, she sees right away that Ms. Povolo is right. It’s an acceptance letter to design school, a school in Rhode Island to which Ms. Povolo insisted she apply. “Do this for you,” Ms. Povolo had said, and Grace heard her words as an order, the same way she heard Pastor Ginny say in church every Sunday, “Take, drink, this is My blood which was given for you. Do this in remembrance of Me.” Grace had tilted her head to the side, knowing she should say thank you to Ms. Povolo, but when the guidance counselor added, “Forget about everybody else for once,” she ran out of the office and into the bathroom and crouched down, trembling, in the corner of one of the stalls. Who would she be if she weren’t taking care of everyone? When Ms. Povolo came looking for her, calling out her name, Grace didn’t answer. She had pulled up her knees hard and fast against her chest, wrapped her arms around them tight, tight, tight.

Now Grace stands, “Thanks,” she whispers, and hurries from Ms. Povolo’s office, her dream clasped in her hand. She runs outside to the picnic table, but the scoop of bridesmaids’ dresses is gone. A small breeze sets the oak tree leaves to fluttering. Like wings. Grace trembles, and the letter slips from her fingers. One green leaf drifts from the tree and lands by itself on the ground. Grace puts her head on the table and starts to cry. She feels like one of those graying T-shirts her dad has, thin cotton the washing machine has agitated into a threadbare shadow of itself.

Jonathan Clarke cruises up the school’s driveway five minutes later in his dented Chevy S10 truck, sunshine glinting hard against its chrome wheels. Grace doesn’t lift her
head. She recognizes his rumbly motor. He has a way of knowing where she is at all times. She thinks of this as a glorious miracle, a sign that he loves her, a sweatshirt, cozy and familiar. At the same time, he’s like liquor or pot, an X-rated movie, a sexy phone call, naughty and exciting and unreliable. He’s taken her to the forbidden Dwayo caves, the haunted caverns above the old Steam Hollow Road. Those dark slippery cracks in the rocks are the sort of place someone might disappear with the Dwayo, a Mitford County monster, and never be heard from again. And the caves are silent, otherworldly silent, not even the sound of trickling water breaks the stillness. They are filled with the hush of fear. When Jonathan takes her parking, the dread of the ghostly Dwayo and the delicious fear of going all the way tangle inside her. It’s like drinking a stolen beer, the liquor burning her throat, and mixing that rush with Jonathan’s rubbing his cheek, its slight stubble deliciously rough against hers. Oh, how she loves those burning sensations. Oh, yes. Tantalizing. Grace crosses her legs.

She hears him turn off the engine, get out of the truck, and sit on the picnic bench across from her. He puts his hand on her bent head, curls his fingers into her long curly hair, making her look at him. He’s wearing jeans and a V-necked T-shirt, the kind that shows his thick, dark chest hair. He smells of sweat and rubber, a slightly bitter odor she likes. It’s from his job at Al’s Tires, a place he’s worked all through high school. On weekends he wears the Michelin Bibendum Man’s costume and becomes a white bubble who struts across Al’s parking lot to attract business.

Jonathan’s leg touches hers, and a thrill tingles through Grace’s body to her tremulous heart. He reaches out, rubs her dress between his thumb and his forefinger. “Nice fabric,” he says. “Crisp.”
Grace points to the letter lying on the ground. He picks it up, reads the return address. He glances at her, and she nods.

“Have you told your mother?” He sets the letter on the wooden table.

Grace shakes her head, no. Tears well again. She hasn’t told her mother that she applied. All correspondence went through Ms. Povolo’s office.

Jonathan leans forward, touches his finger to her cheek, says, “Don’t cry, Gracie.” How she loves it when he calls her Gracie, but she senses his distress. He sits on the bench with his back to her, presses his hands hard against his head. “The pressure builds inside me,” he’s told her. “A vast well of empty headache.” And this time it’s her fault. She knows what he’s about to do, doesn’t know if he’s aware of what he’ll do, but he’ll do it. Left leg over right. Uncross. Right over left. Uncross. Left over right. Three deep breaths. Grace looks at the school, the cornfield off to its left, the flagpole, anywhere but at Jonathan.

He faces her now, both legs under the table. Grace pats his hand, gives it a squeeze before letting go. He likes her to touch the soft space between his collarbone and she strokes him there with the tip of her finger, but he doesn’t smile. He holds the letter and taps it against the table. He shifts his weight so that his knee is between her legs. She can hardly breathe. Minette’s boyfriend Chuck had his hands in her pants on their second date. They did it the next night. Grace and Jonathan have been together seven months, and they have yet to go all the way. Sometimes he puts a hand beneath her bra, running his finger across her nipples until she thinks she might scream from pleasure. Once he pulled down her bra, put his tongue to her nipple, licked her hard in a circular motion, and she cried out with pleasure. Four times now he’s slipped his hand beneath
her panties and poked a tentative finger inside her. How she’s wanted it to go deeper. It makes her wet just thinking about that wiggling finger. Oh yes. Grace sometimes worries he likes the feel of her clothes, the silk or cotton, nylon or lace, better than the touch of her skin. He always fingers her clothes. Always. What Grace hasn’t told Minette is that Jonathan likes to talk dirty over the phone. He lowers his voice and says things in an angry way that make her feel as if he really wants her, wants her bad, and Grace loves it. Something about the anger. Whew. She leans across the table toward him, knowing he can see down her dress.

Jonathan keeps tapping the letter against the table. He opens the envelope, pulls out the thick packet of papers. “Providence,” he says.

“Maybe the city is a sign?” Grace’s voice goes high and childlike in that way she hates. She can hear it, thin, wavy, skittering around the picnic table. A sign, a sign, a sign?

Jonathan says nothing for a long time. Then he folds the letter and each of its accompanying papers in half, then into quarters, then into eighths. Perfect squares. He sets them at right angles to the picnic table’s left edge. He does the same with the envelope. Then, as if he’s made a decision, he says, “Let’s go for a ride.” He reaches for the letter, the envelope and unfolds them, one slow fold at a time, He shoves the crinkled papers back into the envelope, taps it against his hand once more, and puts it on the table at right angles to the left edge.

Grace tilts her head to the side, listening, sure she hears words floating in the silence. “What’s wrong? I told you I was applying.” When Jonathan doesn’t say anything, she adds, “Didn’t I?”
Jonathan tucks a strand of Grace’s hair behind her ear. He bends closer and puts his tongue into her ear. It makes her crazy with velour desire, thick and velvety. He traces his finger across her breasts, runs it down between them. Jonathan’s hand creeps up her leg, tugs at her checkered dress. He pushes at her legs to make her uncross them, and she does.

Grace feels his finger ease beneath her panties, slip inside her. Another finger. Deep. She’s been longing for this, but a sudden, unexpected flush of shame spreads across her chest, her neck. She is utterly alone making this decision. Pastor Ginny would say it was wrong unless you’re married. So would her mother. With the thought of her father, Grace knows the flush has reached her cheeks, her forehead. The leaves overhead twitch. A sprig of spring air teases Grace’s hot skin. Jonathan’s lips are on her reddened neck. She chews her baby fingernail, the taste of vanilla bean lotion bitter in her mouth. He rubs his cheek against hers. “Okay,” she says, her face as red as her mother’s sometimes got. “Let’s go to the caves.”

Jonathan takes his sweet time pulling his fingers from inside her panties. He pulls them out with care, as if he were removing toothpicks from an underdone cake at his mother’s bakery, the mooshy batter coating them. He puts them into his mouth, takes them out and kisses them, his eyes never leaving hers. He looks straight at her and licks his fingers. He leans close and whispers, “I want to fuck you, Gracie.” All Grace hears is the sounds—FFF uhuhuh KKK UUU GRRR aaa SEE.

They hurry into his truck. Jonathan puts his arm around her shoulders. On the floor at her feet are the capes she’s made them, capes they wear up at the caves, red for Superman, blue for Wonder Woman, the capes that are a secret of theirs. Through the
back window, she sees the Bibendum costume, inflated white tire shapes lying in the truck bed. “Bibby,” she says. She’s never called Jonathan Bibby before. The word tastes white and creamy in her mouth. She giggles. He pulls her closer, rubs his cheek against hers. Oh, god. He does love her, he does. “Did you bring the veils?” he asks, and Grace nods, yes, and touches the paisley purse she’s made out of on old skirt of her mother’s. Inside are swathes of black veil-like tulle that Jonathan likes to use instead of capes sometimes.

Grace looks at the school before they edge onto Opossumtown Pike. Something small and white lies on the ground beside the picnic table, corners lifting in the breeze. Kleenexes? A paper napkin? No, it’s her acceptance letter.

Grace is eighteen, not yet nineteen, old enough to have a baby, but not grown up enough to stay home alone on this bleak and snowy late January day. January 25th. Theo is exactly one month old, her Christmas baby. No one mentions his “premature” arrival, and Jonathan’s bundled him up and is bearing him off to his new business, Clarke’s Tire Store. “Leave him with me,” Grace begs. “Stay home with us. Please, Jonathan. Don’t leave me alone.”

Theo is warm and cuddly and smells of baby powder and softness, a softness that has an odor all its own, safety—like her old nonnie, not apples at all. When her mother says he looks like Baby Nathan or Minette says he looks like you, Grace, or Jonathan says he looks like me, don’t you think? she ignores them. He is himself. Theo. Silky blond hair. Sky-blue eyes. She loves the sound of those letters together. Thh eeee oh.
Now, despite her pleas, Jonathan has taken him out in the snow-stung afternoon to the store. Grace stares out the window. She’s holding the pillow she made Theo, a Humpty Dumpty pillow. Snowflakes fall from a sheet of gray sky. Like my flannel dress. She puts a hand to the long gray dress she’s wearing.

Grace shivers in the wintry air that leaks in through the windows and sits dead center on the steps leading upstairs. She’s never been alone without Theo. She thinks of him as a thread, weaving her into a mother, a person who knows who she is. No lights shine and the house is as gray as her flannel. Grace pulls her knees up to her chest, wraps her arms around them, Humpty Dumpty crushed in between. Her breath comes in short, sharp gasps.

A knock sounds on the door.

Grace stays where she is, clutches her knees closer to her chest.

Rat-ta-tat-tat.

Grace pushes herself up from the step. She drops Humpty and opens the door. At first she doesn’t see anyone. She steps outside into the cold. A balmy breeze blushes across her face. She sticks out her tongue. No snow. Downy white feathers dust her hair. She hears the voice, “Amazing Grace.”

Grace tilts her head to the side. A sliver of heat runs through her. “It’s You,” she says, opening the door wide, gesturing Him inside. “Isn’t it?”
CHAPTER ONE

JONATHAN

Something’s wrong with Grace.

I want to make it perfectly clear Grace is a dreamer. Always has been. Everybody knows it. We’ve been married almost seven years, and sometimes she’s come really close to losing her balance. It may be this time she has. And it has to do with Theo. Again.

I had to call Grace’s mom. What else could I do?

Here’s what happened last night. Thursday. Weather hot. First week in April. Heat unheard of in the Catskills. In August, sure. Not April. *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, that’s what Leon said, just like his old gypsy mother. H-Man on the prowl. Only time murders happened around here was when it was hot, unnatural, early spring.

So, the point is, I had to stay late at the tire store. Two, two-and-a-half hours. Promised Grace I’d be home at seven for a special dinner. Pappardelle with salmon and dill, fresh asparagus, key lime pie. Said she had news. I got to the house at nine, nine-thirty. That’s what happens when you own your own business. Late customers. Paperwork. Meetings. Grace knows that. So does Theo.

I didn’t plan to be late. I had news, too. Big news. I’d signed the deal with the
Mitford Bank for building a warehouse. Huge financial gamble. One that could put my store and me into bankruptcy if my projections were off by so much as a nickel. Liens against the house and vehicles. Can’t explain the internal pressure that drives me to take the chances I do. It was the same when Grace and I got married. Baby imminent. Opened the Clarke Tire Store a few months later. Huge risk.

Last night everyone had left the store but me, Carol, and Frank. We locked up the place at five-thirty. Air conditioning running. Frank and Carol sat across from me at my desk. Dunkin’ Donuts’ iced tea. Dozen glazed doughnuts. Fourteen, fifteen napkins. I got up and grabbed the Windex and paper towels from the shelf to polish the glass enclosing my office. Frank and I built the office enclosure ourselves. Twelve-by-fifteen space in the front right corner of the store. Glass and drywall.

Frank and Carol exchanged glances.

“I’ll do that.” Frank took the Windex from my hand. “Not to worry, Boss. You’ve had quite a day.” I’d called him from the bank to tell him the loan had been approved. Told him not to tell anyone.

I sat again and picked up the tire-shaped glass paperweight that Frances had given me on my business’s fifth anniversary. Aligned the incoming and outgoing baskets symmetrically with the edges of the desk. Picked up my favorite photo of Theo and Grace. Sitting side-by-side on the swing at the lake. Theo holds Grace’s hand with his right hand, his left waves to me. Grace squeezes Theo’s hand, but with the other, she clutches the swing’s rope. Sunshine catches the gleam of their
golden hair. I touched their faces. Set the picture on my desk in its spot
marked with a small piece of masking tape.

I folded the napkins into careful squares. Carol joined in. We folded them,
unfolded them, and I set the stack at right angles to the desk’s edge. Carol poured
cream into all three coffees, sugar into hers and Frank’s.

“Relax,” Carol said. “You deserve it after today.”

“Two bank meetings with Gordie Couper,” I said. “Deal’s done.”

“You’re kidding me. Done? I had no idea it was this close to being finalized. Why
didn’t you tell me?” Carol pushed up her dark-framed glasses. Said, “Stop fooling
with your hair.”

Big step, this warehouse, and even Grace didn’t know I had finalized the deal. She
knew about the loan from the Bank of New York, but what she didn’t know and I
had no intention of telling her, was that I had gone to the Mitford Bank and gotten
a much larger loan than the Bank of New York offered and turned down the Bank
of New York.

Headlights aimed into our parking lot. “Don’t open the doors,” Carol said.

I left the office and went straight for one of the bay doors. Flung it up and stepped
outside. Air had a density to it, a dusty film. Clung to my skin. Like one of
Grace’s negligees. Sticky. Well, lookee who. Mary Sanfilipo. Damn it. Old
schoolmate of mine and Frank’s and Grace’s. Never married. Worked over at the
Wal-Mart. She climbed out of her Taurus. Showed some leg. As usual. Short skirt
made of corduroy, wide-lined corduroy. Soft.

“What’s up?” I said.
“You closed?”

“Well. . .” I said, hoping she’d get the hint.

“Oh, come on, Jonathan,” she said. “Help a gal out, won’t you?” And she winked.

That sly wink of hers that made me feel I had no choice in the matter. Like she’d
tell everyone about that afternoon out at the Summers’s old barn if I didn’t do
what she wanted.

“What do you need?”

“Can you check the tread? A friend of mine said they’re pretty worn.”

I pointed to her keys. “You mind?” She put them into my hand. I flipped on the
lights and drove the car into one of the four bays. Put it onto a lift. Got out of the
car. Hit the lift button. I walked around the car, checked each tire.

“Somebody gave it to you straight.” I motioned Mary over. “Take a look.” She
stood beside me, close. “You need to do something about that busted headlight,” I
said. “The bent rear fender, too.” I smelled strong oily perfume and a vague odor

Vanilla bean. We looked at each tire. “Tread’s worn down one sixteenth of an
inch on the back two,” I told her. “No choice. Replace them. Front two maybe got
another two months. No point rotating.”

Frank came into the garage. “I got this one, Boss,” he said.

“You sure?”

Frank and Mary headed over to the large section of the store that we call the
warehouse. Tire racks floor to ceiling. “You might want to consider Michelin’s this
time around,” I heard him saying. “Depends what kind of driving you plan to do.
She ducked her head, pulled her hair over her mouth. She giggled that same giggle she’d been giggling around me and Frank since kindergarten. As if Frank had said something funny. Or provocative. Which he hadn’t. Then she said, “I’m getting a new car in a couple of months. This one’s got 106,000 miles on it. Got my eye on a Ford Escape.”

I moved inside the office. Shut the door. Sat.

“So you got the money for the warehouse.” Carol did this odd little dance step she did whenever she didn’t understand something. A leap into the air and a two-step shuffle when she landed. Wide-cut polyester pants flapping. I couldn’t stand the texture, that cheap stretchy sheen, but every time she did her dance, it made me laugh. “You could have told me. It affects me, too. You and Grace must be thrilled. You should go home. Have a family party.”

Carol knew once I had this warehouse project completed, I would be able to open more stores. Expand. Make more money. What she didn’t know was how close to the brink I’d taken the business and my personal finances, too.

“Mitford Bank’s been good to you, huh?”

“Gordie Couper’s got a lot more foresight than the folks at the Bank of New York,” I said. “He says I’m a fine young man. On the up and up.” I laughed, shook my head. “Lot of money involved.” I didn’t tell her how Gordie’d said, ‘Read your Bible, Sonny. Mess up with money and you burn in hell.” Didn’t know what he was talking about, truth be told, but his words made me nervous.

Carol slipped off her dirty white Reebok sneakers. I started to get up, but she straightened her shoes, tucked them beneath the desk before I had a chance. The
faintest odor of feet drifted my way. She stirred my coffee, took one of the folded napkins and set the Styrofoam cup on it. “Relax,” she said. “I can take care of my own shoes. Been taking care of myself for years. Four dogs and two cats. My mother. I’m not six years old.”

Frank tapped the glass from outside the office. Pointed to the cash register. I pulled the keys from their hook, opened the door and handed them to him. I walked through the store to the outside. Made sure there wasn’t any trash lying around. Sky outside flat. Air muggy. I picked up a McDonald’s hamburger wrapper, three cigarette butts, a red rubber band, a straw, chewed gum. Shoved the trash into our garbage can out behind the store and came in through the rear entrance.

“At six years old,” I said when I got back into the office, “I’m out behind my parents’ bakery every Saturday night. Cars racing past in the dusk, lights shining. Like tonight.”

“Being punished?” Carol asked.

“No, I had stale leftovers. Doughnuts, éclairs, cinnamon swirls. My job? Toss them into the Dumpster.”

“I would have eaten them. I still would.”

I laughed, shook my head. “People talk about comfort food,” I said. “Grace is always going on about macaroni and cheese for Theo, how he only wants it when he’s feeling sad or upset, how his best friend Brad eats M&Ms for the same reason, how Minette scarfs down chocolate pudding after a bad day at the salon, how Frances nibbles Saltines. Nibbles, Grace’s word.” I opened my top desk

“What does Grace say about that?”

“Grace doesn’t know.”

One of the outside windows had a small smudged handprint. I hated parents who didn’t teach their children that windows are not for pressing their hands against. Theo never put his hands on our sliding glass doors at home.

“Relax,” Carol repeated. “You’ve earned a break. Frank will get that when he’s done ringing up Mary.” She slid my coffee cup toward me. Grime beneath her fingernails. Coffee sloshing. “You must have been a such sad little boy,” she said, adding, “Would you put away that knife? I don’t know why you keep it here. It makes me nervous.”

“No, I was happy. A happy kid.” I shoved the knife into the top drawer. Sipped my cold coffee. “A very happy kid,” I said. Got a pad of paper from my second drawer. Touched the locked bottom drawer. Traced the handle with my finger. I wanted to open that drawer. Saw Carol’s eyes on me. Looked away fast. Set the paper on my desk. Got up. Walked to the shelf. Touched it once. Walked to the other side of the office. Tapped the top of one of the file cabinets twice. Back to the shelf. To the file cabinets. The shelf.

“We’ve got to get June’s and July’s goals mapped out,” I said. “Figure how many name brand tires need to be pushed. Advertising campaign. Cost analysis.” Tap. Tap.
Mary waved and walked out the front door. More strut than walk. Mocking me. What did she know, anyway? Grace believed in me and knew what I could do. Gordie Couper believed in me, too. No point thinking about the possible complications if I didn’t do as much business as I expected.

Frank sprayed the front glass door, wiped it down. Pulled out his cell phone. He’d be calling Teresa. He’d gone all through school with me and Grace, graduated with us, gone on to marry his high-school sweetheart, the class vocalist, Teresa Moore. Three kids.

“He’s her ticket out,” I said to Carol, nodding at Frank. “Long as I keep the stores making money.” Teresa moved to Mitford when she was fourteen, her and her mother. Lived in the trailer park outside town on Hudson Pike.

“Like you’re Grace’s,” Carol said.

“Frances and Leon did okay by her.” Touched the shelf.

“Not as well as you have.”

“Get your shoes,” I said, and tapped the file cabinet twice. “Grab the pad of paper. We’re going to do a couple of quick counts.”

Carol looked at me, looked at the coffee, pushed up her dark-framed glasses. Put on her Reeboks. Adjusted her cotton Clarke’s Tire Store T-shirt. “You’re in rare form today, aren’t you, Boss?” She snatched a doughnut and the paper and followed me out to the warehouse.

“We’ve got to see how many of the new Michelins are left.” I moved down the first aisle. My Frye boots made a dull thud against the cement floor. “I want to
check the Uniroyals, too.” Frank and I had built the wooden storage racks ourselves. Floor-to-ceiling. Row upon row. Tires labeled. Dusted. That’s right, my guys dusted them. Didn’t get rid of the rubbery odor, the inevitable mustiness in your teeth and nose, but my store was cleaner and better organized than other stores. “Don’t get crumbs on the floor,” I said.

Carol rolled her eyes and finished off her doughnut. Wiped her hands on her pants. Pulled a pen from her breast pocket.

I got a piece of chalk from the Tupperware container I kept beside the tire racks. Put the smallest trace of white on each tire to prevent counting mistakes.

Carol knew the drill. She had several columns on her pad and filled in numbers as we went along. “Shouldn’t you call Grace? Let her know we’re running late. She must be wanting to celebrate the warehouse deal.”

Carol didn’t need to know that I hadn’t told Grace. We reached the third aisle. “I call her all the time.” I tapped my cell phone, hooked to my belt. “She knows I’ll show up sooner or later.”

“Don’t be so sure.” Carol shrugged. “Besides, tonight’s special, isn’t it?”

“I know my own spouse.” Frank and I had built a ladder for each rack. I scrambled to the top of the rack to look across all the rows. Make sure we weren’t missing anything. So far, so good.

Carol kept her eyes on her pad, said, “That’s what they all say.”

“So what are you saying?” I kept marking tires. Was she suggesting I didn’t know Grace? Or that Grace didn’t know me? Did she mean that she knew something about me that Grace didn’t? What could she possibly know? That bottom drawer of my desk was locked. I had the only key.
Frank came into the warehouse. “Coffee’s watery, you guys,” he said. “Teresa says be home by eight to baby sit. If not”—Frank drew his finger across his throat. “She’s got a choir rehearsal tonight. She’s singing a solo on Sunday. *Nearer My God to Thee.*”

“You guys and your families.” Carol did her peculiar hop and two-step shuffle.

“Kids. Spouses. Jesus. Sunday school.” She noted down several more tires. “I don’t know how you stand it.” She gave me a fast glance. “I didn’t mean anything by that. The Jesus remark. Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said, head down. Nobody was going to know how I felt about the Jesus problems in my family. “What about your mother? You’ve got her to look after.”

Carol did another one of her dance steps. “She’s been feeling kind of rough lately. She won’t go to the doctor.”

“You got to take charge. Shove her in the car and take her,” Frank said. “I’ll start at the other end.” He walked down to the far side of the warehouse. Scrambled up a ladder, pounded his chest, yelled, “Me, Tarzan!” He pointed to Carol. “You, Jane!”

“Shut the fuck up,” Carol said.

“Michelin and Uniroyal only,” I said.

“You got it, Boss.”

“Let’s keep moving,” I said to Carol. “Frank’s on a timeline.”

“Grace ought to put you on one,” Frank called from his perch on the rack.
“And be pushy like Mary Sanfilipo?” I marked three more tires. “Man, I hate pushy women.”

Frank made that Tarzan roar: “Ahahahaahahahaahah.”

Carol put her index finger in her mouth as if to throw up. “Can’t you make him stop?”

“Mary’s one hot babe,” Frank said.

“She looks like a slut in those short dresses of hers,” Carol said.

Grace wore dresses all through school when all the other girls wore corduroys or jeans. She’d stroll to the pencil sharpener and do this funny little sashay thing with her hips. Send her dress out in a rustle around her knees.

I counted fifteen more Uniroyals.

She still does it, her sashay thing. Three nights ago she got up from the dinner table, walked to the refrigerator, and there it was—her sashay. “Grace is the one who looks good in a dress,” I said.

“She’s something, is our Grace,” Frank said.

“Yes,” I said.

“Complicated,” Frank said.


I started counting the rack we’d just done all over again. Couldn’t help it. Had to be accurate. “Seven-year anniversary in another two months. Seven years.”

Carol pushed up her glasses, jotted numbers onto her pad. Frank got busy counting.

I reached the bottom row on the fourth rack. I knew why they’d become silent.
Everyone in Mitford was familiar with what happened to Grace the first year we were married. Right after Theo was born. When I’d taken him from her for an afternoon. Didn’t want to remember how she left me for the Psych Institute out on Hudson Pike. The episode Frances called it. Worst nine weeks of my life. Worse than my father’s leaving me and my mom, worse than my mother’s death my junior year in high school.

I had stood on the porch outside our rented townhouse beside Frances, Theo in her arms. Watched as Leon helped a frail Grace into his car. Terrified Grace wouldn’t come back. Scared I’d be left alone. January day. Bitter snow. Biting wind. Frances saying, “That girl needs to wake up and smell the roses.” She took Theo inside. I climbed into Leon’s backseat. Put his knitting bag in my lap. We disappeared into a slab of the highway’s gray despondency. Leon hummed the same lines the entire drive, “I went down, down, down, And the flames went higher. . .” The word flame thudded inside my head, fiery hot.

Now I got down on my knees, stuck my face beneath the rack. No napkins or crumbs or nails or gum wrappers. I would not think about my fear at Grace’s absence. What I had had to do to control it. Painstaking secret rituals begun in childhood. Routines I did not want to think about. Ever.

Carol patted my shoulder. “We’re done here I think, Boss.”

I looked up from my knees and saw Carol and Frank watching me. “Grace is fine,” I said. “I built her a design studio, you know. For after Theo starts first grade. In the basement.” Minette’s influence, this studio idea. She had stopped by the store one day the month before. Slinky skirt. Tulle, I’d guessed. Remembered
I’d read somewhere that tulle had the sexual dynamite of the veil. I’d liked that description. Minette wore dangling silver-plated earrings. Dangerously high-heeled faux leather boots. “I want to talk to you,” she said. No one paid us any attention. I gestured her into my office. Pulled out a chair from beside the wall. Sat behind my desk. Strong scent of patchouli floating toward me. Typical. Nothing subtle about Mintette. I tapped the desk with a pencil.

Minette reached over and took the pencil from my hand. “Listen,” she said. “It’s about Grace.”

“Grace?”

“She wanted to go to design school.”

“A long time ago,” I said. “She’s got me and Theo.” Carol passed the office. Peered at the two of us through the glass windows.

“Theo’s going off to school all day in the fall.” Minette bent forward across the desk. “I’m afraid being left alone could—well, set off another episode as Frances would say. Her whole life is Theo. I want her to have a studio for her sewing, her designs. I want her busy and happy.”

I grabbed a pen. Her perfume making me cough. Tapped the desk. Set down the pen. Picked it up. Set it down. Coughed. Said, “Look, just because you’ve got your own beauty parlor, doesn’t mean Grace has to turn entrepreneur.”

“I may be leaving for college one of these days. I’m worried about her being by herself. Without Theo. Without me.” Minette gave me a look as if the whole episode had been my fault. “The basement is perfect for a studio.”

“No heat. No air conditioning. Summer coming up.” I had my hand on my locked bottom drawer. Rattled the handle.
“Grace likes hot weather. You know that.” Minette clicked her long red nails on the desktop.

Grace and Theo both had some internal thermostat that sent a breeze through their systems no matter what the heat.

“Look, a studio is perfect. She’ll have clients. You know she will. People around her.” Minette looked straight at me. “I don’t want what happened before to happen again.”

I got up and grasped the Windex and towels. Grabbed my favorite photo of Theo and Grace. Sprayed the picture with Windex. Polished it. Placed it on its masking tape.

“Customers won’t want to sweat to death,” I said. Straightened the blotter.

“She can get a ceiling fan from Wal-Mart.” Minette had stood, folded her arms over her chest, moved close to me, looming, bringing my mother to mind. “It’s for Grace. This isn’t about you.”

So now Grace had a studio.

I realized I was still on my hands and knees staring up at Frank and Carol. Frank said, “The studio’s a good idea. Teresa says she wishes she had Grace’s talent.”

He lowered his voice, “I’m sure she’s fine, Boss. Not to worry.”

Carol took hold of my arm, helped me to my feet. “We’ll finish this tomorrow.”

She put out her hand for my chalk, and I gave it to her. Watched her put it into its container, walk back to the office. Neither of them mentioned the miscarriage.

Frank and I could have kept working or we could have left the store, which is
what we should have done. I know that. I know Grace and Theo were waiting for me, but me and Carol and Frank sat around my desk. Downtime. I took the knife from the top drawer again and hacked a couple of doughnuts into two pieces. Smelled the sugar. Chopped them into halves again. Created a neat rectangle from the pieces. Stickiness glazed my fingers. Started to run the blade through them one more time. Saw Carol’s eyes on me. Made myself stop. Put away the knife. I collected the leftover doughnuts, the cold coffee. Went into the bathroom. Dumped the coffee and doughnuts. Washed my hands. When I came out, Frank said, “Did you hear the one about the woman who gets home, screeches her car into the driveway, slams the door and shouts at the top of her lungs, ‘Honey, pack your bags. I won the lottery!’?” Carol and I groaned. “The husband says, ‘Oh! Really? What should I pack, beach stuff or mountain stuff?’” “Oh my God,” Carol said. “Don’t let him get started.” She waved her hands. “Go on, you two. Shoo. Get lost. Go home.” Before I could snatch up the Windex and paper towels and sweep the crumbs into the trash, Carol slapped at my hands. “I’ll take care of it. Go on now. Shoo.” Parking lot lights shimmery in the deadly heat. Air lifeless. Thick. I stood beside my Jeep, Frank next to his Ford pickup. “So how’s the joke end?” I said. Frank slapped the roof of his truck. “‘Doesn’t matter,’ the wife says. ‘Just get out.’” It’s like he hit a raw spot inside me I didn’t even know existed. Said, “That’s so funny I forgot to laugh.”
Frank leaned across the roof of his pickup. Jumped back. “Hotter than a junkyard dog,” he said. Added, “I got to talk to you, Boss.”

“It’s meaner, Frank, meaner than a junkyard dog.” Said, “Grace is making her parpardelle and salmon tonight. She has news, too.”

Frank got busy opening the truck door. “It’s important.” He wiped his forehead with a blue bandana.

“What’s up?”

“Let’s go to Callahan’s, get a beer. What do you say?”

“We’ll take the Jeep.” Jesus. What does he want? I snapped off my cell phone and shoved it deep inside my pocket.

Callahan’s is a little hole-in-the-wall that has great Genesee on tap. Ten miles down from the store. Same road.

I pulled out onto the two-lane road. Part gravel. Part asphalt. Dusky, not dark. Turned on the low beams. Off to one side was a prefab diner. They brought it in two pieces on trucks. Lifted the sections high in the air and set them down. Presto. Looked like the real deal, straight out of the fifties. A place we ate lunch more often than not. Jukebox humming Johnny Cash or Patsy Cline or Elvis Presley.

Frank didn’t waste time after we left the diner behind. “Teresa’s pregnant again.” He kept his face forward. Stared straight ahead. A line of wash hung limp, unmoving beside an old farmhouse. Tin roof of an outhouse gleamed dully under the last of the sun.
“Four kids,” I said. Tried to push away memories of Grace’s miscarriage. A year and a month ago. Eleven weeks pregnant. The day before she lost the baby, I’d told her I was afraid of having another baby, didn’t really want one. The Jeep’s engine rumbled. I snapped on the radio, looking for a ballgame. Anything.

“You just find out?”

“No. Baby’s due in November.”

“Why didn’t you say something?”

Frank shut off the radio. “Listen to me, Jonathan. I’m going to need a raise.” He still faced front. Jerked the radio dials around. “Teresa’s frantic.”

I couldn’t tell him how close to the edge we were. Couldn’t admit that I couldn’t give myself a raise. Not even Gordie Couper knew all the balls I had in the air. No one knew that I had two sets of books—one that was accurate, one that showed us doing far more business than we were. I knew I’d make things right as soon as I was doing enough business, so nobody needed to know. That extra set of books could vanish as easily as I’d set them up, no one the wiser. I wasn’t doing anything wrong. False financial statements. Big deal. I knew I could make everything all right. In time. I needed time.

“She’s playing Bingo Wednesday nights up at the Grange thinking she’ll hit it big.”

“Jesus,” I said.

“I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t need it.” Frank opened the glove compartment. Riffled around. Pulled out a lipstick tube. Held it out in the palm of his hand. “What’s this?”
I snatched it from him. Rolled its sleek black case around in my hand. “What do you think it is?”


“Thought you quit.”

“Yeah, well.”

Buddy Summers’s feed mill flashed past on my left. His boys Jimmy, Mark, and Tom all worked for me. The other two worked for him. Nice folk. Three cars raced by, one right after the other. One tooted his horn.

I pulled into Callahan’s lot. Eight, ten trucks already parked. Shut off the engine, the lights. Shoved the lipstick into my pocket. “I’ll see what I can do,” I said. “See if the numbers justify it.”

“Look, I’ll work Sundays. Whatever it takes.” Frank closed the glove compartment. “It’s not like you’re not building that warehouse. Lots of buying power.”

“I’m going to have to rent out warehouse space the first couple years. Maybe more. Just to make ends meet.”

Frank opened the glove compartment. Closed it.

I patted his shoulder. “It’ll work out,” I told him. What else could I say?

We slid into a back booth. Air-conditioning blasting. Nodded to nearly everyone in the place. In Mitford, you knew everybody. “How’s it hanging?” hollered

I put up my arm, raised two fingers. Bernie Summers, Buddy’s daughter, slapped down two beers. “Want a pitcher?”

“This’ll do,” Frank said. “Can I bum a cigarette off you?”

“No way, José,” Bernie said. “Teresa’d kill me, and I don’t mean maybe.” She made her right thumb and index finger into a gun and aimed it at her head. “Pow,” she said.

We watched her chunky butt swing back and forth in a pleated black miniskirt as she headed to the bar. Half way across the room, she turned around, made the gun again and pointed it at us. “Pow,” she said again, swung around, and kept going toward the bar.

“Teresa wants a midwife this time,” Frank said. “She wants to be like Grace and have the baby at home.”

“Jesus,” I said. “Maybe Teresa wants that, but you don’t. Take my word for it.”

“Try telling that to Teresa.” Frank put his index finger in the middle of his napkin. Swirled it around.

“Like telling it to Grace.”

Grace had a home delivery. I still lay awake at night. Hear her screams. Sit bolt upright. Grace, warm and voluptuous beside me. I want to roll over, feel her silky nighty, get inside her. But I smell the blood. Acrid. Taste it. I think of her dying, I think of my mother’s death, and I can’t stand the idea of sex.

“That midwife’s voice,” I said. “Can’t get it out of my brain.” I didn’t let Frank know this, but Annalee had said to me, “Hold her hand, you idiot. Help her.” I
tried to help. I did. Blood and chaos made me sick with fear. I’d watched my mother die a long, drawn-out, messy death from cancer. She coughed and hacked up what looked like slime, later blood, and I cleaned it up time and again. She cried out in pain, and I held her, her pain sharp needles inside my head.

“I never got over his leaving,” she said one time. “Turned her face to me. White. Sunken. Said, “Some things you don’t get over.” Her words made no sense to me—I’d seen him beating her, but, hey, if that’s how she felt, that’s how she felt. Her grief at my dad’s leaving seemed as deep as her grief at suffering so much physical pain. It took her dying for me to know that she’d loved him. I understand now, though, that some things you don’t get over. I wasn’t about to confide in Frank, but fact is, to this day me and Grace can be in our backyard. Grace falling out of her swimsuit. Kids in the pool. I reach for her, but the words Annalee didn’t say ring in my ears, “You’re no man,” and all I know is I’m inadequate, and I know I’ll never get over that knowledge. Ever. All I see is Grace stretched out on our bed, same bed we have now, eyes closed, face red and sweaty, vein popped out on her forehead, and I’m afraid of another baby, afraid of the blood, afraid of killing her. I’d only tried sex with one other girl. Mary Sanfilipo. Three days before my mother died. All pushy and aggressive. She’d taken off her clothes, tugged at mine, yanked down my fly. “Which little piggy went to market?” she’d said, pulling at my penis, giggling. “Not this one.” But quiet, dreamy Grace had tied my red cape to my shoulders, the blue to hers, and let me take off our clothes, fold them neatly, slowly, fold after fold, feeling the silk lining of her hand-made chiffon dress, up in the Dwayo caves and lain beneath me all hot soft skin and
long, silky hair. Moving in between her legs like coming home. Vanilla bean.
Safety. Superhero capes wrapped around us. That girlish, compliant, seductive
Grace erased any doubts I held about myself.
I signaled for a second beer. Set my napkin at right angles to the table’s edge.
“Truth is,” I said. “You and Teresa did things right. In the hospital. You in the
waiting room.”
Bernie set down two more beers. Frank’s eyes followed her across the room.
Mine, too. “She’s something, isn’t she?” Frank said.
“Ask any guy,” I said. “I guarantee he’ll tell you the same thing. Have the baby in
the hospital.”
“Quit running your hand through your hair,” Frank said. “Or you’ll be half bald
like me.”
I stuck my finger in the beer’s foam. Stirred. I could see the blood. Smell it.
“Yeah, well.” Frank looked at his watch. “Gotta go or Teresa’ll skin me alive.
When a girl’s got to go to choir, a girl’s got to go to choir.” He grinned at me.
“Hear the one about the wife meeting her husband on the doorstep, checkbook in
hand?”
I thrust a twenty onto the table. “Let’s go,” I said.

Fifty-minute drive south home to Hudsondale. I switched on the Jeep’s air
conditioning. Pulled the lipstick from my pocket. Took off the case with my teeth.
Breathed in the light flowery perfume-like smell. Bobbi Brown’s Floral Petal
Pink. Put the lipstick in the glove compartment. Two more lipstick cases hidden
same spot, each a shade that Grace used—Revlon’s Crystal Cut Coral and
Estee Lauder’s Goldmist Gala, shimmering with a swipe of her Lancome Juicy
Tubes of Ultra Brilliant Lip Gloss. On Grace, they all looked a pale, glossy pink.
Could only find Goldmist Gala. No time to search.
Ah, Grace.
I needed to get home to Grace. Focus on supper, an iced tea, her special supper,
her news. Telling her about the warehouse.
But there it was. The Psychiatric Institute. The old lunatic asylum. Stories of
Victorian structure dating from the 1800’s. Turrets. Towers. Balconies. Didn’t
matter which route I took home to Grace, had to pass this place. I’d push in Dale
Carnegie CDs, turn up the volume.
I shoved in a CD. Finding new opportunities through existing customers is usually
the best way to spend our time prospecting. Almost dark outside. The Institute
lights glimmering. On the lawns. The porches. The building itself. Shimmering in
the heat. Shining like the candles Grace lit that day. Jesus. I step into the
townhouse from the bitter cold. She’s nowhere in sight. “Grace,” I call out. She
always greets me. Always. See Humpty Dumpty lying on the wooden floor. Smell
the tangy tomato odor filling the air. Garlic and thyme. Oven on high. Baked
tilapia burning. Bread, blackened. Smoke burning my eyes. Dank earthy odor
steaming through the radiators. Some other odor I can’t place. “Grace?” Hear
Theo’s whimpers from his backpack. Smell his baby powder. Feel his body
wiggling hard against me. Reach around and pat him. “It’s okay, baby, it’s okay,”
I say. And then I smell the candles, the melting cinnamon wax, the smoky powder of burning matches. Wine, too. A bitter grape odor. Shadows creeping down the staircase. Something else burning. Something unpleasant. A dead animal? Hear Gordie Couper’s voice, Mess up with money and you burn in hell.

“Grace?” I call. “Grace?” I’m afraid to climb the stairs. A glimmer of light shines through the shadows.

I pressed my foot hard to the gas. Reached the Psych Institute. Despite Dale’s words ringing in my ears, I got that cold feeling inside, the kind you get in your marrow. Like when you microwave something and it’s piping hot on the outside and dead cold on the inside. When I was a boy, Miss Fleming made us read this weird science fiction story “The Invisible Man” by H. G. Wells. Creeped me out. Still remember some of the words. Invented my own game of Invisible Boy, a phantom Jonathan who stood outside time. You turned off your mind. Thinking was dangerous. By not thinking, I attained an inner invisibility. Hard to do as an adult. Even with Dale’s sale’s pitch near top volume, I could hear those long-ago story words inside my brain: “No hand, just an empty sleeve. . . Nothing down it, right to the joint. I could see right down to the elbow, and there was a glimmer of light shining through a tear in the cloth.” I pictured the cloth as an ugly shadow.

Flat desolate sky before a storm.

Two miles past the asylum. Pulled off to the side of the road. Pressed my hands to my aching head. Empty and heavy at the same time. Opened the glove compartment again and took out the Crystal Cut Coral. Rolled it in my hand. Put it back. Pressed my foot to the gas.
So I got home late. Past suppertime. Past Theo’s bedtime. Cruised into the court about nine, nine-thirty. New neighborhood. Tract development. Shrubs small or nonexistent. Everyone has a thin sprig of a buckeye tree planted in his front yard because the developer went to Ohio State. Nice development, but Hudsondale is not my taste. Artsy-fartsy. An hour from New York. I like the familiarity of Mitford. Grace’s idea to move. Space from her mother. Still, driving home, seeing the look-alike houses with their tidy lawns, calms me most nights. People take care of their stuff. No kids’ bikes or trikes left out. No basketballs lie in the street. Houses close together in three different models. Split-level. Split-foyer. Two story. That’s us. Colonial. Aluminum siding. Grace calls it a barren landscape. She pleaded to live in the historic section of town with its big shady maple trees, but there’s no way I have time to do the upkeep for an old property.

No Grace on the front porch. Jesus. She always greets me. Her absence sharp as an odor.

I pressed the electric button and pulled into the muggy garage. Grace’s blue van was missing. Had Frances and Leon borrowed it? Minette? I backed out. Pulled in again to get the Jeep on the masking tape strips I’d put parallel to where the van should be. I walked into the dark kitchen through the laundry room. Almost tripped over Theo’s Electric Broom. Boots thumped loud in the empty room. Hum of the refrigerator. Rattle of ice. Buzz of a moth fluttering close to the only light on in the room, the fluorescent bulb over the sink. Faint odor of fish and dill floated through the room.
“Grace?” The place was hot. No air conditioning.

No answer. Moonlight shone through the window screen. Island gleamed pale, a beige Formica. I noticed the table, a roughhewn affair Grace created from two sawhorses and an antique door. Dinner plates set for three. The papperdelle and salmon uneaten on them. Ceramic bowl of red apples shoved off to the side. From the Peekskill Orchard near the lake. Theo’s and my favorite. Only kind Grace will buy. Good thing Frances wasn’t around to emote over Baby Nathan smelling of apples.

Bread on a cutting board. Knife beside it. One glass filled with milk, two with water, lemons wedged to their sweating sides. Plates lined up on the other side of the table. Plastic wrap glinting in the dim light.

I moved closer for a better look. Each plastic-wrapped plate held ten cupcakes coated with chocolate frosting, decorated with smiley faces in orange and yellow. Grace must be the mom in Theo’s class the next day. Or knowing her, the cupcakes could be for the upcoming neighborhood yard sale or Theo’s baseball team. I don’t get why she does all this stuff for everybody. I lifted the plastic, snuck a cupcake. Ate it over the aluminum sink. Wiped my mouth with the back of my hand.

“Grace,” I called out.

No answer.

I closed the kitchen window. Slid shut the sliding glass doors.

I glanced into the dining room, the room we used as an office. Tire store accounting books scattered all over the table in disorganized heaps. I hated the
clutter but had to accept this was the way Grace worked. She’d been doing the 
books ever since I started the business. She must have begun calculating my 
interim profit and loss. Two coffee mugs on the far right corner of the table. 
on the corner? Pastor Ginny? I walked into the dining room. Took the two empty 
mugs into the kitchen. Rinsed out the mugs for Grace and set them in the sink. 
Picked up Theo’s Electric Broom and put it into the closet. Hurried back to the 
dining room to close the windows. How did she stand the heat? I hated that I’d 
paid for the installation of central air, and she didn’t use it. Crazy, it was crazy. I 
turned on the air-conditioning. 
One last glance at the kitchen table. A thick wad of papers lay beside the 
asparagus. I walked over and held them up to the light. Theo’s first-grade school 
information. Schedule. Health forms. 
I ran upstairs, papers clutched in my hand. Hall light shone into Theo’s room. No 
Theo. Humpty Dumpty, worn now and raggedy, rested on the bed. My old plastic 
Batman lay on the pillow beside him. Superman sat on the floor close to the bed. I 
picked him up and snatched Batman and Humpty from the bed. Set them on the 
bureau. “Girls sleep with toys,” my mother’d told me when I wanted to sleep with 
my warm, soft teddy bear. “That’s for sissies.” Grace knew better than to let him 
sleep with them. Theo’s baseball cards sat in a neat stack on the dresser. Derek 
Jeter on top. I closed his windows. 
I hurried from his room. Ran to Grace’s and my bedroom. Shut the windows. 
“Theo,” I hollered. “Grace.” They had to be home. My heartbeat now a steady
hum in my ears. Grace knew how important it was to me that she was home when I got there. Something had to be wrong.

I returned to the kitchen. Ice crackled in the freezer. I sat at the table, still gripping Theo’s school papers. Calm down. She’s home. Of course she’s home. Theo’s school schedule had to be her news. No way she could know about the Mitford Bank loan. No way. Or the fact that I no longer owned the business personally but had incorporated it to protect her from any potential bankruptcy.

I made myself breathe slowly. Three breaths in through the nose. Three breaths out through the mouth. Glanced at the refrigerator. Saw the store pictures of me with Frank and Carol standing in front of the racks we’d built, another with me dressed up as the Bibendum Man. I noticed a new picture of Theo. I set the school papers on the table and looked at my son, his blue eyes, blond hair, and I unexpectedly remembered a remark my mother once made.

“You look like your father,” she had said, “but you’re not going to be like him, not if I can help it.”

She had offered this comment one night as I was going to bed. I probably wasn’t much older than Theo. My mother, father and I lived in four small rooms over the bakery. Kitchen, living room, their bedroom, my bedroom. A small room built into the space beneath the wide staircase leading down to the bakery served as her sewing room. Dresses hanging from a rope, skirts and petticoats sweeping across the easy chair. Inside the small room, the sweet bakery smell swelled around me, but another odor, too. An odor I thought of as belonging to women. Not my mother. A tall, thin woman, she had the bland smell of flour. Except for a blue
plastic flower she tucked behind her left ear, which smelled of dust. And her
worn-out Converse high tops, smelling of feet. No. And her baggy housedresses
smelling of thrift store. The odor in her private room belonged to other women.
Women who brought their sewing to her. Women with swaying hips and lush
bosoms. Women wearing wet lipstick and powdery eye shadow. Women in
clicking high heels. Perfume and hairspray. Glossy nail polish. Women who ooed
and aahed over me. Chucked me under the chin with soft hands until my mother
banished me from her sewing space.

That long-ago night under her supervision, I dusted and vacuumed my bedroom
like I did every evening. She stood silent in the doorway tapping her foot until I
finished.

My mother moved into the room, her striped red-and-white terrycloth robe
flapping. Loose threads dangling from it. She ran her finger over the dresser top,
the bed’s headboard. I opened my neatly made bed. Sheets, blanket taut. Climbed
under the covers. She sat on the edge. I smelled the plain floury scent of her. A
vague odor of Clorox coming from the worn bathrobe. Pressed my finger to a
purplish bruise on her arm. Her bone felt sharp through her skin. “What’s that?” I
asked.

“You know,” she said. And I did.

“He didn’t mean to hurt you.” I sat up in bed.

“Like he didn’t mean to twist your arm last week? Or push you down the porch
stairs the week before? Like he doesn’t mean to drink himself silly every night?”
She leaned toward me. “I can’t do anything about the way you look, but I can
make you act right.”
“I haven’t done anything wrong,” I said.

She put hot, dry hands on my face. “You’re not going to be like him,” she had said. “Not if I can help it.” That dull smell of flour was everywhere. My eyes watered. My mouth went dry.

Now, all these years later, I found myself pressing my hands to my head, that vast well of empty headache swelling inside me. Jesus. I got up fast and opened the basement door. Peered into the muggy blackness. “Grace,” I called. “Grace.” Had Grace closed herself and Theo into her studio, that fifteen-by-thirteen space she’d roughed out during the last month?

I stood at the top of the basement steps, tapping the school papers against my leg. I snapped on the light. Yelled, “Grace?” Walked to the bottom of the staircase. Jerked open the door to her studio. Avoided looking at the basket of out-sized clothes she collected at tag sales and thrift shops, vintage housedresses she used for material. She had put up the drywall, painted it pale blue, etched in a few swirls “to give it dimension.” Begged me to put in a door. I helped her install shelves, two rows of them. “For my sketchbooks,” she told me. I lined one wall with mirrors. Built a storage closet for myself on the other side of the basement. Inside was Frances’s hope chest, which she’d passed on to Grace as a wedding gift. When I built my closet, Grace told me to take that chest and use it for my fishing gear. “Keep the closet locked,” she said, “so Theo can’t hurt himself on jagged-edged tackle.” I did. Keep it locked.

I walked into her studio. Switched on the overhead lights. Sat. Heart pumping.
Pulled her basket close and yanked out the item on top. Terrycloth robe. Striped.
Faded red and white. Like my mother’s. Laid it across my lap and put my fingers through the empty loops. Pressed its rough texture to my cheek. Smelled eye-tickling camphor. Mothballs. Chucked the bathrobe into the basket. Picked up a piece of what appeared to be carpet. A flirty red carpet. Ran my finger across its raised pattern. Somehow sexy. Smelled of lemony iced tea, as if someone had spilled a glass of tea across it. Tossed it in beside the bathrobe. Why did it make me feel so alive? Randy, if you want me to be truthful.


I closed the doors. Picked up the phone to call Frances. Put it back. Grace would not want me to call her mother.

“Grace,” I hollered. Put my hand back on the receiver. Took it off. Once I had caught Grace in the act of throwing away one of her mother’s angel-food cakes. The whole thing. Down the disposal.

“What are you doing?” I said, grabbing her hand.

“She makes me feel invisible.” Grace tilted her head to the side in the way she had. “I bake, too.”

“Your mom drives fifty miles to bring you blueberry pies, pies with criss-crossed crusts that you love, chocolate chip cookies, raisin bread. She loves you.”

“Invisible,” Grace repeated.
“Oh, honey, she gets involved to show her love. She needs to feel needed.”
And the fact was I liked Frances’s interest in our lives. She can never hear enough
about my business, my plans for its future. No guilt about the long hours I’m away
from home. One time she said to me that I was the smartest businessman she’d
ever known. She’d glanced at Leon and shrugged as if to say he certainly wasn’t.
On my wedding day, Leon confided that he hadn’t wanted to get married, that he
and Frances had to get hitched just like me and Grace. Frances pregnant with
Baby Nathan. Couldn’t say to him Grace had been putting me off, saying stuff
like, let’s wait and see. I might leave for Providence. That having Theo, marrying
Grace was the best thing that ever happened to me.
Now I picked up the receiver again. If I called Frances and Grace wasn’t there,
Grace would be furious at me. I hung up the phone. Moved through the dark house
“Theo?”
Mike Kost from next door, Theo’s friend Brad’s dad, called out to me:
“Everything okay, Jonathan?”
I hadn’t seen him. He stood on his own front porch. What did he know about my
wife and son? Had Grace said anything to Suzanne? Had she found out something
about the warehouse deal? No way. Nobody knew the details but me. My closet?
The hope chest? No. Impossible. At last I said, “Yeah, everything’s fine.”
I went back inside the empty house, straight to the kitchen. Snapped on the
overhead light. I grabbed the dinner plates, tossed the food into the disposal.
Didn’t try to save any of it except the bread. Left that on the cutting board. Knife beside it. The pie, the fish, down the disposal. Scrubbed the plates. The mugs. Dried them off. Put them away. Washed the table. Straightened the cupcake plates. Set the apple bowl in the center the way Grace liked it. Picked up Theo’s school papers and used four tire-shaped magnets to attach them to the refrigerator door.

And then I seized the phone. Punched the button for Frances and Leon. What else could I do? Grace had to be at her parents’ house.

Frances picked up.

“What’s wrong with Grace?”

I dropped the phone. Pressed my hands to my head. Snatched the phone. “She’s not home. I don’t know where she is.”

“Isn’t that just hunky dory?” Frances said. “She’s not having another episode?”

“Theo’s missing, too.”

“Look, not a word to anyone,” Frances said. “Least said, soonest mended. We don’t need all of Mitford cackling about Grace. Let me talk to Leon and get back to you.”

I replaced the receiver. Picked up the knife sitting beside the bread on the cutting board. Chopped the bread into slices. One slice. Two. Three. Ten. Twelve. Piled one on top of the other. Hacked through the stack. Once. Twice. Squares. Sliced the squares in half. Lined them up. Carved triangles. Crumbly squares covered the cutting board. The smell of fresh bread made me feel as if I were back in the
bakery. I took the board to the sink and shoved the crumbs down the disposal.

Listened to the grind. Set the board on the counter. The knife I’d used to chop the bread sat on the counter, too. I picked it up. Ran its sharp edge across my finger. Blood dripped into the sink. I turned on the cold water and stuck my finger under it.

When the telephone rang, I jumped. “She’s at Minette’s,” Frances said. “Leon went over and talked to both girls. Even he doesn’t approve of Grace behaving like this. She and Theo are headed home.”

“What?” I said. “Why’d she leave me?”

“Because she doesn’t have the sense God gave a chicken, that’s why.”

I hung up the phone and walked outside to the backyard. Humidity filled the air. I went to the corner where Theo had a dirt hill for his trucks. I picked out stones, one by one by one. Lined them up. Arranged them in squares, circles, rectangles, triangles. Pitched them back into the dirt. Walked around to the front porch. Sat. Same spot Grace should have been when I pulled up forty-five minutes ago. She couldn’t have left because of what I’d done to get the warehouse money. She didn’t know. Nobody did.

Grace pulled up in her van. My heart filled my ears with a steady thud. I turned on the outside lights and stepped into the driveway. Motioned her to stop. Her window already down. Said, “What’s wrong with you?” Theo, eyes closed, was seat-belted into the backseat.

I reached inside the van. Shook her. “What were you thinking?” I looked up to see Mike Kost out on his porch again. Jesus. Why couldn’t that guy go to bed? “Pull into the garage,” I told Grace.

She didn’t move.

“Get out. I’ll move the car.” I opened her door, and she still didn’t move. I took hold of her hand. Clammy. Mine, too. “C’mon. Get out.” She stood. Tears ran down her face. Not the tears. Not again. That day we took her to the Psych Institute—tears, more tears. Wild laughter. “Can’t you see it’s joy?” she kept crying out. “Ecstasy.” Her face flushed, perspiring. “Don’t you see Him?” All I saw was that I was losing Grace to a world of her own making.

“What is it?” I said now. Voice steady. “What’s wrong?”

She put up her hand in that traffic cop gesture of hers. I reached inside the van, pressed the button to raise the garage door. Walked her into the house through the garage, through the laundry room. Ah, the smell of vanilla bean. And the touch of the glistening toga. Broadcloth. Lustrous finish. An odd silk lining. Warm choice to wear on a day like today. I ran my hand across it. She must have deconstructed an old T-shirt and re-stitched, sewing it into the silk so that the raised threads created an embroidered pattern. I felt like sweeping her into my arms, wrapping her toga’s smooth folds around us, holding onto her, never letting her go.


I settled her in a kitchen chair. She wiped her eyes with her toga. I saw her take a deep breath. “You didn’t have to call my mother,” she said. “I hate it when you do that.”
Why did she have to attack me like that? She was the one who’d left me. Gone without a word. “You should have called me,” I said.

“I did call you. About a million times. No answer.”

I remembered that I’d turned off my cell the minute Frank and I headed to Callahan’s. “My cell was off,” I said. “You could have left me a note. Something.” I wanted to kiss her. I wanted to feel her toga against my skin. So soft. I wanted to know what the embroidered pattern was made of. I didn’t want to have to explain anything. I wanted her to have been home when I got here. Was that so hard to understand? Said, “You should have been here when I got home.”

I hurried to the van. Opened Theo’s door. Carried him inside the house. Set him on the family room couch. Wonder Woman clutched in his hand. Ran outside this time. Jumped into the van and pulled it inside the garage. Backed out. Pulled in again to get it exactly right on its strips parallel to my Jeep. Pressed the button to close the door. Stepped into the kitchen.

The overhead light shone bright. Grace held Theo’s school schedule in one hand, her head rested on the other. The tire magnets lay scattered on the floor. I picked them up. Set them in a straight line on the table.

“You didn’t need to involve Minette.” I re-aligned the tire magnets.

“You should have had your cell turned on. Where were you? No one answered at the store.” Grace swatted the table with Theo’s school papers.

“Sometimes I’m not in the office. I’m in a bay or outside looking at tires. You know that. I forgot to turn on the cell. I’m sorry. But that doesn’t mean you need
to go telling Minette our business.” I walked to the end of the table, tapped the handle to the sliding glass doors. Headed toward the closet. Tap, tap.

“That’s not the same as you telephoning my parents.” Grace lifted her head. Set down the papers. “My dad said that after my mom got off the phone with you, she made him squeeze close to her on that tattered prayer cushion of hers and pray.”

“Leon was right to pray with her,” I said.

“It makes her happy,” Grace said. She added, “I thought you’d know I’d go to Minette’s.”

I sat beside her. Said, “Kids go to school. Fly on their own. It’s what they do. You should be excited for him.”

“You were going to come home early. I counted on you.” She chewed her thumbnail. Added, “The school hours are longer than they told me. A half an hour extra. Fifteen minutes in the morning. Fifteen in the afternoon.”

I reached for the cupcakes. Peeled off the plastic wrap. Crumbled it into a ball.

“Meeting with Frank came up. Late customer, too.” I put the cupcakes into rows, their green paper barely touching. “Customers,” I said. “That’s how the bills get paid around here.” No point talking about my big news now. The warehouse would have to wait.

Grace touched a fold on her toga. She wrapped a strand of her wild curly hair around her finger. “You’re never here.”

I got up. Grabbed the balled plastic wrap. Tossed it into the trash container.

Snatched a roll of plastic wrap from the cupboard. Tore out a sheet. Re-wrapped

She tilted her head. Put her fingertip on that little hollow spot between my collarbone. A gentle stroke.

I knew where she was headed, but I just couldn’t. Wanted to. Couldn’t. I ignored the soft pressure of her finger. Released the broadcloth. Pressed both hands to my head. “What did you do? Go to Minette’s to get my attention? Is that it?”

“I’m losing Theo,” she said. “I needed you to come home.” Another stroke in that hollow of mine with the tip of her finger, a soft pressure that I loved. I pulled away from the touch of her finger on my skin. Stared at the refrigerator, the picture of her and Theo.

“I can’t be home more than I am. It’s all I can do to keep up with the store. Make enough money for us. For all the employees. Their families. Don’t push at me.”

Grace reached out and pulled my hand from my hair.

“What’s the embroidered pattern of?”

Grace tilted her head. A small smile. “A Winged Wonder Woman,” she said.

“Are you going to fly away?” I heard a tremble in my voice.

“I’m not pushing at you,” she said.

“I get home whenever I can. It’s not fair for you to go off and not let me know.” I paused. Said, “I need you to be home when I get here.”

At first Grace said nothing. Finally, she said, “Call me, then.” She lowered her voice. “A sexy phone call. Like you used to.”

I piled the magnets one on top of the other.
“Please.” She tilted her head again.

Jesus. What did she see when she looked at me like that? She needed to deal with Theo’s growing up, the extra half hour he’d be gone.

“Don’t you remember those calls?” she said. “Our capes? The caves?”

Jesus. I pushed out my chair from the table.

“Stop it,” Grace said. “Stop that leg crossing routine. Just stop it.” Saw her turn away her head.

“Sorry.” I put my arm around her. Said, “We’re not kids anymore. You don’t understand.”

Grace let her head fall against my shoulder. “Just a phone call,” she whispered.

“I’m only asking for a phone call.”

We sat in silence. I heard her rapid breathing. I didn’t want her to cry. I didn’t know how to make her understand how I felt. About the miscarriage. The stores. The pressure. I took three deep breaths in through the nose. Three out through the mouth. Said, “I’ll call you.”

Grace lifted her head.

I stared at the magnets. Moved them around. Made a circle.

“When? While Theo’s at school tomorrow?”

“I’ll try.” A triangle.

“He plays outside in the afternoon.”

A square. “I’ll call. Tomorrow.”

She leaned closer to me. Kissed my cheek. “We can make it like before,” she whispered into my ear. “Remember when you used to say, ‘I want to FFF uhuhuh KKK UUU GRRR aaa SEE’?”
I could hardly breathe. She went upstairs, then, after gathering Theo into her arms.
I should have helped her. Carried him myself, but I didn’t. I re-attached the school papers to the refrigerator with the tires, shut off the overhead kitchen light. Stared at the fluorescent bulb over the sink. Snapped on the light to the basement and hurried down to Grace’s studio. Stepped inside. Let the basement light shine into the room. Sat in her chair. Pulled the striped bathrobe from the basket into my lap.
I started to rock. Back and forth. Stood. Pushed my arms through the armholes. Pulled the mothball-smelling terrycloth close around me. Rocked, toes to heels. Touched the nubby chenille. At last I yanked off the robe. Threw it into the basket. Walked to the other side of the basement. Stared at my closet. Touched the locked handle. Imagined opening that hope chest. No. You do not have to do that. You don’t. You can make things right. You can. With the business. With Grace.
I turned and ran up the stairs. Slammed shut the basement door. Grace. Ah, Grace. Raced up the next set of stairs to our room. She lay in our bed, silent, still dressed. I took off my clothes. Folded them neatly into squares. Lay them in the laundry basket inside our closet. Put on fresh underwear and a T-shirt. Climbed in beside her. Tugged on the folds of her toga. Wrapped the silkiness around us both. Vanilla bean.
CHAPTER TWO

GRACE

When the alarm’s five o’clock buzz awoke Grace the next morning, all she could think about was that Jonathan had agreed to make a sexy phone call. Her toga splashed out across the bed. She was naked except for her black bikini panties, and her legs felt warm and smooth against Jonathan’s. She rubbed her cheek against his, felt the delicious burning sensation all through her body. She pushed up his tight crewneck T-shirt, pressed her breasts against his naked chest. Maybe, oh, maybe. Theo was sure to be asleep. Her nipples tingled. Oh, please. It had been so long, and he wouldn’t talk about it since the miscarriage a year and a month ago. He always claimed he was tired, and he was from all the store stress, Grace knew that, knew she should be considerate, be satisfied curling up with him, letting him spoon her the way he wanted her to. Almost the way it had been before that day he took her to the Dwayo caves the afternoon she got the letter from Providence.

Jonathan swung his legs over his side of the bed. He smoothed the wrinkled cotton of his boxer shorts, ran his hand up and down the material. Soon he would begin to pleat it, fold it this way and that. Grace put her hand over his.

He pulled away, brushed his hand through his dark hair. “So much is happening at the stores.” He grabbed clean underwear from his bureau and headed for the bathroom.
Grace got out of bed. Her toga drifted to the floor, settling into lavender swirls. She picked out a camisole from her dresser, a slight, satiny number she had created from an old lilac petticoat of her mother’s, and slipped it on. She knew better than to ask him what he meant. Carol? So many late evenings at the store with her. The woman was a vinyl shower curtain—damp, cheap, rubbery. Every now and again, Grace considered putting Theo in the car and driving to Mitford to surprise Jonathan, but she never did.

She walked over to the window and peered outside. Gray and rainy. Had the heat lifted? At least the grass might have a chance to grow. Grace could hardly bear to look out her windows at the identical houses twenty feet apart with their barren patches of empty lawn.

She cast a quick glance over her shoulder. Shower water droned. She closed her eyes and folded her hands on the windowsill. “Please help me,” she whispered. When no answer came, she murmured the Lord’s Prayer and softly sang a hymn that had been running through her mind for the last months, *Onward Christian soldiers, Marching as to war, With the cross of Jesus, Going on before.* Jonathan emerged from the bathroom, wearing his boxer shorts and T-shirt. “What are you doing?”

Grace opened her eyes and imagined she saw sun shining and tiger lilies, hundreds of tiger lilies, blooming in their front yard, a big spray of them swaying back and forth, a Bradford pear, lush and green standing tall in their midst. She turned to Jonathan. He sat on the edge of the bed, pulling on his pants.

“I’d like to be home more, too.” He reached out his hand. Grace settled beside him on the mattress. “You okay?” he said.
I don’t know, Grace thought. I don’t think so. She looked at her camisole. A long, loose thread trailed across her leg.

“You’ve got the whole summer with Theo.” Jonathan put his arm around her, held her close.

Grace tugged on the camisole thread and watched it become looser still.

Jonathan touched her cheek. “Can you pick up the tire uniforms at the drycleaners today or tomorrow?” he asked.

Grace nodded, and he kissed her forehead. She closed her eyes, letting the feel of his lips seep through her, and when she opened them, he was gone. “You’ll telephone me?” she called out, but there wasn’t any answer. She fell back onto the bed, letting her head rest in his pillow’s indentation. She heard a rapping noise and wondered if it might not be a Bradford tree branch, fluttering hard against the bedroom windowpane.

“Mom. I kept calling you.” Theo leaned against the doorjamb, clutching his Humpty Dumpty pillow in one hand, a little figure dressed in the cotton Batman pajamas she’d made for him, his light hair tousled, blue eyes sleepy.

“You did?” She sat up in bed. Her fingers grasped the loose thread on her camisole. It was a foot long.

“Are you okay?” Theo tugged on the three strands of brown yarn Grace had sewn on Humpty’s head for hair.

“Of course I am. I’m your mother.” She held out her arms, and Theo ran to her, tumbling into the bed. He set Humpty on Jonathan’s pillow, then cuddled up in her arms. “Superman and Batman had a fight,” he said.
She touched his arm, ran her finger up and down its soft smoothness. “Who won?”

“Nobody. Wonder Woman made them stop. She hates fighting. She gave them a time out. Superman’s sitting alone in the Fortress of Solitude. Batman’s on the window ledge. That’s why I didn’t bring them in here with me.” Like Superman, Theo had a Fortress of Solitude. While Superman’s was carved out of a lonely Arctic mountainside, Theo’s was hidden in his closet, a large cardboard box painted blue, labeled with large red velveteen letters Grace made and glued to the box. If he scrunched up really tight, he could fit inside it if he took out all his most precious possessions. Theo said Superman’s was an escape, a place to be alone and think. Grace had made Theo’s Fortress a handle of reinforced velvet ribbon, so he could carry it with him to Brad’s or her parents’ if he wanted.

Grace closed her eyes and breathed him in, a dribble at a time. The only words she had for his smell were warm boy. He smelled of warm boy. “I love you, Theo,” she said, her face against his neck. He was her old nonnie blanket, come to life, that’s what he was, safe, soft threads woven into something that gave her life meaning, something she was afraid to ever let go of. They lay in the bed together beside Humpty, snug in Jonathan’s spot.

The numbers on the clock read eight-fifteen. Grace gently shook Theo. “Hey, time to get ready for school.” She pressed her nose against his soft, hot neck and sniffed.

“Mom,” Theo said. “Cut it out.” He climbed out of bed and headed for the doorway.
“I’ll be there to help in minute.”

Theo stopped in the doorway. “Let me do it myself. I know how.”

Grace twirled her loose camisole thread around her finger. “Take the baby monitor from your bedroom into the bathroom. Put it on the floor and leave the door open.”

She watched him disappear into the hallway, heard the thud of the bathroom door hitting the wall as he opened it. She stared at the pillow where Theo had cuddled beside her. The flattened space looked sad, like a discarded dress.

Grace touched her camisole. She had made flouncy panties, too, out of her mother’s slip, lace trimmed. Her mom told her that in her day they called them pettipants. “Pettipants,” Grace said out loud, rolling the word around on her tongue. She liked the pp sounds mixed with the ttt. One of her breasts popped out of her camisole, and she tucked it back inside. She could hear more sounds, too, Jonathan’s voice, that deep, angry one saying FFF uhuhuh KKK GRRR aaa SEE, and she had the strongest urge to slip her hand inside her bikini panties.

“Mom! Where’s my towel?”

Grace sat up. “Get a clean one.”

“Where’s the Spiderman one?”

Grace could see the towel in her mind’s eye on the third to the top shelf of the linen closet. “I’ll get it.”

“I can do it.”

“Get the chair from your bedroom. Put it in front of the closet. Climb up and you’ll see it.”
Vague rumblings and then, “I got it! I’m getting into the bathtub now.”

Jonathan had set the hot water heater so that the water would never be too hot.

“Do you have your monitor?”

“Yup.”

“I’m right here if you need me.” Through Grace’s monitor came the sound of running water.

The air conditioner gave off a sputter of cold air. Jonathan must have turned it on the night before. She got out of bed and turned it off. She went to the windows and flung them open. Gray and rainy. Maybe the heat had lifted. Grace got back into bed and put her arms around herself. Her flesh was soft. She sniffed her arm. It smelled of vanilla bean. She wanted to lick herself the way Jonathan used to, his tongue running through the creases in her arm, behind her knee, between her toes. If she were Jonathan, she would want to be home more often, would want to make love with her, lie on top of her, bury his face in her thick hair.

“I’m in the tub,” came Theo’s voice over her monitor. “I’m bathing Batman and Robin. Clark Kent, too.”


And she would want to live in Hudsondale if she were Jonathan, not be buried alive in bland Mitford. Grace yanked on another loose camisole thread. Hudsondale had street fairs and pottery shops. Two theatres put on shows. She tried to convince Teresa to audition for *Funny Girl*, but she wouldn’t. “I’ll stick to the church,” she said, and
something in her tone of voice made Grace feel guilty as if she’d suggested Teresa abandon her family for a life on the road.

She pulled the sheet over her, adjusted the pillow. One night last summer, she and Mike Kost, her friend Suzanne’s husband, had been chatting about college, the way some of the neighborhood had attended, others not. They stood by her patio table, sipping beers and eating chips. “My friend Minette wants to go to college,” Grace said.

“The hairdresser? The one with the nails and makeup?”

“She wants to be a social worker.” Grace dipped a chip into the guacamole she’d made.

Mike laughed. “I’d like to have her social work me.” Grace glanced toward his house. Suzanne was inside tossing a salad. Theo and Brad threw a ball back and forth across the Clarkes’ pool.

“I don’t think she’ll leave Mitford,” Grace said. The Kosts’ little girl Lisa cooed from her playpen. It was humid, the air damp and close, and the sun rested on top of the mountains, a hot red circle. Mike’s blue bug zapper electrocuted mosquitoes. Sweat trickled down between Grace’s breasts.

Mike sat on the bench and patted it. “Have a seat, gorgeous.” She hated that his words pleased her, but they did. It had been a long time since Jonathan had called her gorgeous or beautiful or sexy. She settled beside him, smelled his maleness, that warm sweaty baseball smell that only men seemed to have. He had on faded khaki shorts and a T-shirt, but she wore a new outfit, an old-fashioned “skort” she’d designed with pleats every inch and a low-cut halter made out of fringed bandanas. Mike put his arm casually around her shoulder, and his finger skimmed her breast. A thrill ran through her. Mike’s
wanting to touch her gave her a funny feeling of aliveness, a delicious sensation of her own warm body, as if she were the satin lining of a mink coat. A hot flush of shame reddened her face. She moved further down the bench and crossed her long tanned legs. Mike scooted closer, put his hot hand on her thigh and gave it a little squeeze. He leaned close to her ear and whispered, “You are such a babe.” Grace’s heart sped up. It wasn’t just his hand or his words, it was the flicker of his voice in her ear, almost like a tongue. Jonathan’s tongue. But when? She couldn’t remember the last time his tongue had found its way into her ear. Her face burned. She took Mike’s hot hand and set it on his own thigh. She got up and walked over to Lisa, stooped down and gave her a kiss. She returned to the bench, but sat farther away from Mike than before. They both pretended nothing had occurred, but the air between them felt tantalizingly thick, a sleeping bag padded with too much down.

“It’s amazing Jonathan never went to college,” Mike said. “Here I am an engineer going to night school for a master’s, but if I could make the money he’s making selling tires, believe me, I’d be home nights, not commuting to City College.” Grace sipped her beer, pressed the bottle against her cheek. She wanted to say, “Look around. Do you see Jonathan? He’s supposed to be here, but he’s not.” She turned to Mike, saw him look down her halter, heard him sigh. She said, “My dream was to be a dress designer.”

Suzanne stepped outside onto her and Mike’s patio. She hurried over to Grace and Mike. “Sorry to be inside so long,” she said. “What are you guys talking about?” Her red hair frizzed in the heat, and her pale freckled skin looked mottled. Grace would give anything for Suzanne to let her dress her. She was a little thick around the middle, pillar
legs and ankles, but Grace felt certain she could create an illusion of beauty with the right clothes and colors. She had such a pretty face. Suzanne put one hand on Mike’s shoulder, the other on Grace’s. A soft green linen, maybe. Or the palest of peach in a shiny cotton. Plain, without frills, the beauty in the cut.

“I was about to tell Mike that back in twelfth grade I got accepted to design school.” Grace paused before adding, “More than anything in the world, I wanted my own clothing label: Grace’s Own.” When neither Mike nor Suzanne answered, Grace had wondered if she really had voiced her dream. Maybe her longings were so impossible that the words had simply stopped inside her.

“Mom.” The Kost’s backyard faded like a bright T-shirt washed one too many times, and Theo appeared in her and Jonathan’s bedroom doorway, wrapped in his wet Spiderman towel, clutching a handful of clothes and his monitor. He handed Grace his monitor and marched over to the walk-in closet. Grace saw him crouch inside, drop the towel to the floor, struggle with his underwear.

She stretched out on the bed, waiting for Theo. She unraveled the camisole thread from her finger, one slow swirl at a time. Had she really told Mike and Suzanne her dream that night? Dream, there it was, that haunting word, dreamy, the word her family used to remind her that she’d spent two months in the Psychiatric Institute—the Insane Asylum, her mother still called it—after Theo’s birth. Silly Grace. Dreamy Grace. Her mother called that time the episode, and all Grace heard when her mother used the word was eh-eh-eh, ppppp, sssss, oh-oh-oh, dddd. One episode, years earlier, yet she knew that’s what was on Jonathan’s mind last night. What’s wrong with you, what’s wrong with you, what’s wrong with you?
Both Grace and Theo dressed in royal-blue pants because Superman wore royal blue, and they both wore blue T-shirts, Grace’s snug fitting and plain, a hint of Lycra and a dart or two added, Theo’s cotton, made from his baby-blankets, with the Superman emblem appliquéd on the front. He also wore a red high-top Converse, a sharp contrast to his blue tights. A yellow belt cinched his red trunks at the waist. She had sewn him a black Batman cape, a yellow Robin cape, a red Superman cape. When Jonathan wasn’t home, she let him wear tights just like his superheroes did. Different colored tights to go with the various characters. Jonathan said the capes were bad enough, but the tights were over the edge, no son of his was wearing tights—but Grace believed a child’s dreams should be encouraged. So she and Theo kept the tights a secret.

They left her bedroom hand-in-hand. As always, at the top of the stairs, Theo shouted, “Watch this!” and he raced down the steps to the fifth one up from the first floor. He leaped, his cape fluttering behind him. He turned from the bottom of the steps and grinned at her. “C’mon, Mom. Five steps. Try. Just try.”

Grace walked down to the fifth step. No way was she going to jump. No way could she explain to Theo that jumping for her was like free falling into a nightmarish dark hole of space. Theo laughed. “C’mon.” Grace walked down two more steps, then three. One step up from the bottom, she jumped.

Theo clapped.

“She put double raisins in this time,” Theo said. “I love Grammy’s raisin bread.”

They sat at the kitchen island eating eggs, sunny side up the way he liked them. Neither Theo nor Grace turned on any lights and the grayish day flitted in through the
windows “like spidery bats in the Batman’s Bat Cave,” Theo said. The two ate raisin toast made from bread Grace’s mother had baked. Shadows flickered in the room. Grace could have baked the bread just as easily herself, but her mother insisted on bringing Theo a homemade loaf each week just as if Grace didn’t know how to bake bread.

Grace bit into a slice and enjoyed the ooze of butter dribbling into her mouth, the warm raisins squishing against her tongue. “Me, too,” she said. “And you know what else?” she added. “I love that you like to wear the clothes I make you.”

Theo grinned.

Clothes were more important than homemade raisin toast, weren’t they? Everyone in town needed her to sew for them—Theo’s school, the high school drama club, the local theater, and especially Pastor Ginny needed her to donate her time and talent.

Grace glanced at the clock over the stove. Fifty minutes to pick up Brad from next door and get both him and Theo to class. She and Theo had plenty of time to finish breakfast, turn off the downstairs air conditioning unit, open the windows, brush their teeth, and drive the five miles to school.

And then she would cruise home and wait for Jonathan to make his sexy phone call. She couldn’t wait to hear that deep sexy voice of his, the way it prickled her ear, made her hot and wet. Before they married, they had sex four, five times a week, always wrapped in capes or big old dresses from her tag sale purchases. Once, Jonathan had worn the Bibendum costume. What a feat of acrobatics that had been! After Theo, they had sex at least once every two weeks, always in costumes, but Grace was tired, then, too.
“Brad’s not as good at baseball as me.” Theo stirred his orange juice with his index finger, then sucked on it. He did it again, making loud slurping noises.

Grace touched her red shirt, ran her index finger back and forth across its softness.

“Mom?”

“He’s not?” Grace got up and pressed her warm forehead against the freezer door. She pulled off the tire magnets and shoved Theo’s school papers into a drawer, the magnets, too.

“Nope, and his dad takes him to the batting cage every weekend.”

“Every weekend?” She sat and chewed her fingernail.

“Sure. He took him all winter, too. They’ve got cages inside for cold weather.”

Theo wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, a gesture identical to Jonathan’s. Grace thought of Jonathan’s hand, the time he’d cupped her between her legs in the front seat of the car with her parents sitting in back and then slowly put his finger inside her. She squeezed her legs together beneath the island.

“They let kids your age use the batting cages?” She could taste her vanilla bean lotion on her fingernail, smell it on her lips.

“We use softballs, Mom,” Theo said. “You should know that from T-ball.” He looked at her as if he couldn’t quite believe she wouldn’t be aware of something so obvious.

“Sorry.” Once he started all-day school would he be gone all hours? Join clubs? Play ball at school instead of at home? Who would she, Grace, be, without Theo? The mere thought made even her fear another episode.
Grace heard the whine of the door from the laundry room. Jonathan walked into the kitchen. He wore his raincoat, buttoned shut and belted.

“What is it?” She twirled a strand of hair around her finger. “What’s wrong?” She hadn’t even heard the buzz of the electric garage door.

“What are you doing home, Daddy?”

Jonathan ran a hand through his hair. “I forgot an invoice. I’ve got to have it.” He started for the dining room office. He stopped, returned to the kitchen. “Look at this mess.” He grabbed the plates, the dried toast, the orange-juice glasses and put them in the sink.

Theo sat as still and silent as one of his superheroes.

Jonathan ran a stream of water over the breakfast dishes. He yanked a Brillo pad across the dishes. “Where are the school papers?”

“In a drawer.” Grace, too, sat very still at the island beside Theo.

“You better line up the pediatrician’s appointment or you won’t be able to get one.”

Grace went to the drawer, got the papers and tire magnets, and tacked them onto the refrigerator. She walked over to the sink. “I’ll do this,” she said, reaching for the Brillo pad.

“The yolk will stick.”

“I’ll clean those,” Grace said. “You’re wrinkling your coat. Get your invoice.” She almost added, “And get out.” She understood why he did his routines, the cleaning, the straightening, the folding, the leg crossing. He always spoke of his mother with love, but she knew better than anyone what he’d gone through as a kid, the way his father
abandoned the family, the moods of his mother. She’d known Mrs. Clarke, had been in her spotless bakery, her sterile apartment, had seen her doing errands in town with that ridiculous blue plastic flower shoved behind one ear, wearing those untied Converse sneakers. The flowers and red sneaks were quirks that could have worked, could have made his mother someone special, but on Mrs. Clarke they were only pathetic. One time when Grace was no more than nine or ten years old, Mrs. Clarke had stopped her on Market Street. “Where did you get that dress?” she’d demanded, pointing her index finger at a blue muslin jumper Grace had designed and sewn. “I want one just like it,” she said. “Where’d you get it at?” and to Grace, it had felt more like an attack than a compliment. “My mom got it for me,” she told Mrs. Clarke, “K-Mart,” and hurried away, one hand fingering the velvet trim on her pocket. Once she got home, she’d crept into Baby Nathan’s bedroom, opened his dresser drawer and taken out the satin pillowcase, rubbing it against her cheek until she heard her mother’s car in the carport.

Grace noticed that Theo had slipped quietly from the room.

Now Jonathan turned to the island, seized a handful of napkins that had been lying beside the orange-juice carton, and began to fold them. Grace sat at the table to wait it out. He would first fold the napkins vertically, second, horizontally, until the napkins were miniature squares, at which point, he would unfold them, try to straighten out the wrinkles. At last he took a deep breath and set the stacks of napkins at right angles to the island’s edges.

“Are you okay, honey?” Grace said.

Jonathan pointed at the table. “Look at that,” he said. “What is all that stuff?”

“It’s for arts and crafts at Theo’s school. We set out the materials this morning. Everyone counts on me.”
Jonathan picked up a knife from the table, pointed it toward Grace. “What is this doing on the table? Why would you leave out a knife? What’s wrong with you?” He ran his fingers along its serrated edge. Grace dropped her arms, pushed her chair away from him. She tilted her head to the side. “What’s wrong at the store?” she asked. “What’s so important about this invoice?”

For a moment she thought he was going to tell her something. He had a funny, expectant expression on his face, as if he were taking her measure, like Theo when he was working up to confessing that he’d eaten the cookies or spilled his milk. Grace imagined her mother saying, “There’s no telling which way the wind will blow.” Jonathan sat down at the table, leaned toward her. The wind’s blowing my way, Grace thought, and she moved closer to him, near enough to catch that faint whiff of tire store.

“What is it, Bibby?” she said, and put her hand to her mouth. She hadn’t called him that since the afternoon he’d come home and told her that he borrowed money to open his tire store.

“Bibby.” Jonathan’s voice softened.

Would he tell her what was on his mind? The air-conditioner’s chill cut into her bones, made goose bumps break out on her arms. And then she felt heat, a delicious familiar warmth, that sensation that someone was close beside her. Oh, it’s a feeling she’s had before, somewhere, yes, somewhere. That slight, warm whistle of wind. She put out her hand, felt the breeze’s comfort. A sign?

“Forget about the invoice.” There went that hand through his hair. “It’s nothing for you to worry about.”
Grace looked at him, tilted her head.

“It’s your leaving out the knife that we need to worry about.” His voice became lower, angry. “Theo’s only six.”

Grace put her hand to her throat, felt the pulse pushing against her skin. She put out her hand, a tentative, shaking hand, but the warmth was gone, only the chill of the air-conditioner remained. Why did she feel so disappointed? And why, oh why, did she have to find that low, angry voice of Jonathan’s so sexy? Her nipples grew hard beneath her red shirt, and she flushed.

“I used the knife to cut the yarn,” she said. “Theo knows not to play with a knife. Besides, we’re always together in the kitchen. He’s not alone.” Her voice trailed off, but the word, *alone, alone, alone* teetered through the room, red high heels on rough pavement.

Jonathan put the knife into the sink and left the unfolded napkins in a neat, wrinkled stack on the island. He went into the dining room office. Grace stood in the doorway. He sat facing the front windows, the opposite direction from her. She saw him crossing his legs, once, then again. She turned away, embarrassed. She went to the kitchen’s sliding glass doors and looked outside at the gray sky. She tapped the glass.

Jonathan returned to the kitchen, a pink invoice and some other papers in his hand. He put them into his coat pocket.

They faced each other across the room.

“It was silly of me to leave out the knife,” Grace said.

A thud sounded from the foyer. “Five steps,” Theo called. He dashed into the kitchen, his red snap-on Superman cape, a yellow S emblazing it, attached to his T-shirt.
“Ta dah!” he shouted. “I’m ready for school all by myself.”

Jonathan stared at his son, then at Grace. She thought it was the first time he’d taken in what she was wearing—her Wonder Woman ensemble.

Jonathan stared at Grace. “What is wrong with you?”

Theo ran around the island, cape flying out behind him. “I’m Superman. I can leap tall buildings in a single bound. Fly faster than a speeding bullet.”

Jonathan grabbed Theo as he sped past. He unsnapped the cape from Theo’s shirt. “He’s not wearing that cape to school.”

Theo wriggled in Jonathan’s grip. “It’s my cape,” he said. “I need it to be Superman.”

Grace stepped over to Jonathan and Theo, tried re-snapping the cape. Jonathan put one hand on her shoulder and pushed her. “He’s not wearing it. Or those tights.”

Grace’s hip hit the pointed edge of the island. The cape fluttered to the floor. She dropped her hands from Theo, pressed them to her hip. Theo went limp in his father’s arms.

“Jesus.” Jonathan set down his son and went to Grace. He touched her hip, pulled down her pants to look at it. She moved the slightest bit so that his hand caressed her. A small red spot marked her skin. Jonathan pulled her closer to him, ran his finger across the reddened area on her hip.

Theo ran to the closet, pulled out his Electric Broom. He turned it on and pushed it across the kitchen floor. He ignored his bright red Superman cape, vacuumed around it as if it didn’t exist. Grace sat at the island and put her hands over her ears. Jonathan went
to the sink and got a wet paper towel, brought it back and stroked Grace’s hip. Theo
thrust the Electric Broom back and forth around the island.

“Look,” Jonathan shouted. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. I just don’t understand you
dressing Theo like this. You want to make him into a sissy?” He sat at the table across
from the island, facing Grace.

Grace was thinking how that one cowlick made his hair look messy in a good
way, how she liked that his raincoat couldn’t hide his broad shoulders. Throwing all those
tires around gave him bulk.

“Turn off that cleaner,” Jonathan yelled at Theo.

“Grammy gave it to me for my birthday,” Theo hollered.

“Turn it off.”

Theo unplugged the Electric Broom. He shoved it into the closet and pulled out
his Batmobile, a big black plastic toy. He got on his hands and knees and raced it up and
down the floor. He made sounds deep in his throat. He ran it into the adjoining bathroom
and laundry room. Vrrroom, VRRROOMM filled Grace’s ears.

Jonathan stood again and dampened another paper towel. He came over to Grace,
sat on the stool beside her and patted her sore spot with the cool towel. She leaned toward
him, closed her eyes, breathed in the damp smell of his raincoat, a hint of chalk, and that
faint mechanic-type odor, oil, maybe, a hint of rubber, a smell so familiar it made her
want to cry. She was grateful he had pushed her because now he was being nice. His
touch felt so good.

Theo zoomed the Batmobile over to the island. One of its wheels squeaked.

“Superman’s grown up, Daddy,” he said. “It’s his cape.”
“No cape outside of this house,” Jonathan said. “Is that clear?”

Grace climbed off the stool, bent down, and put her hand on Theo’s arm. He tapped the top of her hand three times, code for I love you. She tapped back.

“Superman’s not a sissy. He survived the explosion of Krypton.” Theo sent the Batmobile flying across the kitchen floor. “An explosion, Dad, from his own planet. From Krypton.” The Batmobile crashed into the wall nearest the laundry room. Theo walked over to it and propelled it into the bathroom. “Superboy survived because his father saved him. Jor-El. He dared to send his only son flying out alone in a rocket into the wild blue yonder of space to save him.” A small quaver in Theo’s voice made Grace look at him. He breathed in slowly but didn’t let the air out. Grace knew he thought if he didn’t breathe he’d feel a catch in his lungs and that would keep him from crying. She longed to sweep him up in her arms, keep him a baby, keep him safe from hurt. He snatched his cape from the floor. “Superboy was the only survivor. Thanks to his dad,” Theo said. He went over to the table and spread out the cape, folding it into a perfect square. “I’m going to put this away,” he said, that quaver still in his voice. “Superman’s sick. He can’t fly today.” He left the room.

“Do you want me to come with you?” Grace called, but Theo didn’t answer.

Grace sat back on the stool beside Jonathan. “He’s just a little boy.” She paused. “I remember you running around in a cape.” Grace’s voice was so soft and wistful, it was barely more than a faint whistle in the room.

“That was private. Between us.” Jonathan touched her hip. “Better?” He put his arms around her. “I’m so sorry,” he said against her ear. “I don’t want him to be a sissy, that’s all.” She let him hold her head against his chest, his hand in her hair.
Between us, between us, between us. What a lovely phrase. Like those long-ago phone calls, phone calls, phone calls. “You weren’t a sissy in your cape,” she whispered. His heart beat steadily, not fast and wild like hers, but steadily, the way her hands moved when sewing a button on his shirt. He smoothed her hair, touched her cheek. His hand was warm. She leaned her face into it. “I’m so sorry,” he said again. Grace leaned close to him. She put a light finger on the soft space between his collarbones.

Theo hollered down the steps, “Mom, where are my brown socks?”

“Try Daddy’s top drawer.”

Jonathan ran his finger across her red T-shirt. He pulled at her sleeve, watched it snap back into place. “That’s a great shirt. I like the dress hanging on the door upstairs, too. Love the zebra print.” He ran his finger across her hip. “Better?” He put his arms around her. “I’m sorry,” he said again against her ear. “I’d never hurt you on purpose.”

“Are you still going to call me?” She held her breath. She wanted to put her tongue inside his ear.

“Of course I’ll call you. I call you every day.”

“That’s not what I mean.” Grace looked at him. “You know. You said you’d call while Theo was at school.” How could he forget?

“Damn you,” she said, and started to cry. She heard a thump from the stairs. “Six steps,” Theo yelled. “Six!” He came into the kitchen and said, “Sissies can’t jump six steps.” He squashed himself between them. He put a hand on each parent’s arm. “Time out,” he said. Grace and Jonathan exchanged guilty glances. Theo walked to the closet,
got out the Electric Broom and stood beside them. The vacuum cleaner’s erect handle loomed between them. A gauzy, gray quiet descended.

Jonathan leaned down and met Theo’s eyes. “Hey, big guy,” he said. “Give me five.” Theo let go of the Electric Broom, and it crashed to the floor. He slapped hands with his dad. He now wore brown corduroy pants and a beige long-sleeved shirt. Something inside Grace twisted. Jonathan said, “I ordered a Spider Man watch for you, buddy. From off the Kellogg’s cereal box. Keep your eye on the mail.”

Theo grinned.

Jonathan straightened up and pulled a handkerchief from his coat pocket and wiped away Grace’s tears. He ran his hand through his hair. “Are you okay?” he asked.

Grace took a deep breath. He needed her to forgive him for pushing her. Theo needed her to be strong. Her parents, too. The whole town, for that matter. “I’m fine,” she said.

Jonathan lowered his voice. “I’ll call you.”

*I’ll call you, call you, call you.*

The minute Grace got home from taking Theo and Brad to school, she shut off the air conditioning on the first floor and opened the windows. If a little rain dripped inside, she could easily clean it up before Jonathan came home.

She hurried downstairs to her studio. Somewhere, maybe in the closet, she’d find the superhero capes she’d made for her and Jonathan back in high school. She pushed aside piles of material, plaid cottons, black chiffon, pink velvet, faded beige lace, sequin-
trimmed dresses, vintage cashmere sweaters. Why had they stopped wearing their capes? Theo? Her parents’ unexpected visits? All those hours at the store?

At last she found the capes, hidden beneath a stack of old bedspreads on the third shelf. A sign. Oh, he would call, he would. Facing the mirror, she attached her blue Wonder Woman cape to her shirt in a blaze of safety pins. Upstairs she put on her bright blue flip-flops because they matched her pants. She held back her hair with a royal blue headband, retro seventies’ style. She set the telephone buzzer in the kitchen at loud to be certain she would hear it on the first ring and went into the dining room to work on Jonathan’s employees’ payroll. Her flip-flops slapped the hardwood floor.

Grace plumped up her cape and looked at her watch. A half an hour had passed. Only two hours until Suzanne would bring Theo home. She wrote another check. She tore it from the checkbook and ran her finger across its sharp edge. A tiny speck of blood appeared on her skin. She stuck her finger in her mouth and sucked it. Call me, CCC all me, CCC all MM eeeee. She sliced the skin on another finger.

The front door swung open. Minette burst into the foyer. Layers of gray mesh filled the sky behind the door. Seeing Minette made Grace’s heart ache, made her remember running to her for comfort the night before, the way she had so many times before when Jonathan or her mother let her down. Grace hurried to Minette, held her close. Minette only came up to Grace’s chin, so Grace bent down to press her body against her friend’s. Minette was slightly plump in a delicious way, like a bubbled tea dress from the forties, and Grace pressed her cheek to her friend’s. Umm. . . eau de Minette.
“Oh, sweetie.” Minette put her hand on the small of Grace’s back and pulled her closer. Grace’s breasts squished against Minette’s. Grace wanted to move closer, maybe lie down and spoon in bed the way they had as girls.

At last the women stepped apart. Minette ran a light finger beneath Grace’s eyes. “Want some Avon Erase?”

Grace shook her head. “I love your hair.” Her voice trembled. What would she do without Minette?

Minette brushed back her black bangs, short, feathery wisps across her forehead, the rest of her hair gelled into stiff spikes. “I’m trying out a new product. I think it’s going to hold even in this wretched humidity. Rain, too.” She had on the salon outfit Grace designed for her and her staff. Tight, stretchy, black capris, crisp white blouse, red satin sash tied to the side at the hips. And despite Grace’s advice, Minette wore false eyelashes, thick and black, blood-red lipstick, nails painted to match, red shoes.

“Oh, my God,” Minette said. “Let me see you.”

Grace moved from the tiny foyer into the dining room. She used both hands to adjust her safety pins, shaking her cape to spread it out behind her. She loved that Minette noticed her cape and knowing the capes were a secret of hers and Jonathan’s made Minette’s acknowledgment more exciting. She glanced toward the kitchen, toward the phone.

“Wow. Pretty racy,” Minette said softly. “The safety pins are fabulous. Hint of S & M. And the flip-flops.” She stepped forward and ran her finger across Grace’s row of shiny pins. “I would die to have your figure. You can wear anything and look fabulous.” She put a light hand on Grace’s breast. “Cleavage for a day, and I could die happy.”
Cleavage. Once upon a time, Jonathan had loved burying his face in her cleavage, pushing together her breasts, darting his tongue from one nipple to the other. Grace looked toward the kitchen again. Would he call now? Please, no. Not with Minette here. She could almost hear his voice, *fuck me, fuck me, — FFF uhuhuh KKK mmm EEE.* Her nipple grew erect beneath Minette’s hand, and she moved away. “You came to check on me, didn’t you,” Grace said. It wasn’t a question. She walked through the cluttered dining room, into the kitchen. “Want some coffee?”

Minette trailed after Grace. Her red flats squeaked against the linoleum, leaving a tiny trail of dampness. She reached for Theo’s fall school schedule on the refrigerator. The tire magnets fell to the floor.

Grace picked them up, took Theo’s schedule from Minette and reattached it. “It’s for real, all right,” she said. “He’ll be gone all day.” She busied herself opening the cupboard, searching for coffee mugs, filters for the coffee maker.

“Are you, sweetie?” Minette said. “Okay?”

Grace set two mugs on the table. “He’s going to be gone all day.” Her words vibrated as if she were empty inside. Minette touched Theo’s schedule again and once more the magnets crashed to the floor, the white papers fluttering after them. She went to get them, but Grace said, “Don’t bother.”

Minette touched Grace’s shoulder, then moved to the doorway leading to the dining room. Grace stood beside her, put her arm around Minette’s shoulder. Minette’s arm held her around the waist, her hand rested lightly on her hip, on the very place that had hit the island edge earlier that morning. “So where was he last night?” she said.
Grace turned once and stared at the silent phone. She looked at the papers spread out all over the dining room table and said, “Jonathan’s business is really picking up. He had a late meeting.”

“A late meeting. Hmm.” Minette dropped her hand from Grace’s waist. “Is he paying you yet?” She stepped out of her shoes. “Those pointy toes are killing me.” She walked over to the front window in her bare feet. She drew a circle on the glass with her finger. Grace would have to Windex any sweaty footprints and that circle before Jonathan got home. “I pay Keith, believe you me.” Keith was Minette’s current live-in boyfriend. He worked at Tres Minette.

Grace went to the dining room table. She closed the checkbook.

Minette settled in a dining room chair and rubbed her feet. “Did he say he was sorry last night?”

Grace ran her finger across her cape’s edging. She hurried across the room to the hutch and opened the bottom drawer. “Look what I found last week.” She held out a box of cassette tapes. “All mixed love songs he taped for me,” she said. “Remember how it was before we got married?”


Grace returned the cassettes to the hutch drawer. She blushed. Minette’s words made her think of the last time she and Jonathan had done it doggy style. At least two years ago. She put a hand to her pink face. She’d been down on all fours, and he’d had his hands on her breasts, his penis inside her, his voice whispering, “You it like this? You like FFF uhuhuh KKK ing like this?” Oh, God, he had to call her, he had to.
“Why did your mother call me last night? Shouldn’t Jonathan have called me?” Minette said. “Don’t you think that’s weird? And your dad coming over to my place like that with his knitting?”

Grace felt the seam give way on her right pant leg. She could feel her bare skin through the hole. She shrugged.

“I thought Leon was going to cry to tell you the truth. He’s so emotional about you. His baby. He kept calling you his baby. He went off on this Mama Essie rant about *Something Wicked This Way Comes*.”

“Something to do with me being a girl, I think. And you know, Baby Nathan.”

Minette used both hands to rub her left foot. “My toes are killing me.” She switched to her right foot. “Your dad sat and worked on a shawl of some sort. Multicolored. Fringed. My dad would have had on the TV. Some sports channel.”

Grace turned and reached toward the back of the drawer and found another box. Valentine’s Day cards from Jonathan. Grace opened a card dated last year. “You are the love of my life,” Jonathan had written. She closed the card, felt the velveteen trimming on the heart.

Grace chewed hard on the nail of her pinky and then swung around, cape flying, to face Minette. She lowered her voice. “I haven’t even told my dad this yet, but I’m going to ask Jonathan about working in the Hudsondale tire store. Set up the accounting office. Clear it out of the dining room.”

“Why would you do that?” Minette looked up from her feet. “You don’t even like doing the books.” She pointed to her left foot. “Brand new pedicure and the polish is already peeling.”
Grace headed to the kitchen. She stooped to pick up the magnets and Theo’s school papers. This time she taped the papers onto the refrigerator and stuffed the magnets inside the drawer. She moved to the sink and turned on the cold water just to be doing something. The empty coffee mugs sat forgotten on the counter.

Minette followed her, tried to put her arms around her, but Grace snapped off the water and walked over to the refrigerator. She pointed at Theo’s schedule. “Theo starts first grade in the fall. Don’t you understand?” She poked her finger against the white paper. She was Theo’s mother, that’s who she was. “What am I going to do?”


Grace’s heart sped up. Minette’s words hummed inside her like one of Leon’s Johnny Cash songs. Sew. Design. Do what you love, love, love. She put her finger through the hole in her pants. The seam ripped further. “I have a family who needs me,” she said. “My mother, my father, my husband, my son. I’m a mother.” She swirled around, cape slapping at her arms. “I’m good at what I do for the store. I could set my own hours.” She opened the refrigerator door, yanked out a bowl of Clementines and smacked them onto the island.

“Oh, sweetie, I’m sorry. Nobody said you weren’t.” Minette picked up a Clementine, put it back down. She retied her red sash. “I would hate it if Keith were gone all the time the way Jonathan is, that’s all. I don’t know how you stand it.” She carefully peeled the orange. She kept her eyes on the orange slices as she said in a very soft voice, “You don’t think it’s anything to do with Carol? His absences?”
Grace’s heart still raced, an unpleasant, frightened rush of blood inside her like a sewing machine run amuck. She walked over beside Minette at the island, careful not to touch her. She snatched up a Clementine, ripped at the peel. Her cape fluttered every time she tugged at the orange.

“Grace?”

She set the Clementine on the island, grabbed another and ripped off its peel, one strip at a time. “He’s going to call me today,” she said. “A secret kind of phone call, a bond between us from the past. I’ve never told anyone. You can’t tell anyone. Ever.”

“A phone call?” Minette said. “That’s going to make everything all right?”

Grace pulled apart the Clementine, shoved one piece after another into her mouth. She tossed the peels into the trash, sat at the island, and closed her eyes. Something inside her seemed to fall apart, loose and jiggly like the upper arms on some of the church women she fitted for choir robes.

Minette swept her arms around Grace. Eau de Minette. Grace pulled away.

“I didn’t mean to upset you. That’s the last thing I want to do.” Minette shoved her feet into her slim red flats. “You know that.”

Grace put a hand to her heart. Her whole body trembled. When Minette tried once again to hold her, Grace put up her hand.

“I’m sorry, sweetie. I only came over to make sure you were okay.” Minette looked out the window over the sink. “It’s sprinkling. I should go.” She paused. “I’ll stay if you like, though. Have a girl day. Facials. Whatever. I can call the salon and cancel my appointments.” She reached for the phone.
“I told you,” Grace said. “He’s calling. Don’t use the phone. I’m fine. You can go. Honest.”

This time when Minette put her arms around Grace, Grace let her. For a long time, the two women held each other. At last Minette headed for the front door. Grace followed her, flip-flops flipping and flopping.

In the foyer Minette hugged Grace hard. “At the door, she turned once as if she couldn’t help herself and said, “Think about design, okay? You could set your own hours with your own design business.” Grace said nothing. Minette walked out into the rain, hands over her spiked hair. The front door slammed with a dull thud.

Grace stood in the dining room and pushed her nose to the window screen and watched Minette climb into her green Ford Explorer, Tres Minette written on both sides in big pink letters, and disappear into the foggy heat. She pressed one of her cape’s safety pins between her thumb and her forefinger. She picked up a pencil from the table and wrote Grace’s Own three times on a sheet of paper. She crumbled it into tiny pieces and tossed them into the wastebasket.

She crept through the shadowy kitchen to the bathroom. Fll fll fll op op op went her flip-flops, and the lone sound in the empty house made her want to cry. She turned on the bathroom overhead light. It shone down on Theo’s Batmobile resting beside the toilet. A woolen shrug of grayness glided through the window screen. Grace sagged into a corner. Her cape was a veil of blue spread out around her, dull in the dim light. She touched another one of her safety pins. She twisted a strand of hair around the index finger of her other hand. Grace pulled up her knees hard against her chest, wrapped her arms around them, tight, tight, tight. Her whole body trembled. She remembered exactly
what the letter from design school said: “Originality. Talent. A unique view of what
clothes could be.”

Grace pulled her arms still tighter around her knees until she felt the muscles in
her neck tighten, the blood rush to her face. Minette didn’t understand. A phone call
could change things. Her finger touched the torn seam on her pants and she heard the
RRR iii PPP of more material. From outside came the slow, steady murmur of a light
rain. Grace loosened her grip on her knees, laid her head on them, and cried. She didn’t
want to live in a Fortress of Solitude.

A sudden loud knocking on the front door made Grace jump. She left the
bathroom and ran into the dining room toward the front door, cape flapping behind her.
The door opened, and her mother, her father right behind her, filled the foyer, blocking
out the gray sky behind them but not the brooding heat. Grace brushed a quick hand
across her eyes. Her father’s knitting bag, slung over one shoulder, slapped against his
thigh. A pink-and-white seersucker suit peeked out beneath her mother’s slim-fitting
navy raincoat.

Her dad swung shut the door. Grace turned toward the kitchen, the phone. She
could see it now. Jonathan would call, and she’d have to hang up. I’m putting my finger
inside you now, there’s one, oh, Gracie, there’s my second finger, a third and I’m
wiggling them, oh baby, you’re so hot and wet  WH WH eh eh TTTTT. Grace pressed her
thighs together, felt the red flush on her chest. It wasn’t as if her parents didn’t stop by
three, four times a week, anyway, but this time it was to make sure she was okay because
Jonathan had telephoned her mother last night.
Her mom bustled into the dining room, navy coat fluttering, seersucker rustling, the swish of her silken stockings brushing against each other whistling in Grace’s ears. She stood on her tiptoes and kissed Grace on the cheek. “Look what I brought my silly baby girl,” she said, and set down a box of Dunkin’ Donuts. “A dozen glazed doughnuts.”

Grace tried to smile, say something nice, she knew that’s what her mom wanted, but she couldn’t manage it. She patted her mom’s hand.

“What on earth are you wearing? A cape? That shirt is awfully tight, isn’t it?” her mom said. “You look ridiculous. All those pins. And emphasizing those breasts of yours is not the way to go.”

“Have you got the fixings for a Bloody Mary?” asked her dad as usual.

Her mother stood at the refrigerator, supposedly getting the cream for Grace’s coffee, but Grace knew the cream was right in front, easy to reach, and her mom was pushing the mayonnaise and ketchup around. If her dad was having a Bloody Mary, her mother wanted a glass of wine.

“It’s in the back on the right,” Grace said. Her mother knew that perfectly well. Grace and her father sat at the kitchen table, the leftover Clementines between them. She had mixed her father a drink, set out fresh-squeezed orange juice in a pitcher and a plate of apple slices, made a pot of coffee, and put out three plates. A stack of Jonathan’s unfolded napkins sat on the table next to the plates.

“I see Jonathan’s been busy.” Her father pointed at the wrinkled square beside his Bloody Mary.
Grace looked at her dad and said, “I took some napkins to nursery school. Those are the leftovers.” They had been happy, hadn’t they? She could not stop herself from getting up from the table, grabbing the phone, listening to the dial tone. When her father raised his eyebrows, she said, “Phone trouble,” and put down the receiver.

“Your face looks red,” her mother said. “Have you been crying?”

Grace sighed. She saw her father shake his head at her mother.

“I have a right to ask, Leon, after all Grace has put us through.” The word episode hung in the air. “Besides, every cloud has a silver lining. Grace needs to see that.”

“Here, let me put your coat in the closet.” Grace remembered her mother calling her and Jonathan a “match made in heaven,” when they’d told her parents they were getting married. She’d imagined two little matchsticks dancing on silver-lined clouds.

“Have you set the microwave?” her mom said. “And why is it so hot in here?”

“It’s sticky,” her father said. “You should close those windows and turn on the air.”

To her mother, Grace said, “I’m only zapping the doughnuts for twenty seconds. Any more and the glaze gets too gooey.” And to her father, she said, “I don’t like air-conditioning. You know that.”

Her mom sat, a glass of white wine in her hand. “Don’t give me that look, Grace.”

“I’m not giving you any look.” Grace stuck a plate with three doughnuts inside the microwave. She punched the buttons. She reached behind her and ran her finger across her cape’s Wonder Woman appliqué. WWW uhuh Der DER Wooo MMMM an an an.

Her father used a wrinkled napkin to fan himself.
“A little wine never hurt anyone. Speaking of,” her mom added, “can you believe the wine in church last Sunday?”

“What do you mean?” Grace faced her parents, twisted a strand of hair around her finger.

“So vinegary. They must have gotten the cheapest stuff they could find. What was Pastor Ginny thinking?”

“This is My blood which was shed for you,” Grace said. “Drink it in remembrance of Me.”

“Oh, for heaven sakes. You’re not going to start up with that stuff again, are you?” her mother said.

Grace’s dad nodded. “It’s okay, Gracie,” he said. “It’s just a symbol, that’s all.”

He picked up his knitting bag, pulled out a long, red scarf, set it on the table beside him. He took his glasses from his shirt pocket and put them on the end of his nose. He reached into the knitting bag, yanking out a multicolored scarf, knitting needles, and a ball of red yarn.

Grace cringed. She wanted to say, “It is Christ’s blood to me.”

“She’s fine, Frances,” her dad said. “Everything’s fine.” Grace knew that if she’d been sitting nearby instead of standing in front of the microwave, he would have linked pinkies with her. Instead, he did reverse stockinette stitches with the red yarn.

The microwave beeped. Grace took out the doughnuts.

“Those pants are too tight,” her mother said. “And they’re short. Why do you want them flapping around your ankles like that?”
“They’re supposed to be short. I’m creating a trend.” Grace set the doughnuts on the table and sat. “Help yourselves.” She took a doughnut and started licking the glaze.

“Look at her licking those doughnuts, Leon,” her mom said, a quaver in her voice. “Still my precious silly baby, isn’t she?”

Grace kept licking. *You’ll never leave me, my precious silly baby, will you?* Her mother glanced at the apple slices and Grace knew she was thinking of Baby Nathan’s smell, she knew her mom might say for the millionth time, *He smells of apples from the lake orchard, not baby powder at all,* and she knew she wouldn’t correct her, wouldn’t say his room smelled of poop, *Mom, stale, dry, poop,* and now it smells of nothing, nothing at all.

And then, for reasons she couldn’t explain even to herself, Grace said, “I remember when you’d make me sit in the dark on the floor of Baby Nathan’s closet.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s not a big deal. It was a long time ago.”

Her father grabbed two more long knitting needles from his bag, a ball of green yarn. Grace stuck her finger into the hole in her pants. Her mom put down her wineglass and reached for the apples. She sniffed deeply and closed her eyes as if the odor were too painful to bear. Her eyes still shut tight, she said, “That never happened.”

Grace turned to her father and spoke again, not knowing why. “It did happen. Dad, you know it did. You came home and found me one time. She wasn’t even home. She’d left me locked inside.” Grace concentrated only on those things exactly in front of
her. She stared into her lap, at the soft, smooth knees of her prima cotton pants with their torn seam.

Her dad cleared his throat in that nervous way he had that Grace knew drove her mother crazy. He cast on a row of stitches to the multicolored scarf, eyes on his knitting. Her mother’s eyes were still shut.

“Why are you two doing this?” Grace’s voice had that high little girl sound she despised. Something inside her felt like a crinoline petticoat caught in a nasty gale of wind. The rough linen netting scraped her legs. “It happened. More than once. It was a long time ago. It doesn’t matter. Just admit it.”

Her mother opened her eyes and ran the tip of her finger over an apple slice. Like a caress, thought Grace. She wiggled her finger inside the hole in her pants and heard more rrr ii pp ing of the seam. “Say something,” Grace said.

Her parents looked at each other, and Grace saw something pass between them that she realized she recognized from over the years. Something deeply private. The word secretive came to mind.

Her mom finished her wine and poured another glass. Grace’s cape shivered against her shoulders, but when she touched it, it was smooth and still. “Mom?” she said.

Her mother sipped her wine. Her dad said softly, “Memories are funny things, Gracie. Sometimes they’re just dreams.”

“That’s your whole problem.” Her mother’s words slurred. “Thinking they’re real. They don’t mean anything.”

Beneath every conversation for the last seven years lay the word _episode_ and below that _unstable_. She hated that word. _Unstable_. Like a horse running wild through
city streets. And somehow that accounted for nothing she said having any meaning.

Grace snatched up a doughnut and licked the glaze. She grabbed another doughnut and licked it.

“Jonathan and I had a fight this morning,” she said. “Theo was upset.”

“No, he wasn’t,” her mom said. “Theo was fine. Jonathan just cares about neatness. You know that.”

“Did he call you?” He had time to call them and not me. She glanced at the phone. FFF uh uh uh KKKK MM EEEE. She felt the skin beneath her T-shirt becoming red and blotchy the way her mother’s face did.

Her dad set down the knitting needles, picked up his tumbler, fiddled with the celery stalk. He cleared his throat again, a deep rumble that meant he was getting angry. Her mother shook her head at him. “He telephoned to tell us the tires for our car had come in, those special ones he ordered,” she said. “Don’t read more into this than there is.”

“It wasn’t about neatness.” Grace ran her tongue in a circle around the doughnut’s rim.

“Yes, it was,” her mom said.

“It was about Theo wearing capes.”

“Not according to Jonathan.” Now her mom used one of the wrinkled napkins as a fan. “Do you have any Saltines?” she said.

Grace shook her head, no. “And I think something may be wrong at the store,” she said slowly. “Just the way he’s been acting. I’ve been feeling this way for a while.”
“That man is building a warehouse. He’s an amazing businessman.” Her mom sipped her wine, looked at Grace over the rim of her wineglass. “It’s no wonder we all worry about you, hon.”

“I’m relieved to know that Jonathan will always be able to take care of you,” her dad said.

Grace licked off the glaze on two more doughnuts.

“Remember to get Saltines.” Her mother waved the napkin back and forth harder, but the flush on her cheeks and across her nose had deepened. She shrugged out of her suit jacket, hung it on the back of the chair.

Her dad cleared his throat again. He picked up both needles, purled in rapid loops along an edge.

The knitting needles’ click filled the room. Grace took her glazeless doughnuts to the sink and shoved them down the disposal. She settled back at the table.

“Minette says I should think about doing some designing once Theo’s in school. For other people.”

Her mother pulled the apple bowl right in front of her, put her face down close to them, picked up one and held it in the palm of her hand. She left the table and stood in front of the sliding glass doors, her back to the others. It was as if Grace hadn’t said anything at all.

Grace’s dad put aside his knitting, his glasses, moved his chair nearer to hers, linked his pinky with hers. All in slow-mo. His face had turned pasty, the way it did when he was angry or upset, a slight sheen to it. Like the shroud of Turin, thought Grace. He leaned very close to her and whispered, “First, say something to make her snap out of it.
Second, she drove all the way over here to make sure you were okay. Third, she loves you very much.” He took hold of her hand and squeezed, a longtime signal between them that meant I love you, but we have to appease your mother. He kissed her forehead once, each cheek twice, gathered up his knitting materials, and headed for the family room. Another indicator that he was angry or upset. The loud whine of someone on TV announcing a storm warning jangled Grace’s nerves. She walked into the family room. “Is it me you’re mad at?” she said.

“Nobody’s mad,” her father said. “Just don’t let your mother get on the Baby Nathan kick. You know that’s where she’s headed.” He kept his eyes on the television.

Grace returned to the kitchen. She put her arm around her mother. Her mother wasn’t cozy like Minette. Her mom’s bones reminded her of the skeleton Mr. Dacey had in his science classroom. One time Mary Sanfilipo had shaken its hand and the whole arm fell off and shattered into pieces on the floor.

Rain splattered against the cement patio. Her mother smelled of mint, that oddly comforting smell of minty lavender she’d always had. Grace pulled her mom closer against her, and the hateful synthetic material of her blouse irritated Grace’s arm, itched her neck unpleasantly.

Her father entered the kitchen, set his empty glass on the counter, and walked over to the two women. He gestured for Grace to leave. She sat at the island, surprised. It wasn’t like him to comfort her mother. But her father wrapped his arm around her mother protectively, and her mom leaned her thin frame against him. He wasn’t that much taller, maybe two inches, and her head fit into the crevice of his shoulder. Something unexpectedly loving in their demeanor made Grace feel like crying. So often she sensed a
hollowness between them, a bleak empty space she’d felt obligated to fill ever since she could remember. But not today. Her mother whispered, “Thank you, God, for guiding us with Grace,” and her father said, “Thank you, God, for Frances.” He placed his free hand over her mother’s, and her mother put hers on top of his.

“Now’s the time to tell her,” she thought she heard her father say, but her mother shook her head. Together they whispered the Lord’s Prayer.

Grace had this curious sensation of being on the outside of a Sacred Prayer Circle watching strangers perform a secret rite more mysterious than spiritual. As if her parents were in collusion, exchanging blood vows to keep their secrets. It creeped Grace out, reminding her of a time when she’d stood at the shoreline of Silver Lake on a glum, rainy spring evening and looked up toward the cottage. In the strange gray light the place had appeared bleak, haunted, the seemingly black trees rising on three sides of it, the veranda wrapping itself around the wooden structure, dilapidated, the chairs on the porches worn, empty. She’d thought about how much bigger the cottage was than people realized. It had secret passages running the length of the second story, filled with old jars, washbasins, porcelain chamber pots. Two flights of stairs, one inside, one snaking up the outside of the cottage to a separate bedroom. Her dad kept his cottage guns in that locked dark space right over the living room. The outside stairway ghostly with gray misty shadows slipping up and down the steps. The H-Man her dad always talked about? No. She’d glanced back again and the maple tree looked dark, too, sinister, the old swing, dangerous, the cottage a haunted ruin.

Now a gash of ragged lightning, followed by a rumble of thunder made Grace glance at the clock. She put a hand to her heart, felt its rapid beat. She saw the white doily
edging her mother’s face, the shadowy flannel of her father’s. As she sat at the kitchen island, her cape fluttered once more, and this time a light breeze lifted her hair. She had a cozy sense of familiarity, as if someone were enfolding her in his arms, and it wasn’t her parents. She wanted them out of her house. Their odd behavior made her uncomfortable, and she had only twenty-three minutes until Theo was due home. She looked at the phone again.

“Don’t you both have a meeting at St. Paul’s on Fridays?” she said. “You better head back to Mitford. It’ll be slow-mo going in the rain.”

“I really hate this rain,” her father said, and Grace knew he meant it. He’d hated rain for as long as she could remember. She went to him and gave him a hug. “Thanks for coming out in this weather to check on me,” she said.

From the dining room window Grace watched her parents walk out the front door and down the sidewalk to their old maroon Catalina. Her father held a large green-and-white-striped umbrella over her mother’s head. Grace suddenly saw her mother not as a woolen sweater, warm but itchy, but as one of the new spiky woolen stiletto heels, a shoe that left circular holes in those with whom she came in contact from their knife-sharp CL cl cl ICK ICK ICK. She waved as her father backed slow-mo out of the driveway, and she wondered if her mother was real wool or simply faux.

Theo and Brad had helped Grace make chocolate-chip cookies, Brad counting out chocolate chips and adding a bag of M & Ms that he divided into color piles before tossing them into the batter one at a time. Theo mixed the chocolates into the flour and sugar mixture. The whole process, measuring, stirring, baking, eating had taken the three
of them well over two hours despite Batman’s and Robin’s help. Grace taught the boys to cut apples into slices on the wooden slab beside the sink, too, so they could eat those along with the cookies. Theo vacuumed the room as soon as they’d slid the cookies into the oven. He did the family room, too.

Later the rain let up and the boys had gone over to Brad’s, returned for Theo’s blue plastic pants and hooded jacket and his boots, grumbling the whole time that he’d be too hot, and headed back outside to play with their trucks in the muddy dirt pile in the corner of the yard. He had his baby monitor with him, so Grace went upstairs, her own monitor in hand. She sat on the edge of the bed.

He hadn’t called.

She touched the safety pins holding her cape to her shirt, one by one unpinning them. The cape slid off her shoulders onto the bed alongside the discarded pins. She pulled off her shirt, her pants, her whole Wonder Woman costume and threw it onto the floor. What was the point? She set the monitor on her bed stand and lay down on top of the covers in her underwear. Growling noises. Theo and Brad making the sound of truck engines. She thought of her and Minette, the games with Barbie and Ken they’d played. She remembered the wedding dress she’d created for her Barbie out of Baby Nathan’s satin pillowcase. Barbie’s wedding day had been spectacular. Outside at the cottage, hot, a little cloudy, no sun to burn them. She and Minette had staged the ceremony on the raft in the lake. Barbie had had such high hopes. The first thing she and Ken had done was taken off all their clothes and gone swimming. Minette’s naked Bubblecut Barbie joined them. “I want to be a designer,” Barbie told Ken and Bubblecut Barbie. “Famous. Like Betsy Johnson.” But Grace had known she longed to be famous for herself, for Grace’s
own. Oh, God. Her desire had been so strong. She and Minette had even taken off their own bathing suits and paddled around in the water, touching each other’s budding breasts, running a hand between each other’s legs. Grace knew now that she had had an orgasm when Minette’s finger tickled her toodle, her mom’s word, by accident or design she didn’t know, didn’t care, what mattered was that she’d come just as she’d told Minette her plan for Grace’s Own. More mystifying was that at the exact moment of her telling, the sun had come out from behind a fluffy white cloud to beam down on them hard and hot, like a message straight from heaven, and Grace had looked upward to see Jesus waving from a seat on the powdery white puff of a silver-lined cloud.

Grace glanced at the clock. Nearly five. She swung her legs to the side of the bed and forced herself to stand. The boys still growled over the monitor. She decided against a shower. What if that was the moment he chose to call? He would call. He would. He had to. She left her costume on the floor, the cape and pins on the bed, and put on a flirty wrap dress she had made from her mother’s old cotton chenille bedspread. She had cut the mauve bedspread into squares and sewn them together with thick red yarn of her father’s in a pattern of her own design. The top crisscrossed her breasts, leaving her arms bare, and the skirt was tight and ankle length. She reached into her bottom dresser drawer for some socks and pulled out a pair that said Wonder Woman on the side in red. She’d found them at a tag sale over a year ago, but had never worn them. She tugged them on.

Grace went downstairs to start dinner. She took three fat tomatoes from the windowsill and set them on the counter. She planned to make chili, one of Theo’s favorite meals. She looked out the window over the sink. Already the neighborhood was growing grayer. The boys sat on the dirt pile, Theo’s Batmobile in plain sight, two or
three Tonka trucks beside Brad, Mike fooling around with a Tonka truck, too. He
looked up and waggled his fingers at her. Grace walked across the room, picked up the
phone again, heard the dial tone.

She set about chopping onions, peppers, cooking hamburger, heating the tomatoes
and kidney beans. She tried not to think about Mike, about the way he flirted with her,
about the fact that he would probably fuck her if she gave him half a chance, and her own
husband couldn’t even make time to call her. She stirred the onions and peppers into the
tomatoes, her wooden spoon, making a soft, slow glucking sound. A tear slipped down
her cheek. She could hear Ms. Povolo’s voice saying, Do this for you, forget about
everybody else for once and she heard Jesus, too, Take, drink, this is My blood which was
given for you and she could hear her mother saying, You’re pregnant? You’ll be staying
in Mitford, then and she could hear Minette saying, Design. Do what you love, and
overriding all these voices was Jonathan’s, I want to fuck you, Gracie. Grace’s hand slid
down the wooden spoon.

When was the last time Jonathan had said this to her? Two weeks, three, before
her miscarriage? He’d pushed her onto the big easy chair in their family room, the TV
blaring the Rugrats show, Angelica’s voice screeching Tommy, Tommy, Tommy, over
Jonathan’s hoarse I want to fuck you, fuck you, fuck you, Theo safely at the movies with
Brad’s family. Down into the chair she’d fallen, face down, her slightly swollen belly
cradled by the thick cushion, her legs spread wide. She’d turned her head to breathe and
Jonathan tugged down her panties, wadded them up, pitched them into the fireplace.
“I’m going to fuck you up the butt,” he said into her ear, so softly she wasn’t sure she’d
really heard him, heard the FFF uh uh uh KKK BBB uh uh uh TTT, but then she felt his
penis near her asshole and he’d reached under her, between her legs, his hand on her stomach and raised her up so that her ass was high and then his hands separated her butt cheeks and he pushed his penis inside her, slowly, so slowly, Oh, God, it felt so good the way he did it, all slow and gentle, talking to her the whole time, telling her what a sweet asshole she had, that he’d put mayonnaise on his dick to slide it in, how much he loved her, that he wanted to fuck every crevice she had, to be inside her, always, keeping both arms around her as if she were something precious he could never let go of. And she had come hard, furious, trembling, screaming, and she’d thought then they’d be together forever, that nothing could ever separate them after such an intimate act, the FFF uh uh uh KKK inside her heart and the shameful pleasure wrapping them together in a wine-colored wafery ribbon.

The telephone rang. Grace’s hand slipped from the spoon into the warm, gooey tomato sauce. She licked her fingers, wiped them on a towel, and gripped the receiver.

“Where’s Theo?” Jonathan said. “Is it okay to talk?”

He had called. A sign. She was silly to worry about Carol or Minette or her mother. He’d called. “Theo’s outside. I’m alone.” She was getting hot just imagining what Jonathan might say. The mayonnaise thing again? Or maybe the whole buffalo scenario? Had they really put on their capes in the Plimpton Park Zoo and chased each other around the buffalo pen? Had Jonathan really told her to call him Super Dong?

“Locked in my office.” Jonathan used that low, sexy voice she liked so much. Oh, God, this had to mean he would come home early, didn’t it? Theo could sleep at Brad’s. She’d get out Jonathan’s cape, too.
The hamburger meat sizzled. Grace nibbled a bite slowly, the phone tucked between her shoulder and her ear.

“So,” Jonathan said, “when are we going to get together?”

“Tonight.” Grace carefully poured the hamburger into the chili sauce with one hand and dipped the wooden spoon into the chili. She felt giddy, like that girl who had gone to the Dwayo caves so many years before. She knew all about Carol’s little dance step, and she did it herself, the leap, the two-step shuffle. “I love you,” she said, and laughed, a loud echoey kind of laugh.

Theo flung open the sliding glass doors and raced inside. He grabbed a handful of carrot sticks from Grace’s veggie tray, opened the refrigerator and got out the mayonnaise. Grace laughed. He shoved the carrots into the jar and licked off the mayonnaise. Two seconds later, Brad was in the kitchen, grabbing a handful of carrots for himself before they both disappeared into the dusk once again. Little puddles of dirty water dotted the floor. The mayonnaise sat open on the island. Grace laughed again. Mayonnaise. Her laughter spiraled around the kitchen.

“I want to be together. Now.” Jonathan’s voice was so low, so angry.

Grace set down the spoon, sat on a stool at the island, crossed her legs beneath her tight chenille skirt. “Me, too.”

“Naked.”

“Oh, yes.”

“Tell me you want to suck me,” he breathed. “C’mon. Tell me.”

Grace tried to swallow. He wanted her to get a banana, a hotdog, an Italian sausage, even an ice cream cone, something she could suck and make those slurpy noises
over the phone. He loved that. She reached for a banana from the basket on the counter, peeled it, sucked it, made the sounds he liked, squeezed her legs together, knowing her turn was next.

“Oh, Grace,” he said. “Now tell me you want to fuck me.”

It was one thing for him to say fuck, another for her. The word ran around her mind, *fuck, fuck, fuck.* Oh, God, she loved that word. Fuck, she thought, fuck. She spread her legs ever so slightly, reaching her hand up under her long, tight dress, and slid her hand in between them. A thick twirl of red yarn gave way. “I don’t think I can,” she panted.

“Do it.”

“I can’t.”

“Say it.”

Her hand deeper between her legs. “I want to fuck you,” she whispered.

“Now tell me you want me to fuck you.”

Grace’s heartbeat pulsed in her neck, her throat. She opened her legs, pulled up her skirt, the yarn ever looser, let her fingers touch her toodle through her panties. Oh God, had she really thought toodle? Another wild laugh bubbled up from someplace deep inside her.

“Fuck me. Say it.”

She pushed her finger beneath her panties and put it inside herself and said, “*FFF uhuhuh KKK  MM EEE FFF uhuhuh KKK  MM EEE.*” She put a second finger inside herself and moved her hips. Red yarn trailed down her leg.

“Tell me you want me to fuck you, you want it hard and fast.”
“I want it, I do.” Grace swayed on the island stool.

“Jesus,” Jonathan said, his voice warm and slick, and Grace imagined his hand on his penis right there in his office.

“Oh, Bibby,” she said, “oh, honey, come home early. Please, honey, please.” I need him to come home early, to want me, to be inside me, to fill up the emptiness. Please. One more finger inside her and she would come. BBB ib ib ib EEE. She knew it. “FFF uhuhuh KKK MM EEE FFF uhuhuh KKK MM EEE harder, harder, harder,” she almost yelled, and looked up to see Theo standing in the open glass doorway, staring at her. His blue rain suit appeared brilliant, a brighter blue than the sky had ever been. His brown eyes were enormous in his white face. “It’s raining,” he said, and his words didn’t seem to come out of his mouth at all, but from somewhere else altogether as if he were one of his own plastic dolls.

Grace’s eyes never left Theo’s as she said, “I have to go,” and hung up the phone. She knew Theo couldn’t see her hand beneath the island, couldn’t see what those fingers of hers had been doing, knew he couldn’t see her slowly take them out of her toodle, wipe them on her bedspread dress. It was as if she were inside a dream, everything blurry and in slow mo

Theo’s in his homemade rain suit, each plastic seam a feat of creative genius, and there’s mud on it, on his navy boots, mud the same deep brown as his eyes. He’s clutching the Batmobile and he walks into the house, staring, his eyes pools of mud, pulls off his boots, takes the dish towel and wipes off the Batmobile, starts running it up and down the floor. He keeps his eyes on the car, swishing it up toward the island, back
toward the sliding glass doors. Outside the sky is gray flannel just like that long-ago day at the lake when she slipped beneath the ice. Only it’s hot now, hot and hazy.

Grace sits on her stool. Give him time. Time. He’ll smell the onions, the chili beans, the tomatoes, he’ll forget those word. He’ll forget his mother undulating on the island stool like a snake charmer.

And then Theo slams the Batmobile into the wall, smash it goes, bouncing back toward the table, and he’s running, out of the house, thud, thud, thud in his wet socks, outside into the darkening evening, into the drizzle, no boots, no shoes, out he goes across the rain-splattered patio, past the covered pool, past the metal swing set, its two empty swings clanking back and forth in a dull rhythm. “Theo!” she calls, and he puts his hands over his ears. Grace’s heart skips one beat, two, three. He runs across the slippery grass, falls to his butt, slides, gets up and is off and moving across the yard away from the house into the fog of heat, as far away from her as he can get. He’s never been alone outside in the dark before.

Grace climbs off her stool, an old woman, bent shoulders, turns down the heat beneath the chili sauce, hands slippery with sweat and shame. A mauve square has almost torn off near her hemline. She leaves it hanging open, the dangling yarn a teasing against her ankle. She unplugs the phone, praying Jonathan won’t call the Kosts to check on her and runs across the kitchen tiles to the open sliding glass door. He’s gone. Her baby boy is gone, nowhere in sight. The mountains stretch blue-black against a charcoal sky.

“Thh eee oh,” she called out. “Thh EEE OH OH OH.”

No answer.
Grace hurried into the night without shoes, or boots, without a raincoat or umbrella, the dangling yarn dragging across the wet concrete patio. She ran to the pool first, her heart an ugly red pulse in her ears. He wouldn’t have removed the tarp. He couldn’t have. They hadn’t drained the water. It would be gross, algae covered. A menace.

No Theo.

The Kosts’ outside lights shone, but no one was in sight. Please don’t have gone to their house. Grace stood in the grass between the houses, the damp soaking into her Wonder Woman socks, rain dampening her hair, the peculiar misty heat bleeding through her bedspread dress. She imagined Theo’s precious voice crying out, There’s something wrong with my mom. Suzanne would call Social Services. Mike would grin. Cops would arrive and drag away Grace.

Grace slogged around the corner of the house and found Theo huddled on the front porch, shoulders hunched, hands clasped together as if he had nothing else to hold onto. She stood at the corner of the house, not wanting to get too close, to anger him into running again. “Let’s come in out of the rain,” she said softly. Theo turns in a wild swing, faces her. He says, “This is the kind of weather that brings the radioactive mole-men up from the bowels of the earth to kill Superman.” She walks through the wet grass toward him, tiptoeing, hands outstretched. She laughs. Another laugh. Loud. Echoey. She’s beside Theo, her hands still outstretched. All she sees is white gray edging her little boy’s face, covering it like a shroud.

Grace’s hand hung in the air between them like a dead thing. She felt her long hair, hanging wet on her shoulders, its curls tightening with the moisture. Theo stood in
his stocking feet on the porch. He sidled around her and headed toward the back of
the house. His feet squished in the grass. Grace followed him, her own socks squelching,
her wet dress clinging to her thighs, its fringe slapping, loose yarn dangling. She stayed
on the patio as he walked inside the still wide-open sliding-glass doors. He wiped his feet
on the doormat. She saw him sit in his father’s chair at the table, clutching a roll of paper
towels. He took six towels and laid them on the floor. He tugged off his rain pants and
jacket, stretching them out on the towels. He folded each wet garment into neat squares.

When she stepped into the kitchen, Theo disappeared into the dining room. His
footsteps thumped on the stairs. Grace picked up his wet pants and jacket and walked into
the laundry room. Her feet left damp imprints on the linoleum. She stood beside the
washing machine for a minute, looking at the little blue pants and jacket. Then she placed
them back on the paper towels where Theo had put them. She peeled off her own wet
socks and set them beside Theo’s jacket.

She slopped some chili into two bowls. She poured two glasses of milk. She set
everything on the island beside the veggie tray. “Theo,” she called up the steps, “supper.”

A thud in the foyer. Theo came downstairs wearing the only store-bought pajamas
he owned, a pair Grace’s mother had given him. Yellow flannel with little brown-and-
orange pheasants all over them. Grace wanted to cry. She sat beside Theo at the island.
Theo perched his plastic Superman doll on the edge of the island. The dull hum of rain
splattered against the sliding glass door. The night had turned from gray to black.

Grace moved her stool closer to Theo’s. He took his chili and Superman and
walked over to the kitchen table and sat down, his back to her.

“I wish I could have macaroni and cheese,” Theo said.
His comfort food, the food he wanted whenever he felt sad. Grace longed to put her arms around him. “Oh, honey,” she said, but she didn’t move closer to him. They finished their meal in thick, clotted silence, but Theo didn’t leave the room when he had finished. He pushed his chili bowl to the side and sat Superman in front of him. He flexed the doll’s arms, his legs, twisted its head around.

“We need to talk,” Grace said.

Theo averted his head.

“There’s still more cookies in the jar,” she said, but Theo remained seated.

Grace picked up her dinner plate, set it in the sink. She cleared her milk glass, her napkin. The linoleum stuck to her bare feet. She glanced at the unplugged phone. She went over and picked up the Batmobile from where it lay tilted on its side near the closet. “Please, Theo,” she said. She patted the Batmobile as if it were Theo.

He gazed down at the table and shook his head, but Grace saw in the cramped hunch of his shoulders that he wanted her to explain her phone call. He looked at her. “That bedspread looks dumb on you,” he said, and stared at the table again. Now Superman lay flat on the table. “It’s torn,” he added, and picked up his napkin and tore it into pieces. “You’ll trip on that yarn.”

Grace set the Batmobile gently inside the closet. She cleared the vegetables from the island. “Are you done eating?” she said.

Theo thrust his bowl toward her, tossed in the shredded napkin. He wiped his hand across the back of his mouth. She feared he would leave the room the way Jonathan would have done, but he didn’t. He reached into the napkin basket and grabbed a fresh one to put over Superman. “He’s sicker now than he was this morning.” He got up and
grabbed his Electric Broom from the closet. He turned it on high and yanked it back
and forth across the kitchen floor. His face turned red with exertion. At last, he shut off
the cleaner and let it fall to the floor. He sat at the island.

Grace didn’t try to sit beside him. She leaned against the kitchen counter facing
him, but he wouldn’t look at her. He kept fiddling with Superman and the napkin. At last
he said, “What were you doing?”

“Fooling around.” Grace glanced at the unplugged phone again. Wasn’t Jonathan
worried at all? Why didn’t he try her cell phone?

“With who?”

“Who do you think?”

“Daddy.”

“Of course it was Daddy. Who else would it be?”

Theo shrugged. “Suzanne and Mike are always fighting over someone she calls
the Thing. Like a monster, I think.” He kept his focus on Superman. “We’d get thrown
out of school if we used the f word.” Superman’s knees were up now, and Theo tried to
balance the napkin on them. “Miss Clagett would cry, I bet.”

“It was dumb of me,” Grace said. Was Mike Kost having an affair? Poor Suzanne.
Poor me. The word CCC AAIR AAIR OLL OLL filled her mind. Jonathan couldn’t be
betraying her. He’d made the phone call. He had.

Theo flattened Superman’s knees and shoved aside the napkin. “Real dumb.” He
didn’t look at Grace but at Superman when he said, “I won’t tell anyone. You’d look like
a real bad mom. Real bad.”
“Thanks for not telling on me.” Grace patted her hands on her dress. Chenille pile flew out into the air like dying dandelion fluff.


The fluorescent light over the sink blinked, a fierce, short blink. Grace moved toward the table. She chewed on her index fingernail. “I’m sorry,” she said.

“You looked goofy. Your face was all red. The way Grammy’s gets.”

Grace nodded and pulled the chair beside him. Theo pushed Superman in her direction. “He needs you to look at his throat,” he said.

She got a green toothpick from the drawer beside the sink and sat back down. Very carefully, she poked it at Superman’s closed mouth.

“It’s pretty red, all right,” she said. “I think he needs to go to bed.”

Theo and Grace made a bed of white Kleenex for Superman and set it on top of Theo’s dresser, close to his twin bed. Then Theo wanted Grace to watch while he sorted his baseball cards. Derek Jeter, his favorite, lay on top. He put Batman, Robin, Spiderman, and Wonder Woman beneath his Humpty pillow. Grace and Theo curled up together with Humpty between them, and Grace read him two of Jonathan’s Superboy comics. “Superboy was lucky, wasn’t he?” Theo said. “Krypton exploded—nothing left but pieces.”

“Really lucky,” Grace said. “Instead of the Kents finding him in that field, it could have been anyone. Or no one.” She sat on the edge of his bed now, smoothing his
hair. She’d put away the comic book and turned off the light. The hall beams shone
into Theo’s room. “He would have been really lonely.”

“I was thinking of the way his own dad saved his life. Jor-El sent him flying
through space.”

“Oh, you like the flying.”

Theo nodded. “Through the sky. He wasn’t afraid, either. And it was thanks to
Jor-El’s quick thinking that his only son lived. Like in a way Jor-El kept Krypton alive
through Superboy.” He added, “I liked your socks.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. They’re cool. You should put them back on.”

“When they’re dry. The red leaked onto the white.”

“I want a pair of red boots, boots that Superman would wear. Just like his, high
and pointed in the front.”

“We can look at tag sales, but that’s a tough one, sweetie. We’ll see.”

Every time Grace tried to leave, Theo let go of Humpty and clutched at her hand.

“Not yet,” he said. “Don’t go yet.”

“I’m not leaving. Don’t worry.” She tapped the top of his hand three times.

He got out of bed and went straight to Jonathan’s boyhood comic-book collection.

He climbed back into bed clutching a Batman comic. “This one’s about The Riddler,” he
said. “He reminds me of Daddy sometimes.”

skintight outfit had never been part of her and Jonathan’s games.

Theo tucked the comic beneath his pillow. “Just the way he has two identities.”
Grace found this remark disturbing. She felt it stick to her like the rhinestones she’d glued to the tiaras did for the town theatre. Not a single stone came off during any of the hot, wild dance numbers. “I still don’t know what you mean,” she said.

Theo crawled beneath the covers, only the top of his head poking out. Grace heard his muffled words, “I can’t explain. Sometimes nice. Sometimes not.” He stayed under the blanket. She heard him breathing in slowly, and she didn’t hear the exhale. He was trying not to cry.

“Come out from under those covers.”

Theo tossed back the blanket and tugged at the three strands of brown yarn on the top of Humpty’s head. “Will you make new hair for him? Golden curly hair?”

“You don’t want his hair like Daddy’s anymore?” Grace shifted on the bed.

Theo didn’t answer. He said, “You can’t go anywhere. You just can’t.”

“I’m right here, honey.” Grace stayed close beside him until he fell asleep, but his words about The Riddler stayed with her. She hadn’t forgotten that The Riddler had two complete personalities—one that used the other for evil or something like that. He was one of the few BatVillains to have more than one set of clothing—the green-and-lavender get up and an elegant three-piece suit. Why would Theo think his father had two personalities? All he ever saw his father wear was his tire store clothes, blue pants and the Clarke Tire Store shirts. She’d made countless Clarke Tire Store shirts. Could Theo sense that Jonathan was having an affair with Carol? Dual women? Did he have her Grandma Essie’s prescience?
Still wearing her damp torn bedspread dress, Grace plugged in the phone and sat at the shadowy island. She clutched Theo’s baby monitor in her hand and stared at his Electric Broom, lying on its side next to the kitchen table. The fluorescent light over the sink made the countertops look orange. Jonathan had reached out to her today in a way that he hadn’t for a long time. And look what had happened. But there was still a chance, wasn’t there? Theo was confused, maybe, but he was okay. She hadn’t damaged him. Maybe she and Jonathan could recapture the mood, the intimacy. Redness edged from her chest to her face, shame mixed with pleasure and desires still thrumming within her. Oh, Jonathan. She tried his cell phone to let him know why she had hung up so swiftly, but he didn’t answer. As soon as she put down the receiver, the phone blared.

“Grace?” It was Carol.

Carol? Frank always called if Jonathan couldn’t, never Carol.

"What is it?"

“Problems at the store. Jonathan tried to call you a bunch of times. He wanted me to let you know we’re going to be here all night.”

“We?”

“Me and Frank and some of the other guys.”

“Where is he?”

“On the road. Problem. Especially with this rain. One of the delivery trucks broke down. He’s trying to put out the fire. We need those tires tomorrow.”

“Why are you calling? Where’s Frank?”

“With Jonathan.”
“Right,” Grace said, and hung up. She heard a tear and felt something soft slide down her leg. She didn’t care. Let the whole dress fall apart. She walked to the refrigerator and stared first at Theo’s school schedule, then at the store pictures. Two of them showing Jonathan standing beside the tires, one arm around Frank, one around Carol. But it was the one of him alone in his Bibendum costume, the one with him wrapped in wires of white plastic surrounded by neatly stacked circles of tires that she snatched and ripped in half. She tore the halves in half and shoved them into the trashcan beneath the sink. She refused to think about Carol. Carol had nothing to do with Jonathan not calling her back, not coming home. Nothing. She reached into the trash and plucked out the torn picture. She threw the pieces into the sink and reached for the matches on the windowsill. She scraped two matchsticks against the side of the matchbox. They exploded into flame, and she tossed them on top of the picture and watched the bits of photograph burn to black ash.

Grace seized Theo’s damp clothes and her own wet socks and took them into the laundry room. The red from Wonder Woman smeared across the white cotton like blood. She moved to the sliding glass doors and flung them open. Her blue flip-flops sat on the mat, and she shoved her feet into them. She grabbed Theo’s baby monitor and stepped outside. The rain had stopped. A wisp of warm wind sent her dress to fluttering, the bedspread fringe swinging against her naked thigh. She picked up two Tonka trucks and carried them to the garage, setting them on their shelf. Heaven forbid should Jonathan think she let Theo leave them outside.

Her flip-flops slp lsl apped apped apped against the wet concrete patio. Grace slumped onto one of the picnic benches. Rain seeped through her still wet dress. Mike
and Suzanne stood in their own sliding glass doorway, but they seemed shadowy, unreal. Grace clutched the edge of the table. Mike loomed over Suzanne, Suzanne crumpling to her knees, her arms clasped around his calves. Then him grasping her, yanking her to her feet, pulling at her dress, her tugging at his pants.

Grace glanced at the silk sheet of velvety blackness now covering the Kosts’ sliding glass door. Had she dreamed Suzanne and Mike together? She saw that the inside of her hands were red as her father’s yarn from holding onto the table so tightly. Oh, how she wished Jonathan would come home, rub his cheek against hers, take her to bed, send those burning sensations through her. Make her feel alive. Theo’s deep breathing whispered through the monitor.

A bare sliver of moon shone, and rain fell once again from the black above. She thought of the H-Man, of the dark caves above the Steam Hollow Road. Tonight’s black shadowy sky made her feel as if she’d slipped into one of those dark, wet cracks in the Dwayo cave, those cracks she’d always imagined someone might disappear into and never be heard from again.

Grace put her elbows onto the wet picnic table and covered her face with her hands. Despite the unnatural heat, goosebumps popped out on her arms, her legs. She shivered. Maybe she’d go upstairs and lie down beside Theo. Maybe she’d go down to her studio and try to find her old design books.

It was then that a warm breeze glided past Grace, a gentle brush of air. She lifted her face. An odd fluff of warm fog wafted around her. She stuck out her hand. No drizzle. A sign? She felt as if someone had placed a downy angora blanket over her shoulders, her bare legs, around her head and ears.
“Amazing Grace?”

She tilted her head to the side. Now the sky appeared crystal clear, starry, the frightening black gone. She put out her tongue and tasted something sweet, sticky. Glaze, that’s what it was, doughnut glaze, and she kept out her tongue to catch the white silvery goo that slipped into her mouth, tasting of sugar, but enfolding her, too, making her safe and for a minute she thought it was a cloud’s silver lining, a wisp of mesh from which she could create anything at all. Please, oh, please. And she tried to stand, to go to her studio, but she heard a familiar voice, a sound that slid into her ears, but no, it wasn’t a voice at all, no, she was slip sliding into one of her secret spaces, into a dream, not the muffled dream of Mike and Suzanne, her own dream, Grace’s Own, yet she was wide awake, aware of the sudden glittery stars and fluffy familiar warmth. She pulled the cuddly angora blanket closer around her shoulders, but no, it was her old nonnie, its lovely baby-powdery smell floating through the air, sprinkling her long hair like confectioner sugar.

“I’m here,” she said.

She’s nineteen years old, no older, a sophomore at college, a winner of the year’s dress-design award. She’s marching across the stage in her award-winning dress, a luminous creation made of a slim-fitting blue Lycra and brocade, material she’s invented herself, wound tight around her body so that every curve shows. The dress is cut low, and her breasts gleam under the bright lights. She’s designed the dress so that her smooth swell of midriff shows, ruching down the sides, a hint of belly button, a slit splitting the dress up one side, showing off her long, shapely leg. Her curly blond hair floats across
her shoulders, glows like sunshine against the blue dress and sets off her blue eyes.

Her dress label reads Grace’s Own in scripted blue letters. It’s Grace’s moment, the one she’s always wanted and she’s alone on stage. She sweeps back her hair in one wild motion of her hand and looks around. Who will present the award?

“Amazing Grace?” comes a voice. She shades her eyes with her hand, but the klieg lights make it impossible for her to see anyone.

“Hello? Hello?” she calls.

And then she sees him. Jesus. He’s sitting on a step that has appeared out of nowhere, and he’s the Jesus of the pictures she’s grown up on in church, the Jesus wearing a blue cotton robe, a million wrinkled folds in it. The Jesus with blue eyes that can see right through her, that could melt her if she let them. He’s tied back his hair in a ponytail, showing off his bone structure. He has a hint of beard. A peek at his tanned feet shows her a pair of worn leather sandals.

He’s smiling. Grace pulls her ruching over her belly button. She puts her index finger atop her head the way she did as a little girl playing Mother May I? and spins around. Her legs are soft and satiny slipping against each other beneath her dress’s stretchy fabric, and she spins closer to Jesus until she’s no more than a step away from his perch on the step. He does have a five o’clock shadow, a scratchy stubble that makes Grace want to spin closer still, so close a finger couldn’t slip between them. He smells faintly of sunshine.

“What kind of a dance move is that?” Jesus asks.

“An umbrella step,” Grace says, and there he is beside her, a swirl of steamy seascape blue and a slim brown finger atop his shiny hair and around he goes, both of
them dancers as light on their feet as Tinker Bell flying across the stage atop Peter
Pan in his sleek green tights, her gossamer petal wings flinging shimmering fairy dust.

Jesus links his arm with hers, umbrellas lost in the whirl. Jesus drops her arm and takes
a step back. She notices a gleam of perspiration on his forehead. He touches her
shoulder, a light finger sliding down her hot bare skin.

“Are you making a pass?” Grace whispers, both excited and fearing she has just
assured herself a trip to hell. She wonders if Mary Magdalene found him as impossibly
attractive as she does. For Mary’s sake, she hopes not.

Jesus smiles, and it comes to Grace as easily as her umbrella step that he’s as
safe as her father, as safe as her dad during her adolescent years, the years she
hopelessly flirted with him, taking his yarn, wrapping it around herself, teasing him to
untie her. And he would unwind the yarn, she spinning in circles, unraveling, he telling
her all about knitting, about selvage stitches and slip stitches and stockinette stitches and
he’d never get mad that she’d tangled his yarn. Her mom would be at the office, and
she’d beg him to tuck her in and he would, first making her hot cocoa with real chocolate
and milk that they’d sip together at the kitchen table, sometimes eating doughnuts and
playing with the Ouija board. Later, sitting on the edge of the bed, knitting needles cl cl
clackackackacking and him talking about his hard day at work, about her mom, don’t
worry your mom, let’s keep her happy, think of Baby Nathan, and he’d set down the
scarf, the needles, and kiss her forehead once and each cheek twice, squeeze her hand.
Every now and again when he thought she was asleep, he’d lay his head on the bed and
cry as if his heart were torn into slivers of a once beautiful crystal-and-chain belt, and
she wouldn’t move because she didn’t know what he wanted from her. He’d mumble
about the H-Man, about Something Wicked This Way Comes. But now it doesn’t feel as if Jesus wants anything. Does he?

“I love you,” she says.

“Ah, Grace, how sweet the sound,” Jesus says, and moves his hand to her dress.

“Such a beautiful dress.”

Grace tilts her head. He does want something. No, please, no.

Jesus puts His hand to her cheek, leans very close and says right into her ear,

“You know what to do.”

Grace trembled. Her teeth chattered. The blanket disappeared, and raindrops fell onto her hair, arms, dress. She sat, uncertain what to do. She glanced upward at the sky. It had grown dark again. She got up from the picnic table, walked inside and set Theo’s baby monitor on the island. She closed the sliding glass doors and pressed her face against the glass, knowing she’d have to Windex it later.

“No,” she said. “I don’t know what to do.”

She went to the closet and grabbed Theo’s Electric Broom. She flipped the vacuum cleaner’s switch. Around the kitchen she went, sucking up the chenille fluff. She felt like a soft light ball of thread herself, a piece of fiber floating aimlessly in the air, only the humidity holding her together. She left the cleaner leaning against the table and walked outside again, shutting the sliding glass behind her. She closed her eyes and held her hot face against the glass. Rain dripped down from the sky. Please don’t let me fall apart. She walked over to the tarp-covered pool and looked up into the dark heavens. Rain splattered her.
Jesus.

He had been the warning sign of her earlier episode when Theo was born, when Jonathan had taken him away from her, leaving her alone. But this was different, wasn’t it? Only a dream. It wasn’t like Jesus had appeared in the flesh like he had that time. And no one had understood that he had been there to help her that day, nothing more. He had tried to tell her something important, but no one listened to her. She hadn’t been able to understand Him herself. She’d done what she thought He wanted her to do. That’s all. Her actions weren’t crazy like they said. She touched her throat, hoping to stop its wild pulsing. She had nothing to worry about. It was a dream. And it had been a beautiful dress. Beautiful. Plush. Yards of blue brocade laced with Lycra. She wasn’t crazy, she wasn’t coming undone. Jesus could, after all, only mean one thing when he said, “You know what to do.” The same thing her mother and Pastor Ginny would tell her.

Grace kept her eyes on the sky. One star, two peeked through the misty black. “Okay,” she said, her voice loud and echoey in the empty night. “If that’s what You want, I’ll try harder to make him happy.”

Grace glanced inside the house. Something small and pink lay on the floor underneath the telephone. A paper napkin? One of Theo’s capes? No, it was part of her mother’s chenille bedspread, red strands of her father’s yarn spreading out around it.

Grace sat on one of the picnic benches, a little pool of water soaking through her skirt. She picked at her dad’s yarn, gradually pulling it out of the holes she had so lovingly hand stitched. Square by square, her mother’s bedspread fell onto the wet patio.
CHAPTER THREE

JONATHAN

Whatever’s wrong with Grace is getting worse.

Third week in May. Hot, humid, sticky. No rain since that night in April. Leon talks of nothing but the H-Man and rambles about his Mama Essie and her weather prophecies. The way she’d wear that black babushka. Whispering in that thick spittlely whisper, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. Leon doesn’t seem to know that saying comes from some eerie science fiction story—Ray Bradbury this time—one that Miss Fleming made us read—where lightning rods arrive ahead of a storm, and a dark magic is a part of life. Some evil carnival, too. The main character spends the story chasing something that will destroy him simply because he doesn’t want to stop running and accept who he is. I tell Carol that the heat is good for business because the barometric pressure makes people get their tires checked.

Over a month since the night Grace went to Minette’s. Still not herself. Moody. Pushy. Nothing like she’s supposed to be. Doesn’t know the stress I’m under. The warehouse. The risks I’ve taken for the business, for her and Theo. I’ll make things right soon enough. Cross that bridge when you get there, that’s what Frances would say.

But Grace knows nothing. Not about the huge loan from the Mitford Bank. She wanted Bank of New York because she wants to cut some of our ties to Mitford. No
reason for her to act the way she did last night. Mind fogging heat played no part.

Doesn’t bother Grace. I had to call Frances. What else could I do?

Here’s what happened last night. Thursday. I got home late. Later than I’d told her I’d be. Passed the Psych Institute at eight-forty. Seventy-five miles per hour. Ignored the shadowy lights. Let Dale Carnegie blur my brains: Deliver products or paperwork personally to the customer’s home or office. Make phone calls to thank customers for their purchase. Reached Hudsondale at two minutes after nine.

No Grace on the front porch. Jesus. Here we go again. Pressed the electric door button and pulled into the muggy garage beside Grace’s blue van. At least she was home. Backed out and pulled in again to align the Jeep exactly on the masking tape. Thumped her tires, checked the tread. Walked inside through the laundry room. Kitchen dark, only the gleam of the fluorescent bulb over the sink. Tomato and onion, garlic smell filled the room. My eyes watered. Wiped them with the back of my hand. Spaghetti sauce. My favorite.

“Grace?”

I glanced at the table. Two places set. Real silver. Two unlit candles in silver holders. Two wineglasses. Bowl of shiny Peekskill apples as a centerpiece. Big pot on the stove. I went over and stared at it. Half-expected something burned like that god-awful day six, almost seven years ago when we had to take her to the Psych Institute. Candles then. Wine, too. Removed the lid. Thick chunks of tomato, mushrooms, garlic, swirls of onions. Let out the breath I didn’t realize I’d been holding.

Took a good look around the kitchen. Island clean. No toys, yarn, sewing
supplies. The table had nothing on it but place settings. I opened the closet door.

Theo’s Electric Broom, cord neatly wrapped, stood beside his Batmobile. Glanced into the dining room. Office papers scattered all over it as usual.

“Grace,” I called again.

No answer. One last glance at those candles, the wineglasses. Could almost taste that long-ago smoke, smell the sickening charred odor of plastic. Like a rotted animal.


Back to the lighted hallway. I ran inside Theo’s open door. He was sound asleep, one arm flung over Humpty, the other dragging on the floor. Batman and Robin lay on the pillow beside him. What was Grace thinking? I picked up the dolls and set them on the dresser. Put Batman on the bureau next to Superman and Robin. Wonder Woman was nowhere to be seen.

I sat down on the bed’s edge. Long eyelashes like Grace’s a smooth sweep on his cheeks. Wonder Woman clutched in his hand. I pressed my hands to my head. There it was. That vast well of empty headache. I plucked Humpty from beneath his arm, pulled Wonder Woman from his hand. Set them on the dresser. What was Humpty doing with long blond curls? Grace was losing it.

Theo made a sudden movement. Opened and closed his eyes. Smiled at me. Didn’t flinch. My own arm flashed inadvertently upward to protect my face. I pressed my
hands to my head again. Stop. You’re not Theo. He’s not you. Nobody’s going to hit anybody. I leaned down and kissed him on the cheek. He smelled of Mr. Bubble and garlic. Not sugary, the way I had as a kid. I pulled him to me. Held him so tight I could feel the beating of his heart. Laid him gently down. Said, “You’re not going to be like me.” His eyes stayed shut. His monitor sat on his beside table. Grace couldn’t be far.

Down the steps to the kitchen. “Grace,” I called. No answer. I opened the closet and took out Theo’s Batmobile. Grabbed paper towels. Sat at the table and polished his toy. Swept the towel up and down. She had to be home. Of course she’s home. I set the Batmobile in the closet and flung open the basement door. Peered into its blackness. Had Grace closed herself inside her studio? Minette and her interfering studio idea. Flicked on the light and walked to the bottom of the staircase. Muggy and hot.

“Grace?” I yanked open the door to her studio. Vanilla bean. Dresses hanging across a pole beside the mirrors. Pink and blue and yellow. Kaleidoscope. One had a silver ribbon around its waist. Another a sash of red sateen. I traced its sheen with my finger. Sniffed the flowery scent, roses, sweet jasmine. Some kind of powdery fragrance. Mint. Lavender? How I loved its aroma, the way color and sense came together somehow. Mmmm. Had Frances been here for a fitting? Unlikely. She thought Grace’s clothes ridiculous.

I stepped inside. Air closer and more humid. How did Grace stand the sticky heat? At least for once, she’d turned on the air-conditioning on the first and second floors. I sat in the semi-dark. Reached for her basket. Something new on top. Faded, frail white blouse, picot loops edging its beige lace. Looked like something a woman sixty, seventy years ago might wear. Held it to my cheek. Smelled of roses. Tiny embroidered pink
flowers formed a heart in its center. I gently rubbed the material between my index
My eyes teared. Tossed the blouse into the basket. Ran out of her studio. Refused to let
myself stop in front of my own closet. Not tonight. Didn’t matter how much I needed to
open that door to my private space. Raced upstairs to the kitchen.

“Grace,” I shouted.

The sliding glass doors leading to the back patio hung ajar. I stepped outside.
Looked across the sky. Blur of mountains. Next door, Mike Kost’s creepy blue bug
zapper broke the hush. Grace and Theo had emptied, cleaned, and opened the pool this
past week. Earliest we’d ever opened it. The sinister heat. In the gray night sky, I saw
Grace sitting on the edge of the pool, feet in the water. No patio lights. Dark.

I moved toward her, feeling dazed, as if some huge burden had been lifted from
me. “Why didn’t you answer me?”

Fireflies flashed and vanished and appeared again. Dozens darting and dotting.
She didn’t turn around. Didn’t say anything. Jesus. Please. Not like that day we
took her to the Psych Institute. Please, no. She’d cried over her baby doll Hollerina, about
Jesus, then she’d gone dead silent. I hated that. Hated when she wouldn’t talk to me. She
knew that. Filled me with shame. As if I wasn’t worth talking to. Still, she wore the
skinny black bikini I loved, a bikini she’d fashioned from two pairs of my socks. Her hair
hung on her shoulders, loose and curly, the way I liked it.

“Grace,” I said.

Then I saw it. The bed she created. Two air mattresses pushed together. Covered
with a quilt she’d made from my boyhood sleeping bag. Unlit candles encircled three
sides of the bed. Wineglasses gleamed. Candles, wine.
She turned, stood. Came to me. A safety pin attached the front two sections of her tiny top. She spilled out of it. Wrapped her arms around me. Pulled my face down against her neck. Warm. Garlic, a hint of sausage. A taste of vanilla bean. Always vanilla bean.

“What’s going on?” I stepped back. Heard trucks scudding down the highway off in the distance, retreads holding up or flying off into the night.

She pressed her breasts against my chest.

I held her. Touched her hair. Silky. Like the sateen sash. The air had the scent of Grace’s fey dampness. Sweaty vanilla bean.

She wiggled her hips. “You smell good. Glazed doughnut.”

I attempted to let go of her, to put my hands on her shoulders. She pulled me tighter. The smell of vanilla bean everywhere. I could almost taste it. Felt that vast empty headache swelling inside my head. I needed to sit. Said, “Honey, I’m tired. Long day.”

And it had been. She had no idea at all of the pressures. Never had the slightest clue what my life was like. How could she not meet me on the front steps if she had?

She took my hand from my hair. Walked over to the bed. Picked up a pack of matches from nearby. Began lighting the candles.

“No. No matches. No candles.”

Frogs and toads croaking and clicking.

She smiled. Kept the matches burning, lighting candles. All I could see was our bedroom in the old townhouse that day I’d come home with Theo strapped to my back. The flames. A sickening smell I couldn’t identify. Acrid. My own vomit.

The bug zapper zapped. Sent its blue light our way in a haze of heat. I used the back of my hand to wipe my sweaty forehead.
Grace walked to me. Wrapped her arms close around my waist. “That was a long time ago,” she whispered.

I pressed my hands to my head, empty headache swelling. What wasn’t so long ago was her miscarriage. A year and two months. She didn’t know what that had done to me. No way I could push away the memory now. Not with the glowing candles, the wine. Jesus. Not with her half-naked in front of me. But I could never explain how I felt about the miscarriage to her. Or to anyone. A Thursday evening. Just like tonight. Theo sleeping. Me and Grace watching TV in the family room. The night before, Wednesday, we’d had a terrible argument. Told her I was afraid of having another baby. Didn’t know how to explain it. Couldn’t tell her Theo’s birth had scared me. That I was afraid of the blood. Afraid I’d lose her. I turned silent when she started to cry. Left the room. Locked myself inside my basement closet. She didn’t speak to me the next morning. Making things worse.

I came home early that Thursday night, the Thursday evening of the miscarriage. Five o’clock. She was talking to me now. Said she was trying to understand my feelings. Sat next to me on the couch. Suddenly she got up. Left the room. Came back fifteen minutes later. “Call Suzanne,” she said. “Take Theo over to Brad’s. Hurry.” I did what she said.

I returned home. She lay on the couch. Sweat beaded her flushed forehead, her upper lip. A damp strand of hair fell across one eye.

“Get Annalee on the phone.”

I telephoned the midwife. No answer. Left a message. Kneeled at Grace’s side.
Smoothed her hair. “What is it? What’s happening?”

“Look in the bathroom.”


I slapped down the toilet lid. Sat.

“Don’t flush it,” Grace called from the family room. I got up from the toilet. Splashed cold water on my face. Crept back into the family room. Said, “Why leave it?”

“The baby could be in there,” Grace whispered. She groaned. A sound that smashed my brain like a tire iron. She staggered into the bathroom, hands clutching her belly. “Come with me.” She held out her sweaty hand. I couldn’t hold it. Couldn’t look at her red face as she let her hand drop to her side. I followed her to the door. Couldn’t step inside. Couldn’t hold her hand as she squatted on that toilet. Couldn’t hold her damp hair back from her face. I was fifteen years old again. Filled with familiar horror. Its sour smell, its rancid taste filling my eyes, nose, my mouth.

I stood at the door.

“Please,” Grace said. “Please.” She stretched out her hand again.

I stayed in the doorway.

Grace bent over, holding herself. “Oh God, oh God, oh God,” she cried. “Oh, stop rocking back and forth,” she said. “Stop, stop, stop.” I hadn’t even known I was.

The phone rang. Jesus. Ran to the kitchen. Annalee. Told her what was happening. Help Grace off the toilet, she said. Put your hand in the water. Check for a fetus. Bring Grace and whatever you find in the toilet to the hospital. I’ll meet you there.

I called Frances.
Then I did it. Carried Grace to the Jeep. Kissed her cheek, her hair, her neck. She smelled of bitter blood. Said, “I’m sorry.” Hurried to the bathroom. Stuck my hand into that bloodbath. Found three wiggly clots the size of my fist. And then our baby. Slime. Cherry Jell-O. Slid all of it into a large Zip-loc bag. Back to the Jeep. Pulled off the road on the way to Hudsondale General twice. Threw up. Fainted at the hospital. Woke up in the waiting room. Annalee standing over me. “It was a girl,” she said. “A baby girl Grace named Isabel.”

I stared at her. “What do we do?”

“What do you mean?”

“With the baby? Bury her? What?” My voice sounded high in my ears, high as an adolescent boy’s. I might as well have been sitting in the Mitford Funeral Parlor when my mother died, that blue flower still behind her ear, choosing a casket, deciding what she should wear. “Give me the blue flower,” I said to the undertaker, Ansel Watrous, skinny guy, dressed all in black, and I’d taken a yellow taffeta party dress with a sparkling sequined bodice, hanging from the rope in her sewing room and a slinky golden slip, clothes that didn’t belong to her, clothes that smelled of jasmine, not flour, and dumped them onto Mr. Watrous’s desk. Said, “These. She’ll wear these.” I’d brought over makeup, too, a tube of lipstick, a packet of powder, eyeliner, shadow, mascara, perfume. “Use these,” I’d told the guy. Mr. Watrous had patted my shoulder. “Yes, sir.” I slapped down a large pair of black satin high heels I’d bought at Good Will. Said, “Put these on her.”

“We won’t be needing those,” the man told me, and I took home the shoes.

Annalee offered me no comfort. Not a pat on the shoulder, no touch of the hand.
“Grace should decide. She’s in room 113. Her mother and father are with her.”

Annalee had walked away without giving me another glance.

Now Grace finished lighting the candles around the makeshift bed. The air was so close I was having trouble breathing. Fog plunged in from nowhere. Flickers of stars died. She walked over to where I stood beside the pool and took my hand. Her face in the fog was gray as a dull hubcap. Pulled me toward the bed. Faced me. Ran her index finger over the words Clarke’s Tire Store on my shirt pocket. Undid the buttons. Slipped it off me. Let it fall to the concrete. Caressed my chest.

“It was almost seven years ago,” she said. “And it wasn’t what anyone thought, anyway. No one listened to me.”

I could hear Frances’ voice inside my head. *Episode.* She’s having another *episode.* Said, “Theo?”

Grace pointed to the baby monitor lying on the picnic table.


I stepped backward. One step. Two. Jesus. Vast well of empty headache worse. Didn’t know what to do. I mean she’s been badgering me about sex. It’s a turn off. It is. Ask any guy. I wanted my tender, yielding Grace back. I was tired from work and worry.
I had a right to be. Ask Frank or Carol. They’ll tell you. Didn’t she listen when I told her about the pressures of building the warehouse? Where had my soft, compliant Grace gone? She’d never been like this. Pushy. Sure, there’d been that phone call business, and oh, she’d put her hand on my stomach beneath the covers, maybe lower her hand further still, fondle me a bit. Or put my hand on her breast. Or turn my mouth to hers. Where was my quiet, dreamy Gracie?

Night birds whistling through the stillness of the moist air.

Grace slipped her hand beneath the covers on the foam mattress bed. She held out our superhero capes. She smiled. “You can’t escape me, I’m a bird, I’m a plane, no, I’m Superman!” She pressed her finger lightly in the space between my collar bone. She leaned toward me in the ashen night. Wrapped the red cape around my shoulders. “Clark Kent, you’re Superman, you’re Superman Clllll ararar KKKK KKK ententent SSSS ooo perper mmmm ananan. My hero.”


“Stop it,” Grace said. “Stop that business with crossing your legs. Stop it right now.”

“They Kosts,” I said.

“They can’t see us in the dark.” She stood in front of me. Naked. Except for her bikini bottoms dangling around her thighs. Lush. Shiny with sweat. She turned away from me. As if she couldn’t bear to look at me. She leaned down and blew out the
candles. One by one. Smoke filled the air, and her ass filled my face, my eyes, my senses. Round, tight, inviting.

She stood straight, tilted her head. Face to the sky. “What’s wrong with me?” she said. Dead gray silence.

Her own blue cape lay on the patio. I took off mine. Folded it on the table. A perfect red square. The yellow S facing me. My back to hers. I folded hers and put it beside mine.

“I am trying harder,” she said.

I turned around. Said, “Look at me, Grace.” She kept her back to me. That round bottom of hers within reach. She stared toward heaven.

“I’m tired,” I said. “I need your support.”

Her bikini bottoms fell to the patio. A black puddle. She never took her eyes off the sky. “What is it?” Her voice wavy. “I thought this was what You wanted.”

“You’re pushy,” I said. “Like Mary Sanfilipo.” Couldn’t believe I said that. But I did. Continued, “Give me space. Let me relax when I get home.” Didn’t mean it. Didn’t know what I meant. The sound of my father’s voice filtered through me: Stand your fucking ground.

Still with her eyes facing the misty heavens, Grace flung out her arms and cried, “What do You want me to do? Help me, please help me.” She collapsed onto the picnic bench. Dropped her head into her folded arms.

I couldn’t take anymore. Frank hounding me for money. Gordie Couper asking questions. Customers demanding. Carol pressuring me for time off to care for her mother. And now Grace. Pushing at me for sex.
I picked up my boxers and pants. Tugged them on. Grabbed my shirt. Lay it on the picnic table. Pressed it into careful folds. Grace didn’t look up or speak to me. Why did she have to do that? Not speak? It made me want to put my hands around her throat and squeeze. *Something Wicked This Way Comes.*

I ran inside, down the stairs to the studio. Seized the terrycloth robe. Brushed its rough cotton across my face. Didn’t care that it smelled of camphor. Raced to the patio. Grace stood naked. Unmoving. Staring into the sky. A flash of distant memory came to me. The Invisible Boy searching for his lost father. I remembered my mother telling me he had died, that he was buried somewhere far away. Recalled pedaling my bike to check out every graveyard within a fifty, sixty-mile radius. Remembered returning home at dusk to the bakery months after the last ride I’d taken. Going up to the window. Pressing my face against the glass. Peering into the shadows as if I’d find what I was searching for inside my childhood home. Something lost. Something outside time. Had my mother told the truth? I no longer thought so.

I wanted to walk away. Leave this scene. Return to the basement. Open my closet door and step inside. Unlock Grace’s hope chest. Smell the flowery scents, the lavender, the vanilla bean, the mint. Touch the creamy velvet, crisp taffeta, bumpy seersucker. Press my face against their textures. Run my fingers up and down the black satin pumps. Let my finger skim the blue plastic flower.

I could not let her have another *episode.* Had to stay with her. Wrapped the robe around her. Tucked her arms inside the sleeves. Gently pushed her onto the mattress. “Here, baby,” I whispered. “We’ll snuggle. We’ll sleep here if you like.” Unfolded my shirt. Undid the buttons. Jerked it on. Hands shaking too hard to button it. Lay beside her
on the mattress. She rolled away from me. Please, no. Don’t do this, Grace. I curled around her. Felt the thud of my heart against her back.

"Is it Carol?" she said at last.

"What are you talking about?" What did Grace know about the store? I sat on the edge of the mattress where there weren’t any candles. Smoke still curling in the air.

“Stop crossing your legs. Stop it.” Then, “Are you having an affair?”


“Nothing’s wrong,” I whispered against her ear.

“It’s been so long.”

Chirps and buzzes.


Smoke made me cough.

She could not know about the loan from the Mitford Bank.

Zap. Kosts’ bug zapper.

Grace pulled away from me. She kept on the robe. Picked up her bikini top and wadded it into the bathrobe pocket. Walked across the warm patio cement to the picnic table. Sat. Put her hand on top of the folded capes. The hushed heat felt palpable.

I remained on the mattress, slick with dampness. A fear that had crept into my mind and heart every now and again over the past years, seemed palpable tonight—a toad, a dying trout, a dolphin rolled up dead on the beach. I shoved away the thought.
Grace would never leave me. Never.

I settled at the picnic table across from her.

I could just make out her face through the gray, her head tilted to the side in that disconcerting way she had. “What is it?” I asked, and hoped she wouldn’t start in on me or the craziness about Carol, that we leave the scene on the water mattresses behind us. Better to talk about Theo and school.

She reached out and pulled my hand from my hair. “My mother,” she said. “I was remembering how she told me I’d never fallen through the ice at the lake, that I’d imagined it.”

“That was a long time ago.”

She pulled at a fingernail. “I asked her about it a few weeks ago. Fragments of my life are sliding out of storage or something.”

“You might have dreamed that afternoon at the lake.”

“I know. Silly Grace.” She plucked at a loose thread on the robe. “But she might not have told me the truth about it.” She looked at me. Tilted her head again. What was she after? “I believed her the first few times she told me it never happened. I’m not so sure anymore.”

“Did your mom visit today?” I asked.

“She didn’t have to.”

Bug zapper zapped. Shivery blue light.

“Your mom means well.”

“I know that,” Grace said. “Don’t you think I know that?”

An owl hooted.
“I think I fell through the ice. I’m going to talk to my dad about it.”

I ran my hand over the picnic tabletop. Little splinters of wood cut my fingers. I’d have to find time to sand the table. “It’s not good to dwell on this stuff,” I said.

“She says I make things up.”

“Your mother did not say that.”

“What she said was that I was crazy, a dreamer. The same way you do.” Her gaze didn’t move from my eyes. “Gordie Couper called today.”

“Gordie?”

“He seemed to think I knew all about the Mitford Bank’s loan.”

Understood now why she’d brought up Frances.

“You said you’d gone to the Bank of New York. That you would go out of Mitford for the money. Expand our world.”

Pool water almost motionless. A cricket skimmed its surface. “Your mother never said you were crazy,” I said.

“Why did you lie?”

All the hard work I’d gone through to protect her. All the liens. All I was doing to provide for this family, and here she was pushing at me. “I want to work with people I know,” I said. Jesus. What was Gordie thinking of calling my wife? He’d hear from me tomorrow.

Grace said nothing. Her eyes still on mine.

“It’s my tire business,” I said.

She got up from the table. Walked over to the tire swing I’d hung on Theo’s swing set. Looked right at me. Said, “If I had a knife, I’d slash this tire to bits.” And then that tilt of the head. “You shut me out,” she said, and her voice trembled.
I pressed my hands to my head. Stood. Moved toward her.

She returned to the table. Shoved the capes to the ground. Grabbed the baby monitor off the table and hurried toward the sliding glass doors. Robe sweeping across the concrete. Disappearing inside the house. Somehow familiar and frightening. Jesus. Wanted to follow her. Couldn’t. My legs buckled. I was a little boy again. Watching my mother run from my father. At night. I had crouched down behind the glass display cases. Cases holding éclairs and glazed doughnuts, cinnamon swirls and brioches, pecan logs and croissants. Cases with sharp edges. Remembered the way I failed to protect my mother again and again.

One night she and I lingered in the bakery, alone, cleaning. We’d both showered, gotten ready for bed, but then she decided we had to clean the bakery. “I’m not talking to you until those glass cases are clean,” she said. I polished those sliding glass windows and shelves four, five times before she spoke to me. She scrubbed the floor. Her bathrobe trailed across the floor behind her.

And then my father showed up.


He shattered the door. Splinters of wood. Shards of glass. Put his hands around my mother’s throat. “Don’t you ever lock me out again, you fucking bitch,” he said. Liquor, now, and sugar and an oniony odor swelling the small space. His thumbs pushed hard against the soft space between her collar bone. I hid behind the doughnut case.
Watched. He pushed her toward the stairs. She pushed him back. Ran toward the
broken door. Robe ballooned behind her. He was too quick. “Tonight, Lillian,” he said.
“Oh, you will tonight. I’m standing my ground. You’ll fucking remember who the man is
here, baby.” He shoved her up the steps to the apartment. I curled in the corner. Closed
my eyes. She wouldn’t scream. She wouldn’t want the neighbors to know what I knew.
Later, he would fall asleep. She would come get me. After my initial surge of panic, my
landscape.

When my mother returned to the bakery, “I’m sorry,” I’d said. I swiped a paper
towel across the doughnut display case glass. Said, “He didn’t hit you, did he?” Hoping
for a reprieve. My mother had said nothing. Nothing at all. For three days. Spacious
hollowness. Slipping into The Invisible Boy who stood outside time.

I hurried after Grace. Caught up with her on the dark stairs leading to the upstairs.
Grabbed hold of the robe. She stopped on the shadowy step. Faced me. Her bathrobe
opened. Her voluptuous breasts swung into my face. Oh, God. I pressed my face into
them. Warmth. Vanilla bean. Mothballs. She took my hand. Led me downstairs. We sat
on the family-room couch together. She snapped on the dim lamp beside us. Pressed the
remote button for the TV, then muted it. Silent figures moved their mouths. She pulled
the baby monitor from her robe pocket. Set it on the table. Didn’t button her robe.

We sat in silence broken only by the air conditioner’s hum. Faced the silent TV
screen.

Grace said, “I thought I might work in the store next year. I thought what I did
mattered, that you needed me, that it was our business.”
The pressure inside my head increased. “Why didn’t you like the van I got you?” I said. “It’s your favorite color. Room for Theo and his friends.”

“I hate vans.”

Didn’t sound like the Grace I knew. I wanted to touch her arm. See if the skin was still soft. Or if it had turned hard and cold. Her face was white in the flicker of the muted television. She reminded me of my mother in her casket, white and blank.

“Everybody wants a van.” My mouth so dry the words were sticky.


She didn’t have to say more. I knew where we were. Right back at the Mitford Bank. Gordie Couper. Could he have told her about the checks? The Clarke Tire Store, Inc.? My name only. That her name wasn’t on the checks the way I’d promised they’d be at the Bank of New York? Was that what tonight was all about? “I’m part of this, too, aren’t I?” she’d said when we first talked about getting a loan. “I’ve been doing the books for almost seven years.” Easier to agree than to fight.

She put up her right hand like a traffic cop. “I don’t think I’m going to do the books for you anymore,” she said.

A sigh, muffled breathing. The monitor. Theo.

Grace and I looked at each other in silence. The worst part for me was that I was relieved. Incredibly relieved. I wouldn’t have to hide the Mitford Bank checks or statements from her or try to figure out cover stories about the size of the loan or the fact that I had incorporated the business without telling her. Or that there was a second set of books.
She tilted her head as if she were hearing something I wasn’t saying. Hated when she did that. What could she know? “I don’t think I’ll work in the store at all. I don’t know what I’m going to do.” Her voice trailed off.

Think. Try to understand what’s going on with her. Besides the surprise call from Gordie. Theo. Theo going to school all day. Of course.


Tears trickled down Grace’s face. I touched her shoulder, helpless. “Should I call your mom and dad?” I said.

She shook her head no.

“Minette?”

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

Grace wiped away tears. “I’m fine,” she said. “Stop asking me that. You, all of you, Minette, my mother, father, Pasor Ginny need to stop it.” She stood, leaned down and snapped off the lamp. “Just leave me alone.” She left the room.

I sat in the dark for awhile. Walked into the hallway. Grace had disappeared. I climbed the stairs. She wasn’t in our bedroom. I hurried down the steps to the small foyer and opened the front door. Condensation exploding before my face in quick, violent puffs. Expected to see Grace sitting on the porch steps. Saw the Kosts’ porch light was on unlike our own. Neighborhood had no streetlamps to bath the cul-de-sac in golden mist. I stood in the hot black stillness of our porch. A breeze should have been drifting through the neighborhood, the chill of an early spring night. This was the absence of sound before a storm. This unnatural weather had to break. I’d lived in the Catskills all my life. Never
had we had this unnatural heat. Not in April. Not in May. August sometimes, yes.

Leon’s voice inside my head: *Something Wicked This Way Comes.* I remained motionless. Didn’t trust the sweaty silence. Could Grace have gone over to the Kosts’?

Mike Kost emerged from his house. Khaki pants, white T-shirt. Walked to the end of his driveway. His car, a navy Camry, sat parked out front. He turned and gazed at his house. Suzanne stepped beneath the porch light. Rumpled. Red hair every which way. Face swollen. Mike pulled a set of keys from his pocket. Heard its jangle. Suzanne stood unmoving.

Brad came out onto the porch. Clutched a big bag of M&Ms. “Daddy?” he called. Lisa crawled outside. Pressed her face against her mother’s leg. Three statues. Mike stood at the end of the driveway. Shoved the keys into his pocket. Moved toward the house. Sluggish. The defeated slope of his shoulders felt like a warning to me.

I slipped back inside, letting the door swing shut. Winced as the metal shrieked against the night. Raced to the basement. Thumps from her studio. I wrenched open the door. Grace yanked sketchbooks from the shelves. Opening them. Flipping through pages. Terrycloth robe swinging wildly.

“What are you doing?”

She faced me, flushed, hair tumbling down her back, hands on her hips. She turned away to the sketchbooks. Ignoring me. Pulled drawing pads at random off the shelves. Leafed through sheaves of paper.

I said nothing for a long time. At last I whispered, “You are okay, aren’t you?” All I wanted was for Grace to get into our bed with me, cuddle up and go to sleep. Act like herself. “Grace?”
She tossed another sketchbook onto the drafting table.

“You better come to your senses,” I said, and backed out of the room.

Could Grace have any idea how much her not speaking to me hurt me? I might as well have been that frightened Invisible Boy in the bakery.

Grace had gone to bed, but she didn’t so much as look my way when I came into the bedroom. Maybe she was asleep, but I didn’t think so.

I hurried downstairs in the dark to the basement again and stood outside my storage closet for a longtime. Sweat trickled down my chest. To sit in the space, to open the chest, lean my head into the velvet. Let it touch my skin. That’s all. Just brush it against me. Nothing more.

“That room is off limits,” my mother said, hands on her narrow hips, voice loud and angry.

I jumped. Looked around. No, it wasn’t my mother. Just me, hearing her. How many times had she told me to keep out of her private sewing room? How many times had I snuck inside, snuggling into its one easy chair? So comforting, that room. Dresses floating from the rope. Flowery smells fluttering out from those clothes, filling the room with a thick perfume all its own, fruity, spicy, sweet.

Without warning the memory came. I was young, a little boy. The Invisible Boy. Hiding in the dark, forbidden place. The sewing room. Away from my parents. From their fighting in the kitchen. By myself. Door closed. Light on. I picked up the pile of clothes in the chair and sat down. Put skirts and blouses and dresses on my lap. Poufed up around me like bubbles in the bathtub. Blue and pink and yellow. Flowered and plaid.


And then the door had swung open. My mother, my father behind her in its frame. I had smiled. Fluffed my crisp yellow dress. The sour odor of beer and sweat swept the room, wiping out the scent of flowers. I put up my arm to protect my face. I took a step backward. I pressed myself against the wall. Folded the dress over my head. Slipped away outside time.

Now I forced myself away from that closet, away from the memory of that humiliated self, up the stairs, into the kitchen. Went for the freezer. An old tactic from childhood that Grace knew nothing about. That I’d mentioned to Carol last month. Swung open the door. Reached for the box I knew was in there. The box filled with glazed doughnuts I had bought the week before at Dunkin’ Donuts. Told Grace they were leftover from a store meeting. Sighed in relief. Anyone who has had the craving to take a
drink, smoke a cigarette, snort cocaine, eat a chocolate bar has to know that overwhelming desire I’m talking about. You know the release of pressure when that first sip of wine or drag on the cigarette hits your throat.

I set the box in the microwave. Buzzed those doughnuts for twenty seconds. Put the box on the table. Grabbed five paper towels from Grace’s roll beside the sink and spread them out. One by one, I arranged the eighteen doughnuts. First in three perfect stacks of six. Next, six perfect stacks of three. Circles of six. Circles of three. Grabbed a knife from the drawer. Sliced. Nicked my fingers. Pressed the knife lightly against the skin of my arms. Once. Twice. Three times. Rolled up the doughnuts bits in the paper towels, moved into the garage, and stuffed them into the bottom of one of the trash cans.

In the bathroom I washed the stickiness and blood from my hands and arms. Wiped my face with a wet towel. Stared at my pale blur of a face in the mirror. This was Grace’s doing. Her not speaking to me. Something was wrong with her.

I strode to the kitchen. Picked up the phone. Receiver had that creepy clammy moistness that comes from air-conditioned air. It stuck to my skin. I called Frances. What else could I do?
Frances sat up in bed, clutching the sheets. There’s something wrong with Grace. Jonathan’s late night words buzzed in her ears, a pervasive, staticky noise. She struggled to look at the clock. Six-thirty. Warm already. She didn’t think she had slept at all for the worry, but Leon was gone. He must have already set off jogging the trail around the lake. He’d started running two-and-a-half weeks ago, his weak ankles wrapped ridiculously tight. But she wasn’t going to let herself think about what that might mean. She’d think about that later.

It was too early to grab the phone and call Grace. Please don’t let there be anything wrong with my silly baby dreamer. Not another episode. She couldn’t bear it. And hidden beneath this prayer was another one: Forgive me for thinking there’s not a damn thing wrong with Grace but selfishness.

Frances got up and shrugged off her worn flannel nightgown, hanging it on its hook inside the closet. She left on her underpants, practical white cotton underwear, bought in packages of six at Wal-Mart. She special ordered her white padded bra, but they still cost under twenty dollars, shipping included. A good thing, too. Someone in the family had to watch their pennies. The Lord only knew if they would have one cent in their IRAs if she didn’t. Bankruptcy had not stopped Leon from spending money. As for Grace, she went through Jonathan’s money faster than he earned it. New house, new van,
new this, new that. No doubt in her mind that Grace had pushed Jonathan to build the new warehouse.

She walked into the hallway, snapped on the overhead light, and took a long look in the full-length mirror. She sighed. Her breasts, small as they had been before, had shrunk after menopause. No wonder Leon had a roving eye. She shook her head. She refused to remember the indiscretions. That was all in that past. Still, she tried to recall the last time Leon had seen her body. Really seen it. Or touched it. Of course seven weeks ago, she’d taken his hand and forced it beneath her bathrobe, pressed it to her right breast, to the lump she had just discovered. He’d felt it all right. Immediately said he was calling Grace, but she’d said no, absolutely not, it was private between them, that she’d never forgive him if he told Grace, that he and she would decide what to do. He had to promise he wouldn’t say anything to anyone. The only thing he said then was, “I hate that old bathrobe.” So far, they’d done nothing, not even talk about it. But they would. Soon. Her heart thumped. When she was ready. Seven weeks was nothing.

The thing she wondered, though, was would he have ever noticed the lump if she hadn’t made him? Frances was sure Jonathan got an eyeful of Grace once, maybe twice, a week. She shut her eyes, tried to blank out the image of a naked Grace, radiating lush heat and damp invitation.

Frances shut off the lights and returned to the bedroom. Maybe another baby was on the way. Maybe that’s what was making Grace upset Jonathan. Hormones. She hated that part of her felt pleased at the thought. But there it was, a sliver of pleasure at the idea of Grace not being able to hang onto that figure of hers forever. Not if she’s popping out babies. And about time, too, with Theo close to seven years old, her miscarriage over a
year ago. What on earth was she waiting for? Grace was no career woman as she,
Frances, had been. All Grace had were silly dreams of designing her own clothing line
some day.

Frances pulled on her worn pink-quilted bathrobe and as she did, she remembered
an afternoon she had walked in on Jonathan wearing this very same robe. Yes, Jonathan.
Frances sat on the bed. It had been the damndest thing. She had come home early from
the office one afternoon Grace’s senior year to find Jonathan’s truck parked in the
driveway. She pulled her old Valiant around it and drove into the port-côchere. She
entered the house quietly. Three doughnuts, glaze nibbled off, sat on a plate next to the
sink. She headed down the hallway, past Baby Nathan’s locked room. Grace’s bedroom
door was shut, and she heard a scuffle, followed by a laugh.

“It’s not the right size,” Grace said. “You’ve got to let me fit it.”

Another scuffle, followed by a crash.

Frances tapped on the door and opened it. Jonathan stood on Grace’s hope chest
wearing Frances’ shabby pink bathrobe. The sewing table chair lay on its side on the
floor. Grace sat on the bed, breathing hard, wearing a blue cape slung over a too small
black bodysuit. The legs hit her mid-calf. Her bosom strained the top. She leaned toward
Jonathan, flushed, laughing, a tape measure in her hand. “You didn’t need to knock over
the chair,” Grace was saying.

“Isn’t it early to be home from school?” Frances grew faint. With his dark
coloring, Jonathan looked adorable in pink. And, oh, my, he was so hairy. Her heart
fluttered, a little whisper of butterfly wings. She collapsed on the bed beside her
daughter, warm melted butter.
Jonathan leaped from the chest, and Frances caught a glimpse of boxer shorts covered in pink-and-red hearts. She knew he knew she saw them. “Grace,” he said.

“Grace made them for me for Valentine’s Day.” Into the silence, he added, “Grace had to finish the drama club costumes, so we came here for her to work.”

“Does the school know?”

Grace and Jonathan looked at each other. “I told Minette to let Mrs. Clagett know if anybody asked,” Grace said. “It’s fine. They need the costumes.”

“What is that you’re wearing?” Frances pointed to Grace.

“It’s a costume. Minette’s. For Cats.”

“And Jonathan?” Frances turned to Grace’s boyfriend. “What’s he doing in my bathrobe?” She gave him a sidelong look, her voice low, lingering a bit on the words my bathrobe. A flush crept up her neck. “Not for a musical is it?” she said.

Jonathan ran out of the room. Frances started to follow him, but Grace put up her hand. “His clothes are in your room,” she said. “Stay here. You’ll embarrass him.” She tilted her head to the side in that disconcerting way of hers.

Frances was certain Grace thought she’d been flirting with Jonathan, had seen that fleeting smile, and her flush turned dark. “What are his clothes doing in my bedroom? What’s he doing in my robe?” She pressed cold fingers against her hot cheek.

“He loves that bathrobe,” Grace said. “He likes the pucker of the quilting. I was measuring him so I could make him one his size.” She paused. “There’s nothing odd about it. Bathrobes are unisex, you know,” she said. “He didn’t want pink. He told me to make it yellow.”
Frances knew she should yell at them, be indignant, but their pleasure in each other and her bathrobe and Grace’s ludicrous outfit gave her an overwhelming feeling that she had begun to grow old at that moment. She didn’t even think to ask why Jonathan had known about her robe or put it on in the first place. “Yellow?” she’d said, wonderingly. “He wants it yellow?” Grace giggled, and she had, too. “Whatever floats your boat,” Frances had said. Poor Jonathan fled the house without saying good-bye to either one of them.

Now, these six, seven years later, Frances sat in the same spot on the same bed. Why did she feel at least thirty years older than on that afternoon? And she’d felt old then. Please, God, help me feel less—what? Old? Like my life is over? She put her hand inside her almost threadbare robe and then inside her bra and lightly pressed the lump. She walked to the dresser and picked up her framed picture of Jesus and touched her lips to His. No lighting candles, gulping wine, and burning dolls in some melodramatic bid for attention for her. No, Francis pulled out the old prayer cushion tucked beneath her bed and knelt. “Thank You, Lord,” she prayed, “for Jonathan’s phone call. Please help Grace come to her senses.” Again, she put a hand to the lump. Small and smooth, painful, it rolled beneath her fingers. Swiftly she added, “Please don’t let this lump be anything. Grace and Leon, Jonathan and Theo need me.”

Seven notes followed the whir of the old grandfather’s clock’s gears.

Silver Lake stretched for four miles in either direction, hidden coves no one ever used here, there and everywhere, cattails thick wherever they filtered runoff as it flowed into the lake, the Catskills all around. Few cottages dotted the landscape, most hidden,
only theirs high atop a green hill. Far away from the others. A giant maple tree cast
shade over the place, a row of tamaracks closer to the lake. Frances pressed her nose to
the cottage kitchen’s window screen. She feared the trees’ tender shoots would dry up in
the heat. Another hazy day, too hot for May, no breeze, not even one blowing up from the
lake. The cattails ran thick along the shoreline, too. Frances heard a goose’s squawk and
watched an upland songbird scoot along the plants in search of fluff for her nest. But this
year the cattails would dry up way too early. No wind. Not a breeze. She hadn’t heard the
wind chimes in weeks.

A damp, cottagy odor, a melancholy scent, lingered in the air. A sense of wet
moss, wet dirt, rotting wood despite the lack of rain. The Thayers’ raft bobbed in the
water, its worn buoys faded orange. She reached for the Saltines and nibbled.

Off in the distance a canoe moved. Now who could that be at this early hour?
Dan Connelly? Phil Berkheimer? She pulled the binoculars from the drawer beside the
window. Dan Connelly with a blond-haired woman. Where there’s smoke there’s fire.
Not that she would ever say anything.

She returned the binoculars to the drawer. Twenty-five after seven. She knew her
daughter’s schedule as well as she knew her own. Jonathan would be at the tire store,
Grace waking up, Theo on her bed, playing with his super figures. Keeping an eye out the
window for Leon’s return, Frances picked up the telephone and hit speed dial.

“I’m glad you telephoned.” Grace’s voice sounded tired. “Can I come out to the
lake today?”

Frances sighed in relief. No need to mention Jonathan’s urgent call. She pictured
Grace chewing on a nail. There was nothing wrong with her silly girl. And if it turned out
she, Frances, had something wrong with her breast, how on earth would she be able to
look after Grace? Don’t think about it, she told herself. She believed the old saying,
“What you don’t know can’t hurt you.”

Frances turned her thoughts back to Grace and wondered again about a baby. She
had plenty of advice for Grace if indeed she were pregnant. And not speaking to your
husband wasn’t part of it. Despite all Leon had put her through, she had never stopped
speaking to him. She saw him puffing up the path from the lake.

“Come this afternoon after Theo gets out of school,” Frances said. “You can swim.” She’d be back by then from her once-a-week stint serving the homeless lunch, a
service she’d created as part of St. Paul’s women’s group. No need to mention that Leon
would still be at the Rod-and-Gun Club with his buddies. How he stood the heat out on
that treeless range was beyond her. She hung up the phone just as he reached the back
porch steps. She heard him humming one of his favorite songs, Johnny Cash’s “Ring of
Fire.”

Frances bustled into the sweltering Rescue Mission’s kitchen to check on her tuna
casseroles.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” Pastor Ginny said. “Jody Trow and Bev Buckley are
talking, not getting a thing done.” She adjusted her white minister’s collar and dusted off
the black skirt Grace had made for her. “Like magpies, those two. And while I’m glad to
have her, I have no idea what that Sanfilipo girl is doing here. She hasn’t been in church
more than three times this year.”
“I’ve been upstairs. Scouring the damn bathrooms. Yuck.” Frances rolled her eyes. “Do men ever take aim?”

Pastor Ginny laughed. Her curly gray hair was the curliest Frances had ever seen it. Humidity.

The fishy smell of tuna wafted through the air. Frances removed warm buttered bread wrapped in aluminum foil from the oven and set it beside huge bowls of salad sitting on the counter beside the refrigerator. She worried sweat had stained her blouse.

“I don’t know what we’d do without you. You and Grace. Leon, too. You three do more for the church than the rest of the congregation put together.” Pastor Ginny walked over to Frances and hugged her. Frances’ lump tingled with pain, but she put her own arms around the pastor. “You’re a good friend,” Ginny said, and they both knew she was referring to Frances’s support when Pastor Ginny’s sixteen-year-old daughter had been killed in a car accident five years earlier. She’d gone by Ginny’s house every day for months, brought casseroles long after neighbors and congregants had stopped. Frances squeezed Pastor Ginny and let go. Ginny used her skirt to wipe away tears. She picked up a sponge. “I’m going to do a quick wipe down of the tables.” Before she left the room, she asked, “Everything okay with Grace?”

Frances nodded, yes. She snatched her cell phone from her purse and tried Grace the second Pastor Ginny left the kitchen. No answer. She bit into one of the Saltines inside a plastic bag she’d tucked into her skirt pocket.

Mary Sanfilipo sauntered into the room. Her denim skirt was too short. Her strappy heels too high. And that hair. A sprayed rat’s nest. Hard to believe that she and
Grace had been grade-school friends. Mary carried a large black bag slung over one shoulder.

“Salad dressing?” Mary said. “Did anyone bring salad dressing?”

The girl’s gum chewing set Frances’s teeth on edge. “Not me,” she said. “I brought three tuna casseroles. Homemade. The large ones.”

“La-di-da.” Mary leaned on the counter close to Frances. Frances smelled sweat.

“So, Frances, what’s new with you?”

“Mrs. Thayer to you.” Frances touched her bag of Saltines.

Mary laughed. “Don’t you think Grace and I are getting a little old for the Mr. and Mrs. routine?”

“What did you bring?” Frances said. “And what on earth is in that giant bag?”

“Paper plates. They’re in the kitchen.” Mary patted the black bag. “Jogging clothes. Sneaks, shorts, tank top.”

Frances felt her neck turn red. She put a hand to it. How could she turn so hot so fast? Jogging clothes. “Why aren’t you at work?” was the only thing she could think of to say.

“Wal-Mart’s open twenty-four seven.” Mary shrugged. “I’m on the night shift this week.” She smiled at Frances. “They’re hiring. Grace ought to put in an application. She’d get a discount on all those sewing supplies.”

Frances bent down, opened the oven door, and pulled out one of the casseroles. She grabbed a big wooden spoon from a drawer and stirred. She could feel her own hair curling. It was damp on her neck. Again she worried that sweat was staining her blouse.
“Grace is busy with Theo and Jonathan.” She couldn’t resist adding, “Besides, she doesn’t need the money.”

“That’s not what I heard.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.” Frances swirled the spoon around the tuna. She bit her tongue to keep from asking just what it was Mary had heard.

Mary snapped her gum. “Whatever you say.” She leaned closer. “Grace is okay, isn’t she?”

Frances slammed down the wooden spoon. “There’s nothing wrong with Grace.” She bit into a second Saltine.

“Lee-onne.” Mary dragged out the word so that it practically sounded as if she were speaking French. “Why don’t you get him to help with the homeless? He’s retired like you, isn’t he? Lots of time on his hands.” She smirked. “I heard you sold your insurance business for beaucoup bucks.”

The town clock boomed twelve o’clock noon, and Frances yanked another casserole from the oven. She placed two more dishes inside, lasagnas that Janet Roper had made. She used a paper napkin to dab her hot face. “Let’s get serving,” she said. It was none of Mary’s affair what Leon did or didn’t do. Leon was her business, not Mary’s. Frances had never liked Mary, couldn’t believe she’d bring up their insurance company. So tacky. Mary’s mother was just as bad, a class-A busybody, the whole damn Sanfilipo family living right next door to her and Leon now for years. And the fact was, she and Leon had barely come out even with the sale of their business. “Mr. Thayer to you,” Frances said. “And he does plenty for St. Paul’s. He mows the cemetery, and he’s knitting sweaters for every member of the Afghani family we’re sponsoring.”
“A regular Martha Stewart,” Mary said, “before she went to jail,” and laughed. She put her hand on her hip, jutted out her leg. Her skirt rode up even higher. The girl wore no stockings. Had she no shame? A butterfly tattoo showed on her thigh.

“So what about the salad dressing?” she said.

Frances felt like slapping her. “Look in the refrigerator. There’s probably some left from last time.” She headed to the main room. Already twenty, thirty men stood by the door waiting for the go ahead from Pastor Ginny. An enormous fan hung from the ceiling, rotating the hot air. After Ginny said grace, the men shuffled past her, heads down, mumbling, “Thank you, ma’am, thank you.”

Mary emerged from the kitchen, holding up half a bottle of Thousand Island dressing. She did one of her old cheerleader jumps, and two of the men whistled. Frances reached into her pocket for another cracker.

Mary grinned at her. “Ta ta,” she said loudly, and waggled her fingers. “Give my best to Grace and Lee-onnne, Mrs. Thayer.” Janet turned to look at Frances. Frances’s horrible rosacea spread from her neck to her hairline.

Mary moseyed out the side entrance, black bag slapping her naked thigh.

Frances motioned to Jodi to take her place. She went into the kitchen and hit redial on her cell phone. No answer. She took her bag of crackers and sat alone at the kitchen table, her overheated skin smearing the Formica. She felt like crying. She kept seeing Mary’s giant black bag filled with jogging clothes. She glanced around. No one. She pulled a small flask of Chardonnay from her purse and drank two deep draughts. A third. She snatched up a handful of Mary Sanfilipo’s paper plates and tore them in two.
She crushed them in her hand and stuffed them into the recycling bin. That girl was living her salad days, that’s what she was doing. Well, let her.

When Grace didn’t show up that afternoon, Frances telephoned her daughter four more times, left three messages. She didn’t call Jonathan because she didn’t want to worry him. Grace was known not to answer her telephone. Frances almost drove to Hudsondale, but by then Leon had returned from the Rod-and-Gun Club for cocktail hour at the cottage. Cocktail hour, the only time Leon seemed truly with her. And she didn’t have to plead with him to show up. She always dressed up, and he, too, changed clothes. Today he rested three rifles against the porch corner. He kept his precious German Lugar in a locked box in the cottage’s upstairs bedroom. He had an array of shotguns, forty-fives, who knew what all, upstairs, too. Only he had the key.

They sat on the cottage porch, a rickety wrap-around veranda. So much they needed to do to repair the cottage, but they never got around to it, couldn’t really afford to, either, although it would be easy for Leon to shimmy the veranda joists with tamarack wood. She put the tray with their drinks and Saltines on the wrought-iron table between the cattail rocking chairs Leon had woven. He used tamarack roots as well. She smoothed her pink suit, a light linen she’d bought at Frugal Fannie’s outside of Poughkeepsie. She glanced at Leon, touched her hair. Would he notice the ash-blond rinse she’d used on her tidy pageboy, a color that masked the gray completely, or the neat leather pumps on her feet? She certainly noticed he had begun to dress differently—tight black T-shirts, frayed jeans. What was the point of paying perfectly good money for threadbare jeans?
“Style,” he’d said. ”Keeping up with the times.” He’d taken to sporting a goatee of all things.

Still, she and Leon had reached a point, finally, where they sometimes talked a little. Oh, not about themselves, not their shared memories, certainly not Baby Nathan or her accident, and so far not her breast lump, but maybe about the drought and the heat, Mama’s Essie sure commentary of *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. The might discuss an article in Frances’s *Wall Street Journal* or maybe Leon would ask her to help him with the *USA Today* crossword puzzle. He might let her hold the yarn as he stitched the bright sweaters for the Afghani family. Today Frances used her cocktail napkin as a fan. There was a spring denseness to the air unlike the other seasons. Even so, the veranda provided little relief from the heat. The maple tree leaves hung quiet as death. The only sound was Leon’s low humming.

Frances looked at her watch. Five-fifteen. She bit her lip, worried, but as awful as it might sound, she was glad it was too late for Grace to show up, that she wasn’t here to interfere with her time with Leon. It was these moments during cocktail hour that gave her hope that one day they might find happiness together again. They had been happy, hadn’t they? Before Baby Nathan died? Before the accident? The problems with the business?

She didn’t allow herself to form the thought before the indiscretions.

And yet there one was. Oh for heaven’s sake. An indiscretion. Miss Davies, Catherine Davies, Grace’s first-grade teacher, a girl fresh out of college. Who Frances had no idea was bringing Grace home after school and occasionally meeting Leon right in the ranch house. Her and Leon’s ranch house, a house in a nice neighborhood. Small, but
they owned it, didn’t they? Her dream come true, thanks to her hard work running their insurance company. And where was Grace while Catherine and Leon were getting to know each other? Yes, that’s how she preferred to think about their meetings. Not as two naked bodies thrusting themselves at each other, hot and sweaty, in her bed. No. She wasn’t going there. She wasn’t. And there’s Catherine, sweet, simpering, oh-Leon-you’re-so-great-Catherine, and she’s what? Slipping off her dress? Leon’s unzipped it, she’s sliding out of it, she’s pulled off her underpants, tiny black bikinis, how could she, an elementary-school teacher? Bikini underpants no bigger than a Kotex pad. Black bra a sliver of lace. Had she fallen to her knees then? Put Leon’s penis in her mouth? The act Frances refuses? Is that it? But why then panties left in the bed, tucked down into the sheets where only toes can touch and so it’s not until Frances yanks off the sheets to change them, that out comes the black frippery. You don’t need a bed to suck a man’s penis. She picked them up, sniffed them, that’s true, she did, that womanly smell overcoming her, making her dizzy, with what? Jealousy? Hatred? Fear? Don’t leave me. Oh, Leon, how could you? In our bed? And Leon’s humming in the shower and what is she to do? She goes into the bathroom and tosses the panties over the shower rod. Do they land on his head? On the slippery porcelain in front of him? He gets out of the steamy shower and wraps a towel around his waist, that’s what she knows. He leaves the water running, their water bill reaching sky high and she stands on the bathmat in white cotton. You wouldn’t give me oral sex, he tells her. A man needs that. Yes. She pulls off the towel, kneels on the tiles now, off the bathmat, he’s on that, and she takes his penis into her mouth. Sucks him until he comes. She’s on her knees, cold, hard tiles biting into
her skin like staples. He puts his hand on her head, fools with her hair. She gags. What happens then?

Frances put out her hand, touched the reality of the smooth glass holding her wine. She smelled the lake air and ran a sweaty hand over the front page of the Wall Street Journal, black ink coming off on her fingers. They go into the bedroom, that’s what they do, and Leon is caressing her and pulling off her white cotton underpants, unhooking her padded bra, whispering, “I love you, Frances, I do,” and she lets him do whatever and she tries to feel, but what she feels is sorrow and a longing too great for words and she shudders, knowing that Leon thinks she’s climaxed.

Frances sipped her wine and set her porch rocker to swaying with her foot, adding its squeak to Leon’s low drone. Nineteen years ago. No use crying over spilt milk. She looked at Leon, scribbling in USA Today, knitting bag at his side. His rifles stood close enough he could have reached out and touched them. Without thinking, she slid her hand inside her blouse, ran her finger lightly over the lump.

“Leon?” She put a tentative hand on his leg. They should talk about getting a mammogram, choosing a doctor.

He smiled at her over the top of his glasses and shook his Scotch tumbler, rattling the ice. “Help me with this will you?” he said. “What’s another word for ghost? Seven letters.”

Suddenly Leon turned away, squinting, peering down the front lawn toward the shady place they parked their car. A big old evergreen standing beside what Frances realized was Grace’s van looked like a stage-set prop, its dark blue-green needles phony against the pale blue of the sky. Frances’ hand fell away from Leon’s leg. Grace moved
up the stone-filled drive toward them, shoulders hunched like an old woman’s. If anything really were wrong, Frances would never forgive herself for not driving to Hudsondale. Theo ran alongside his mom. He wore thick black glasses, a short-sleeved, button-down shirt, a dark tie, and navy-blue pants. “Grammy!” he yelled. “Grampy Lion!”

Leon set aside his crossword puzzle and eyeglasses, standing to wave. Grace wore a tight white knee-length skirt with some sort of flashy red flare at the bottom, a zebra-print pocket puckered across its front, and a low-cut shimmering top of some glittery gold material that showed her black bra straps and a large safety pin. And she was barefoot, of all things. Frances was sure she could make out a hint of pink nipple. She felt like screaming. There was something so primal about Grace, and that girl took great pains to emphasize that animal magnetism.

Grace reached the bottom porch step. It wasn’t a nipple peeking out of that gold, but pink lace. It might as well have been a nipple. There was something about Grace Frances preferred not to think about, something hot and sensual, something that seemed to invite both male and female attention. How on earth would Grace ever find a lump in those huge breasts of hers? Frances glanced at Leon, back at Grace. For once, her daughter’s wild hair was slicked into a tight braid.

Theo tugged on Grace’s hand. “C’mon.”

“What in heaven is he wearing?” Frances said.

“Can’t you see he’s Clark Kent?” Leon said.

Theo pulled on Grace again. “Let’s go.”

“What in heaven are you wearing?”
“A trumpet skirt.”

“And that top?”

“Lamê. I made it out of a vintage dress.”

Frances almost said, “It’s certainly not my cup of tea” but stopped herself. Instead, she said, “If you aren’t the cat’s meow.”


“We’ve got our routine,” Grace said.

Leon nodded. Frances reached for a Saltine.

Grace and Theo headed to the rear of the cottage, as usual, toward the water.

Frances left Leon to his crossword and walked to the back herself.

She watched her daughter and grandson from the side of the cottage. Theo took off his glasses, his shirt and tie, folded them into a neat pile on the ground. He had on tights, red trunks and his Superman shirt. That Grace made them out of his baby blankets irritated her no end. “But, Grammy,” Theo had told her, “that’s what Ma Kent did. That’s why Superman was so strong.”

Grace stuck her hand into that big pocket on her ridiculous trumpet skirt and pulled out a bundle of red. What on earth? She snapped it onto Theo’s Superman T-shirt. Aha. Superman’s cape. The big yellow S insignia right in her face. Her daughter and grandson climbed onto the wide wooden swing hanging from the maple tree. Theo liked to stand on the swing and have Grace stand on it, too, facing him. They’d crisscross their feet, put both hands on the ropes, use their knees and legs to get the swing going. Theo’s cape flew out behind him. “More powerful than a steaming locomotive,” Frances heard him say.
It was not so different from that time years ago when she and Leon had put up the swing, Leon climbing the one rope hand-over-hand like Tarzan to the branch and wrapping it around, laughing, his blond hair blowing in the May breeze. Yes, it was May, like now, only not so humid, almost chilly with the breezes blowing up from the lake. She could almost smell the tree buds sprouting and growing into leaves. Grace is off with Mary Sanfilipo, that wretched girl, who’s visiting the cottage with them, off in the woods with their Barbies, and she and Leon are alone and then the swing is in place and they’re side by side and there’s nothing about Leon that doesn’t make her happy in that moment. She’s just sold a big insurance policy to a large company on the outskirts of New York, and they’ve rented a new office at last, one on Mitford’s Main Street. Leon laces his fingers with hers and they sit on the swing, and he says, “Hold on,” and she does. He uses his foot to get the swing going, and he pumps hard and it swishes high into the air, and Frances squeals with fear and pleasure. Leon grasps her fingers tighter, and he says, “I do love you, Frances, I do.” And even as her heart soars into the sky with the swing, she holds something back, something inside her, something that is her, something that needs protecting, but she laughs, anyway, and squeezes his hand against hers, and to her amazement Leon starts to cry, tears dribbling down his face, and he says, “Charlie and I put up a wooden swing near the caves, and we’d swing just like this. He’d taunt the Dwayo, ‘Come and get us!’”

Ah, Charlie. Leon’s big brother, who hiked the Catskills and hunted with him. The first year Frances and Leon were married, on a gray rainy autumn day after Baby Nathan’s death, Charlie and Leon found two graves on a remote area of the mountainside, a place no one else ever went, graves with tombstones that read Anna Stevens and Baby.
Charlie, so like that weird gypsy mother of theirs, made up stories to go with the engravings. Anna died in childbirth. Anna had the baby out of wedlock, killed it, then herself. Charlie’s favorite story was that her husband killed her and then the baby. Charlie wanted to dig up the graves, check the bodies for signs of fingerprints on their necks or for marks of suffocation, but Leon wouldn’t let him. Then Charlie had gone missing, and he, Leon, her poor husband, had found his brother’s body three days later, shot, lying cold and lonely in the misty rain. The H-Man. That’s what people said, but Sheriff Bob Walker said a careless hunter on the loose. Frances never asked any questions at all. She didn’t want to think about the brothers up on that wet mountain. Still. Frances takes hold of her husband’s hand that day on the swing and says, “It’s okay,” but deep within, she remembers Baby Nathan. The tangy smell of apples always drifting over from the Peekskill Orchard driving a knife through her heart. She thinks about his nursery.

And when Grace and bratty Mary show up, flushed and dirty, Barbie dolls’ hair ragged and clothes muddy, Grace laughs and laughs at her parents in the swing. “Like couples in a movie,” she says between giggles, and Mary stands beside Grace staring at them, but Grace can’t stop laughing, giggles spiraling out of control, turning to tears. Silly Grace. Leon stops the swing, Frances gets off, settles on the grass, and pulls Grace close beside her. Leon joins them on the ground, and Grace moves into his lap. He kisses her forehead once, each cheek twice. He squeezes his daughter’s hand and hangs tight to it. Mary stays off to the side.

“I love you, Theo,” Frances heard Grace say now. The swing slowed. Theo leaped into the air, cape sailing out behind him. He landed perfectly on both feet. Grace clapped from her standing perch on the swing, arms laced around the ropes for balance. Frances
waited to see if Grace would jump, she was always saying she would, but she never did. “Theo, come help me,” she called, and Theo ran to the swing, held onto his mom’s ankle as she sat down and then took both her hands to help her to the ground. “You’ve got to jump,” he said. “It’s the wild blue yonder. Like flying.” Grace put her hands on his cheeks, bent down, and kissed him smack on the mouth. “Mom,” Theo said, and used the back of his hand to wipe off the kiss.

Theo ran to the kitchen terrace and grabbed a heavy orange life jacket, and Grace bundled him into it. She pulled his monitor from the big pocket on the front of her skirt and shoved it into his hand. She clasped the other monitor. He ran toward the lake.

Frances hurried to the front veranda and told Leon to bring their drinks, they’d be sitting out back. By the time they got the snacks set up on the rear porch, Grace, too, was down by the lake.

She headed slowly up the path toward them. She turned once and called out, “Be careful, sweetie. Stay where I can see you,” and Frances saw a flash of orange life jacket. Leon stood, started down the stairs, but Frances put her hand on his arm. Grace didn’t need his help. She could make it to the porch just fine without him. Frances’s father certainly never helped her with anything.

“Everything okay?” Leon called out.

“Sorry I’m so late. I forgot about a first-grade open house this afternoon,” Grace said. “It’s like I’m basted together.”

“Basted,” Frances said. “Don’t be absurd. What are you, a turkey?”

“A basted stitch. Loose.”

“You could have told me you’d be late,” Frances said.
“Late?” Leon sounded gravelly. “For what?”

With her hair pulled back tight that way, Grace’s face looked bleak and empty. Something awful has happened. Oh, please, God, not another episode. No, that couldn’t be, Grace was here at the cottage, not home lighting candles for Jesus and burning up her baby doll. Sometimes Frances wondered if she’d ever forgiven Grace for frightening her so. To lose both her children would be more than she could stand. Now she wondered if Jonathan had turned the tables on Grace for once. Maybe he’d hurt her feelings.

“Jonathan,” Frances said. “What’s he done?” She was both furious and pleased, furious because Jonathan had no business hurting her daughter and pleased because maybe Miss Me, Me, Voluptuous Me was going to have to learn that life wasn’t all about her. Frances pushed away that idea in a hurry, not wanting to accept for one second that she had even thought it. Mothers didn’t resent their daughters. She, too, stood.

Grace lowered her head, pulled up the red flare of her skirt to wipe away what had to be tears. Frances realized that the lining of the skirt was red.

Leon walked down the stairs slow-mo, stumbled just like he always did under pressure—those weak ankles of his—put his arms around Grace. He pressed her face to his shoulder, smoothed her already smooth hair. Frances wanted to rush down the steps and enfold both of them in her arms, tell them how much she loved them, but all she could think of was what if they pushed her away? Rosacea flared across her cheeks, her nose, her forehead. Oh, why did she have to feel so out of place, so unwanted? Leon always turned to Grace, not her. It seemed that all she had to keep hold of Leon was her breast lump. She thrust his iced tumbler against her hot cheeks. Neither Grace nor Leon looked up. Frances did what she always did when her husband and daughter shut her
out—she reached for her wineglass and took a gulp and finished off the wine. She refilled the glass. She maneuvered a third rocker beside hers and Leon’s.

At last Leon led Grace up the cottage steps, pinkies linked. So irritating. The three of them sat in chairs beneath the porch roof. Late afternoon moisture hung in the air, thick and close, ghostly.

“Specter,” Frances said. “The seven-letter word for ghost is specter.”

“I tried to call you back,” Grace said. “No answer.”

“I had the Rescue Mission today. You could have left a message,” Frances said, but she knew Grace always hung up and tried again.

“Why didn’t you tell me Grace was coming?” Leon said.

Over the rim of her wine glass Frances looked right at Leon and said, “You were jogging when Grace and I talked.” She turned to Grace. “Is this about Jonathan?”

“Why would it be?” Leon said.

Grace gave Frances a look of inexplicable anger. “It’s about me, Mom.”

“No need to get huffy,” Frances said. “Everything’s not about you, hon.” To Leon she said, “Maybe you should go down to the lake?”

“Theo’s fine.” Leon moved his chair closer to his daughter’s, indicated the monitor she’d set on the table, pointed to the blaze of orange down by the water.

“You ought put away those guns. Theo’s just a little boy.”

Leon got that pasty look on his face, a slight sheen.

“The guns?” Frances repeated.

“First, I heard you.” Leon cleared his throat. “Second, I’ll take care of them. Third, I’ve taught Theo to stay away from guns and you know it.”
Frances had a sick feeling about that pasty look of his. It panicked her in some unidentifiable way. Like Leon’s fear of the H-Man. Frances felt Grace’s eyes on her as she stretched out a trembling hand for her wineglass. Grace touched her zebra pocket. She twisted her braid around the index finger on her other hand. Leon sipped Jack Daniels, three ice cubes, same as usual. Not that Grace ever said one word about Leon’s drinking.

Frances leaned toward her daughter. “You’re being silly. Overreacting. Jonathan says you’re not speaking to him.”

“You talked to him?”

Leon patted Grace’s knee. “That’s a great outfit,” he said. “Unique.”

Trust Leon to compliment Grace. “He called me, hon,” Frances said.

“When?”

“Last night.”

“Of course I’m speaking to him. I got up with him this morning. Made him breakfast. I was upset last night.” She gave her mother a look of scorn maybe, or worse, pity. “Don’t you ever get mad at Daddy?”

Frances watched her husband and daughter look at each other. Her flush deepened. Something was happening here on their cottage porch in which she had no part. “Don’t use that tone with me,” she said, and pressed her cool wineglass to her cheeks, her forehead. “I thought you were going to tell me that you’re pregnant.”

“I don’t want another baby.”

Leon cleared his throat, a dreadful ratchety sound.

Grace chewed her nail.
“As per our agreement.” Theo’s voice was deep as it came through the monitor. “You can’t back out now, Lex Luthor.”

“Jonathan’s worried about you,” Frances said. “We all are.”


“You can hum all you like, Leon, but that’s not going to change anything. We still have a daughter with problems,” Frances said. “Hum away.” That song particularly hurt her. She knew the words: Oh, no, I never got over those blue eyes, I see them everywhere. . . Catherine? Or someone else?

“I wish Jonathan wouldn’t telephone you without me knowing.”

“Don’t make a mountain out of a molehill. You’re lucky he cares so much,” Frances said. “Look at Keith. He won’t even marry Minette.”

“Minette doesn’t want to get married,” Grace said.

A curious silence hovered over the porch, heavy and gray. Frances drank more wine. Leon gulped his bourbon, his face still pale. Grace simply sat in her chair. Leon cleared his throat again and kept up the humming until Frances thought she would scream. She felt the damp clamminess of the lake stretching to their porch. Leon’s tumbler slid in his hand. She took the glass and set it on the table.

Leon made a great show of going to freshen his drink. He stuffed the sweater back into the bag. “More ice,” he said, and vanished inside. No slow-mo this time.

Grace tilted her head to the side, looked at Frances. “I always feel like Jonathan’s holding something back from me.”
“Let’s get down to brass tacks,” Frances said. “He works all the time. He’s tired.” So all that was bothering Grace was lack of attention. Too bad. From the time Frances was a little girl, she had to notice herself if she wanted to be noticed.

Leon returned and set his drink on the table. “I’ll take care of the rifles,” he said, and headed to the front porch. The two women sat in silence, the same uncomfortable silence Frances remembered fromGrace’s high school days, the days when her daughter jabbered about being a designer.

“I’m going to go join Theo.” Leon’s voice rasped in the hush. Both women turned. Frances hadn’t heard him come back. That’s right. Disappear when the going gets tough. Same as always. Still, he sat and polished off his drink.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” Grace said.

“Nothing’s wrong with you.” Frances picked up a Saltine and set it back down.

“I’m not happy.” Grace touched her finger to her pocket, twirled her braid.

“Yes you are.” Frances’s voice rose. She reached for the Saltine again and ate it.

Of course Grace was happy. And if she wasn’t, it was her own fault. Was it possible other mothers felt the faintest flutters of pleasure under such circumstances? Maybe Grace would have to find out the true meaning of marriage now. Maybe Grace would have to suffer the way she, Frances, had. Immediately Frances thought, *Please, Lord, forgive me. I want my baby to be happy. I don’t know what makes me think such things. As the Lord is my witness, forgive me."

Leon set down his empty tumbler. “First, where is Jonathan, Gracie?” he said. “Second, maybe we should get him out here. Third, maybe we should all have a picnic.”
Things had to be serious for Leon to suggest a get together that in that manner. What was it that Leon understood that she didn’t? Help me, Lord. Her linen jacket felt damp, her feet slick inside their leather. She dabbed her face with a hanky that Grace had edged in lavender ribbon for her.

Leon cleared his throat again. His forehead still had that sheen to it. Frances listened to him clear his throat until she couldn’t stand it. “Stop it,” she said. She had to put an end to this, this scene. “I dusted Baby Nathan’s crib last week,” she said, her mouth dry, foul tasting. “The little blue rocking chair. His dresser. That precious painted lamb so faded.”

The moist air made the few escaped hairs around Grace’s face puff out in curls like a crown, the way they had when she was a little girl. Her shoulders slumped. She reached out a hand to her mother. “Poor Mama,” she said. “I’m it. Your only child.”

Oh, my. Grace hadn’t called her Mama in years. It frightened Frances. Frances took hold of Grace’s soft warm hand. “Oh, hon,” she said. “I love you.”

“I love you, too, Mama.”

There it was again. Mama. Frances slipped her hand from Grace’s, drank more wine.

“I’ve got to check on Theo.” Grace pushed the monitor into her pocket and hurried down the steps, her bare feet a slap, slap against the wood.

Leon went after Grace, slow-mo, limping, caught up with her halfway down the path to the lake. The maple tree off to the side of the house stood watch, a blur against the grayness all around, its swing hanging still, the empty picnic table beside it, forlorn. The tamaracks drooped. Frances saw Leon speak, then Grace.
And there it was. Another *indiscretion*. Oh how she wanted these memories buried. But no, there was Leon, right here at this cottage, on his knees in the living room. He’s on his knees in front of Frances who sits on the couch in her pink quilted bathrobe, a crucified Jesus hanging on the wall behind her. Grace is down at the lake, maybe sunning on the raft or drawing in that sketchbook of hers, those silly little drawings she does, Minette beside her, the way Frances has always yearned for Leon to keep her company. She reaches out a hand, touches Leon’s hair, runs her finger up and down his whiskery cheek. He hasn’t shaved. Leon always shaves, even on vacation. He’s crying. She presses his head to her bosom, wishes she had Grace’s chest, oh, God, just for one day she’d like to have cleavage, that soft, smushy pillow of Grace’s that even she, Frances, longs to touch just to know what it feels like. It’s all she can do not to reach out and put her hand on Grace’s breasts whenever she walks by. Oh, how she’d like to wear something low cut, sprinkle lavender cologne between her own big breasts and feel Leon’s mouth warm against them. Or dust them with sugar and let him lick it off. She’s never gotten into bed without a shirt to hide her small breasts. She only lets him touch them in the dark and she moans, his mouth on her nipples sets her on fire, his finger twirling around them, electric, her nipples a direct line to her toodle. Oh, God, oh, God, what’s Leon saying? She can’t hear him even though his mouth is against her chest, right in front of her, her ears aren’t working, but oh, her heart is, he’s saying, *Please, Frances, let me go*. And it’s right then that Catherine Davies knocks on the cottage door and walks straight into the living room like she owns the place, like she’s been there a million times before, a little boy holding her hand, a boy who has Leon’s golden hair, his blue eyes. The pain is so great Frances can’t breathe, she’s staring at this woman and boy over Leon’s head, her hand so tight in
his hair that if he pulls away from her a tuft will be left in her hand, leaving a bald
spot in its place.

“She’s here?” Catherine’s voice is high and wavy the way Grace’s gets when
she’s upset. She’s wearing a halter top, breasts spilling from it, lush hips filling out blue-jean shorts, navel showing, and God, her legs long and tan, not a single freckle, oh, no, smooth and tan.

Leon tries to pull away, tries so hard Frances feels her fingernails dig into his scalp. At last she lets go, and he stands. He faces Catherine and that boy. The boy says nothing, looks at the three of them.

Frances smells nothing but cottage, musty, damp air, and then the other odor reaches her, the Catherine odor, she knows that’s what it is, a scent she’s smelled on Leon more times than she’s ever let herself know. She thinks this can’t be happening, she’s walked into a bad dream, that’s all it is, a nightmare like Grace has, and she’ll wake up and Catherine will be nothing but a ghost of her subconscious, a faded figure, nothing.

Now Frances touched her flushed face. She finished her wine, poured another glass, and drank it. She did her best to focus on her husband and daughter, standing on the path to the lake. Grace was nearly as tall as her father. Leon appeared stooped, old in his ragged jeans and tight T. She hadn’t noticed before. Eight, ten years earlier, he hadn’t been gray, oh, no, his hair is blond in her fingers, blond as he gets off his knees, blond as he looks first at Catherine, then at her, blond as he covers his face with his hands. And Frances slowly unties the belt on her quilted bathrobe and lets it drop to the floor, a slow swirl of pink puddling onto the pinewood floor, and she stands, a tall thin woman in white underpants and padded bra, and she doesn’t care about the boy or Catherine, she
looks Leon straight in the eye, reaches behind her back, unhooks her bra and lets it flop to the floor, and then she’s grabbing at her underpants, and Leon’s saying, “Stop it, no, there’s a child here, a child, Frances,” and Catherine is stumbling to the door. She’s got the boy by the arm and she’s yanking him outside, and clump, clump, clump, they’re down the steps. Now it’s she and Leon alone and she knows he’s half in and half out that door and so she steps out of her underpants, says, “Follow me,” and walks toward the bedroom, naked, rotating her ass in slow undulations, oh, she knows it’s her best feature. He follows her, she knew he would, she had only to speak in a certain tone, that tone that said, “You killed my baby,” because always that lies between them. Leon was at home with Baby Nathan when he died, but they never, ever speak about that. Even Grace doesn’t know. The doctors said it was SIDS but she knows in her heart her baby wouldn’t have died if she had been the one home and so she can’t stop asking herself, why did I go out for Kotex that day, oh yes, that’s exactly where she had gone, out into torrents of rain, a deluge, to the drugstore, Leon too embarrassed to buy her feminine products, so she left him with the napping baby and came home to a baby who wouldn’t wake up and now Leon would follow her into the bedroom and for the first and only time in her life she straddled him, fucked him hard, her own fingers on her nipples, she spit on them first, then whirled them around, she fucked him, then sat on his face, saying, Is this what she does, is this it? Is fur pie, oh, yes, she said those words, fur pie, words she’d never used before or after, words she didn’t know she knew, but words that flew out of her mouth that day like vomit, fur pie in your face is what she does? You like the smell? The taste? And Leon? Oh, Leon is lapping away, he’s got his hands on her hips, he’s holding her to him long after she wants to get away, roll over, hide beneath the blankets. He won’t let
go, he’s leaving bruises on her hips, yellow skin that lasts for weeks, and she’s crying
now, please, Leon, please, enough, but he won’t stop, and when he does, she slips off the
bed and gets on her knees, hands clasped on the bed, Help me, God, I love him and
there’s no answer but the sound of Leon crying.

Frances took a long, deep breath and watched Leon take Grace’s hands in his. She
refilled her wineglass. He hadn’t held her hands in the last year. Except for their prayer
circle. Not in the last two years, five years. Maybe on their twenty-fifth wedding
anniversary. It didn’t matter. She drank more wine. Leon would come back to her and
send Grace to her, too. He always did. And now there was the breast lump to keep him
nearby. She saw him drop their daughter’s hands, kiss her on the forehead once, twice on
each cheek. Now she distinctly heard him say, “First, Gracie, sit with your mom. Second,
call Jonathan. Third, I’ll look after Theo.”

Leon touched Grace’s shoulder, said something else that Frances couldn’t hear.
That he was still speaking in threes told her all she needed to know. He walked off down
the trail. But he turned suddenly, looked toward the cottage, straight at her, Frances, not
Grace. This time something between them passed, Leon and Frances, not him and Grace.
Grace watched them, but her daughter swiftly glanced away. Frances let her finger graze
her breast. He walked slow-mo up the hill to her. She met him halfway. Would he put his
hand over hers as was their custom? Enter their private prayer world? She waited, and
when he didn’t cover her hand, she took a deep breath, and put her own hand over his.
Please, God, please. Nothing. Leon did nothing. Frances’s heart tightened, arteries
shrinking in pain. Like the H-Man Leon liked so much to talk about had come along and
burned her chest with his own charred skin. And then Leon swept both arms around her,
held her tight, said, “I do love you, I do.” He stepped back and touched her breast lightly. “Soon,” he said, voice husky, “soon we must do something,” and took off after Theo.

Frances remained on the path, staring at him. Maybe there was nothing to this jogging business, after all. Maybe she was imagining things. She needed more wine, though, to calm her jittery heart, no mistake about that. She turned and saw Grace standing in front of the empty swing. Her daughter gave it a fierce push and watched the swing dance back and forth as if she were contemplating climbing onto it, pumping high into the sky, and taking a wild jump into the air. But no. Grace headed toward the porch. She went inside the cottage, coming back with a damp towel. She walked down the path to her mother and pressed the towel to her mother’s hot cheeks. Frances closed her eyes, enjoyed the cooling sensation, the closeness of her daughter, prayed, Thank you, God, for Leon loving me, a prayer so full of longing and hope that to her horror, Frances started to cry.

“Oh, Mama, everything’s okay.” Grace held her mother, patted her hair.

And because she couldn’t admit to Grace much less herself, her real fears, Frances said, “Baby Nathan would be thirty-two years old.”

Grace held her until she stopped crying. “Let’s sit on the porch.” Grace took her mother by the hand, gently settling her on a porch chair. Grace sat in the chair closest to her mother. Again, she dabbed the damp cloth Frances’s face.

“Why don’t we have a picnic like your dad suggested?” Frances said, voice shaky. Her hand trembled as she filled her wineglass. “All five of us? Here at the lake tonight? We’ll have brownies, guacamole, chicken on the grill.”
Grace opened and closed the safety pin on her bra.

“All the family together.” Frances lowered her voice, “Except Baby Nathan.” She sipped her wine and said, “We’ll set a place for him, anyway.”

“Jonathan works late every night.” There went Grace’s finger rubbing at that pocket. She didn’t say a word about Baby Nathan.

“Call Jonathan, hon. I heard your dad tell you to.” When Grace didn’t answer, Frances said, “Tell him it’s my invitation. He’ll come. Mark my words.” More wine.

Grace’s face took on that odd shuttered look of hers, the look she got that made Frances want to knock her head hard and say, “Hello, anybody home?”

Frances said, “It’ll make your father happy.” She used the hanky to wipe at her eyes. “And Theo. Think of Theo.”

Grace disappeared inside the cottage.

Frances picked up her wineglass, ran her index finger along its rim until it sang, a faint whistle in the gloom.

The smoked hickory odor of marinade lingered around the grill. The sky had gone gray, more dusky than dark. From where she sat at the wooden picnic table beneath the shade of the ancient maple tree, its swing unmoving, Frances could make out Theo’s orange life preserver as he knelt at edge of the lake. His hand glided across the silver surface, sending out little rippled sprays. “You’ll be safe, Wonder Woman, I’ll take care of you” came over the monitor, now lying on the picnic table. She heard the slap of a stone hitting water. “Oh, no you don’t, Brainiac,” Theo said.
Grace gathered the paper plates, stacked them in a pile. She reached toward
the plate of brownies, but Leon put his hand over hers. “Let them set awhile.” He handed
her the mayonnaise. She carried the plates and jar inside the cottage.

“Lucky little kid, isn’t he?” Jonathan said. “He’s playing baseball this summer.
Grace tell you that?”

Leon nodded. “I played as a boy, too.”

Frances glanced up to see Grace returning to the table. She sat beside her father,
leaning her arms on the table. “I found my Maternity Medley last night,” she said. A
bullfrog croaked nearby.

“Your what?” Frances swung one leg over the bench, then the other, skimming
them past Jonathan. She remembered Grace’s Maternity Medley just fine. It won her a
scholarship to that ritzy design school. Frances would have liked to hate herself for
begrudging Grace a college opportunity, but she didn’t. Why should Grace have
something she herself didn’t? And for a maternity collection she’d designed when she
wasn’t even pregnant. What on earth would Frances’s friends at St. Paul have thought? It
was bad enough that Grace had gone and gotten herself pregnant a month later. Oh, no.
Frances had nothing to feel guilty about. She had never stopped her daughter from
sewing and wearing those silly clothes of hers, now had she?

“Coffee?” Frances said. Did Jonathan notice that she wore no stockings, that her
bare legs were smooth, that Flash Bronzer had done its work? She glanced at her
daughter, but nothing showed in Grace’s face. Her face appeared blank in the dusk, as if
that yanked-back hair of hers had erased her expression.

“I’ll get it.” Grace stood across from her at the table.
“Isn’t that the collection you did in high school?” Leon asked.

Grace leaned against the maple tree. She nodded her head, yes.

“The coffee?” Frances said.

Her daughter climbed the slope to the cottage. Frances pulled her legs back over the bench beside her son-in-law and squeezed his arm. Nothing in that. A harmless gesture.

Grace came out with the coffee on a tray and moved toward one of the old wooden lawn chairs. A little sprinkle of paint chips fluttered to the grass as Grace sat in the chair closest to the picnic table, a chair facing the lake.

Jonathan got up and pulled a chair close to Grace. He handed Frances and Leon the tray with their coffee and settled beside Grace. They placed their coffee cups on the wide armrests. Jonathan had a steak knife in his hand.

Frances slid off the end of the picnic bench and went over to the other side and slipped in beside Leon.

“That collection is so dated,” Grace said. “It’s not any good.”

“Isn’t that the one Ms. Povolo raved about?” Jonathan ran the knife up and down the edge of the armrest. Paint chips spun to the ground.

“It’s been a long time,” Leon said.

“Too long. My sketches looked imitative. Nothing like the way I remembered them.” Grace’s voice was high, annoyingly young. “Nothing like the clothes I design for myself now.” She swept her hand across her skirt. “The whole point is to build something new into a design that still suggests couture of yesteryear. It’s feeling. A spark. Part of what designers call ‘the grande logique.’ History.”
What kind of skirt had Grace called it? A trumpet skirt? “Whatever floats your boat,” Frances said.

“I like the concept of clothes and scents seemingly mixed together, the idea of crisp aromas of mint and oranges mingling into slinky tailored blouses or supple wool crepe blazers.”

“I love what you’re wearing,” Jonathan said. “That gold lamé is great with that velveteen zebra pocket. Sheer whipped cream and chocolate. The flare’s red lining, too. The honey-lemon nectar of a trumpet flower blowing in the wind. You’re my gold-dust woman.”

“You like it?” Again, Grace’s voice was high. “I’ve named it. The design. Champagne Truffle.”

Why Jonathan sounded as crazy as Grace. Gold lamé, for heaven’s sake. What did he know from gold lamé? Grace and her little clothes drawings. Champagne Truffle. Good grief. Why on earth were Leon and Jonathan acting like they mattered? Frances knew better than anyone that you can’t live off dreams and little drawings. Design school. Ridiculous.

“Seems silly to me to care at this point.” Frances watched Leon sip at his nearly black coffee. “Don’t you need more cream?” she said.

“I’ll get it.” Now Grace’s voice had that tired quality that annoyed Frances.

“Go ahead and draw if you want to,” she said. “Far be it from me to rain on your parade.”

Jonathan joined Grace on the way to the cottage, steak knife in his hand. Frances turned so she could watch them. They walked up the lawn in the evening shadows.
Brush-like tufts on the tamarack twigs swished as they passed. When Jonathan took hold of Grace’s hand, pressed it to his cheek, Frances’ heart constricted. Her hot red rash deepened. When would Leon hold her hand again?

“She thinks finding her Maternity Medley last night is a sign,” Leon said.

“Sign of what?”

“I don’t know. Lost dreams?”

“In a pig’s eye Grace has lost dreams,” Frances said. “Please. What that girl needs is another baby.” Lost dreams. How can he have sympathy for Grace and her lost dreams and not for me? As if it were yesterday, that afternoon with Catherine and her boy are back in her heart.

Lost dreams, that’s what Frances had and that night after the scene with Catherine and Leon left the house yet again, left her alone in the house with Grace, and this was one night she couldn’t stand it, and she wraps up in that faded pink robe, wraps it tight around her, slips into her red stilettos, grabs her wineglass and a bottle and heads down the path to the lake. Is Grace with her? Frances no longer remembers, all she remembers is the shimmering lake, her pink robe yellowed in the glimmering moonlight, the music, ragtime, and she remembers knowing that it’s over, her dreams are dead. She puts her high-heeled foot into the water and doesn’t feel its chill, she feels nothing, and she keeps going, she never learned to swim, no, her childhood wasn’t one with swimming lessons. Oh, she can skate, but no one taught her, she bought the skates herself and practiced by herself and now she’s walking into the lake by herself. Has she ever not been alone? She doesn’t even have the dream that Leon loves her and she keeps moving forward, moving, swaying to the music swelling in her brain and then she’s underwater and her bathrobe...
puffs out over her head like a thick puf of yellowy cloud beneath the yellowed moon and the pain fades, she can feel the numbness of nothingness. Oh, God, thank you for that, she gave thanksgiving, offering herself to God and then, who was there? Leon. Leon is in the water beside her and he’s put his arms around her. He’s pulling her to safety and somewhere there’s screaming, and Leon is saying, It’s over, Frannie, it’s over, I give you my word. He’s never called her Frannie before, only one time, when they first made love, oh, so many years before, when they accidentally conceived Baby Nathan, and now in the lake all Frances can hear is Frannie, and then he’s saying, I’ll never see her again, not anyone else again, and she hasn’t smelled Catherine again, and he’s saying, Hush, Gracie, and Frances doesn’t know who Gracie is, she just wants whoever she is to disappear, to leave her alone with her Leon. At the hospital, yes, Leon takes her to the hospital, it’s an accident, she fell out of a boat, and Grace’s eyes are wide and Frances knows who she is.

Frances sat up straight at the picnic table. The sun was a dull mustard glazing the mountains. On the hill to the cottage, Grace looked up at Jonathan, said something. He leaned down, kissed her right above the ear. Grace pulled her hand from his, moved a step ahead of him. He ran his hand through his hair, a habit he’d had ever since she’d known him. Like the leg crossing that drove Grace crazy. She herself found it endearing. Frances saw the steak knife’s dull gleam in his hand. She wanted to run up the lawn, grab her daughter and shake her hard enough to rattle her teeth. How dare she rebuff Jonathan? Frances stood and tried to wiggle out from the picnic bench. Leon put his hand on her rear end and squeezed. “Stay put,” he said.

A thrill ran through Frances. “Someone has to knock some sense into that girl,” she managed to say.
Leon patted the bench. “Sit.” She did. Grace and Jonathan disappeared inside the dark cottage.

Leon cleared his throat. He very deliberately put his hand over hers.

Frances’ legs felt like Jell-O. He’d initiated their private prayer circle. She put her hand on top of his. Oh, for another bottle of wine. Her flush deepened. “Don’t let there be anything wrong with our baby girl, God,” Frances whispered. “I couldn’t stand it if she had to go back to the Psych Institute.”

Leon said, “Please, God, don’t let there be anything wrong with Gracie and Jonathan’s marriage.”

As always, they followed their individual prayers with the Lord’s Prayer. Frances’ heart beat so hard it hummed in her ears louder than any hum of Leon’s. She said, “Of course they’ll stay married.”

“We’ve gone to church every Sunday for over thirty years,” Leon said. “We’ve stayed married. If they can’t stick it out, then what’s been the point?”

Frances’ rosacea burned. She and Leon loved each other. That was the point. She held her free hand to her heart to hold in the pain. She looked at the cottage. The way it sat by itself on top of the hill made it appear dreary, abandoned, the veranda unbalanced, leaning off to the left of the building. Several chimney bricks had toppled.

Now for the first time in a very long time, Leon took hold of Frances’ hand, caressed it. “Look how hard we’ve worked to make our marriage solid. Counseling with Pastor Ginny. Our prayer circle. So our Grace would have a happy home life, a stable family.” He held her hand tighter. “You and I didn’t have that.”
France stared at the cottage again. Another brick tumbled from the chimney. The fading sky made the place look haunted. Baby Nathan came to mind, and she had the uncanny sense of smelling the picnic-like odor of his Styrofoam casket, like a cooler full of iced refreshments and the overwhelming clusters of purple pansies and lavender hyacinths coating his grave.

“Let’s go down to the lake.” She had to get away from this haunting.

“You’ll never enter my Fortress of Solitude.” Theo’s voice came through the monitor loud and angry. “Forget it, Brainiac. The glass-bottle city of Kandor is safe with me.”

“The cream?” Leon let go of her hand.

Frances’s face burned. He’d moved so close to her. Touched her bottom. Prayed with her. Held her hand. All she asked was that he take her to the lake, to their grandchild, away from this eerie hurtful sensation she had. Almost on its own, her hand slipped inside her blouse and bra and touched her lump.

“Don’t worry, Supergirl,” came from the monitor, “I’ll find the antidote for Kryptonite. Krypto will be safe. We’ll all be safe.” Theo made a barking sound. Leon grinned. “Krypto’s the dog,” he said.

Frances glanced at the cottage. No sign of Jonathan or Grace. The house looked scary now, a ragged-edged shape against the darkening sky. Frances gave an inadvertent shiver despite the heat. She remembered the gun collection locked in the separate upstairs bedroom. She hated guns, had always hated guns. She again imagined Leon’s H-Man lurking in these mountains. A goose walking over her grave.
Taking hold of her husband’s hands, she said, “C’mon, let’s go down to the lake. Watch Theo.” She didn’t even have to tug at him or use that certain voice of hers, the one that willed him to do what she wanted. Sweat trickled down her chest.

“You think you can escape Metallo?” came Theo’s voice through the monitor.

“There’s no escape from that evil robot. He’ll kill you with his Kryptonite heart.”

“Humidity’s is what’s going to kill us both,” Leon said. “That and the heat.”

He didn’t mention her lump. He got to his feet, used a leftover napkin to wipe the sweat off his face, sweeping it across his goatee. When Leon gave her a gentle shove toward the path to the lake, relief and something that might have been gratitude spread through Frances. She moved her hip toward his with a little rhythmic movement. He returned it. A red-winged blackbird swooped toward the cattails. They walked slow-mo down the path, leaving only the shadows of tamaracks on the empty lawn chairs.

Maybe tonight.
CHAPTER FIVE

GRACE

Grace stepped outside to the back patio in the early morning. Another hot June day. Not one drop of rain since April. The sun slamming out of a too-blue sky as unforgiving as an ink stain splattered on a sheer white nightie. Grace shivered despite the humidity. In the month since the picnic at her parents’ cottage, she had taken to getting up when Jonathan did. Sometimes she wasn’t sure she had ever gone to sleep.

She should get moving, wake Theo, start breakfast, but she didn’t feel like it. Maybe it was the unnatural heat. Grace sat on the edge of the pool and dangled her feet in the water. The trees in the distance appeared dormant as if unable to grow or change. Like me. I’m so tired. It was as if she were a pair of her mother’s white underpants, unpleasantly bunched at the bottom, elastic loose at the waist, ready for the rag bin.

She leaned over and ran her fingers through the water. Today was one of her days to help at Theo’s school. She had put on jean shorts and a T-shirt that she and Theo had tie-dyed together, a shirt and material she had designed herself, adding a hint of Lycra to plain white cotton, streamlining it through the middle, reshaping the neckline. Theo tie-dyed a shirt, too, and they had laid it on his chair the night before. They had driven to the Peekskill Orchard and bought a sack of thirty apples. The kids could slather them in peanut butter and use raisins to make faces.
“Grace?”

She turned. Jonathan stood in the frame of the sliding glass doors. “Everything okay?”

Grace got up and shoved her feet into her sneakers. She moved past him into the kitchen.

“Hey,” he said. “Just asking.” He put his hand on her shoulder, touched her hair, pulled into a tight ponytail. He kissed her lips. She gave him a swift buss on the cheek. “I’m fine,” she said. “Quit asking. Make sure Theo’s up, will you?”

Jonathan followed her inside. “I’m missing a cardboard carton with some of the accounts,” he said.

Neither one of them had said anything about Grace’s decision to quit working for Jonathan and his tire store. The day after that discussion, Jonathan gathered up the stuff on the dining room table and put it inside his Jeep. Grace walked to the sink and rinsed Theo’s macaroni and cheese dish from the night before. “It’s not here,” she said. “You took everything I had.”

“It’s got to be in the house. It’s not in my office.”

“It’s not here.” Grace scraped a Brillo pad against the glass plate.

Suzanne slid open the patio doors and stepped into the sunny kitchen the way she did two or three times a week,

Jonathan headed upstairs. “Look around the house today, will you?” he called from the hall.

“Coffee?” Grace said.
“A favor.” Suzanne sat on a stool at the island, propped her chin in her hands. She was like one of Theo’s old seersucker playsuits, cheery and crisp, yet easily crumpled. She had gone to *Tres Minette* in Mitford and had her hair lopped off in a choppy hairdo that Grace thought made her look like Hair Stylist Barbie.

“How on earth would I know?” Suzanne shrugged. “The grapevine? He was gone last night until almost eleven o’clock. Won’t say where he was. Just says he’s not happy. The same old thing.”

The unspoken words that had been drifting around the neighborhood for the past few months lingered in the silence that followed: *Was there somebody else?* Grace thought about the way Mike came onto her. She blushed. It wasn’t that she liked Mike or any of the other fathers, but oh, it was reassuring to know that to some men she was a swirl of creamy satin. Grace had been by herself, sitting under a tree keeping an eye on Theo at first base. Suzanne was acting as base coach. Mike, Lisa in his arms, settled on the grass beside her. He picked up a blade of grass and ran it up and down her thigh. Grace glanced at the other mothers on the benches. Mike was a flirt, no question, but she found herself responding to the blade of grass tickling her inner thigh, growing damp between her legs. She stood, moved away from him. He took Lisa by the hand and headed to the bleachers. Then Jeremy Webster came to stand beside her. Bobby’s dad. Paula’s husband. Neighbors.

“Are you as unhappy as you look?” He leaned closer and whispered, “You ever fuck in the backseat of a car?” She watched his lips forming the words. At the same time
she heard them so clearly that she felt them under her skin, under her lacy, bow-tied halter dress, so near and warm that she felt herself go hot. His whisper drifted like a long chiffon scarf through her body. FFF uhuhuh KKK. FFF uhuhuh KKK. FFF uhuhuh KKK.

“No, no, I’m not unhappy.” Grace’s voice was as high as it had ever been. She almost ran to the home bleachers, sat beside Betsy Moore. “Protect me from that animal,” Grace murmured to Betsy, aware that the women had all seen Mike and her together, then her and Jeremy, knowing that Betsy would repeat her remark to the others. “Paula would kill him if she knew the stuff he says.” She’d hoped Suzanne had been too busy watching the ball to notice Mike talking to her. And then she saw Paula Webster at third base glaring at her.

“Mike’s going through a phase.” Grace measured out the coffee, dumped it into the coffee maker, pressed the button. “Adolescent, harmless. My dad used to do stuff like that. Talk to my mother’s friends. It didn’t mean anything.”

“It means something to me.”

Grace walked over to her friend and hugged her. Suzanne’s arms came around Grace, held onto her. Grace could smell Suzanne, her Herbal Essence shampoo, her Vaseline Intensive Care Body Lotion, the odor of a light sweat. Grace stepped back, took Suzanne by the hands. “It’ll get better,” she said. Who am I fooling? she thought.

Suzanne looked at Grace, and Grace thought how red her eyes were, red and raw, eyelashes invisible, like a fish’s.

“He says he doesn’t know if he loves me anymore. In that way.”
Grace gazed at her, stricken. Did Jonathan feel the way Mike did? Was that why they never made love anymore? She wondered what Mike’s side of the story was. Whenever the neighborhood women discussed Suzanne and Mike, Mike didn’t stand a chance. Selfish, that’s what he was. Selfish and childish. Poor Suzanne. She didn’t deserve this. And at the same time, the women were smug. Smug that they were holding onto their own husbands. *What’s wrong with Suzanne?* was the unspoken undercurrent. If anyone suspected trouble in the Clarkes’s marriage, Grace already knew what everyone would say: *there’s something wrong with Grace.*

“Could you keep Lisa today?” Suzanne asked. “Get Brad off to school and pick him up?” She brightened. “Mike says he’ll spend the day with me.”

Grace walked over to the sink and stared out the window. Suzanne’s desperation made everything in Grace’s life worse. She brushed away a tear and turned to the counter, grabbed the coffee pot and held it out. Suzanne shook her head, no.

“I’ll have to take her to school,” Grace said. “I’m the mom in Brad and Theo’s classroom today.”

“Oh, Grace. It’s always you. You even run the church nursery and Theo’s long been out of it. What would we all do without you?”

The front doorbell rang, two rings, then another.

“Please?”

“Of course I’ll watch Lisa,” Grace said. “Bring her over.”

Another sharp ring.

Pastor Ginny stood on the doorstep. She wore her collar and black short-sleeved dress that Grace had sewn glass buttons down the front to make it distinctive.
“Thanks, honey,” Suzanne called from the kitchen. “I’ll bring them over in ten, fifteen minutes.”

“Mom.” Theo stood at the top of the staircase. “Where are my plaid socks?”

“The argyles?”

“The ones like Daddy’s.”

“They’re in the hamper, sweetie.”

Jonathan appeared at the top of the stairs beside Theo. “Is it Frank? Carol?” Why would he suggest Carol? CCC aaaaaaaaaaarl? What kind of a woman worked in a tire store with all men? Yes, she was a shower curtain all right, the kind with those rubbery stick-on things to glom onto the wall. Or someone else’s husband.

“I’m hoping you’ll help me with some church projects.” Pastor Ginny made a gesture with her hand as if to ask if she could come in.

Theo marched partway down the steps and then leaped the last six into tiny foyer. He stood beside Grace. He had on his Clarke Tire Store T-shirt, the one that was black and had red lettering, and his brown shorts. “Where’s your tie-dyed shirt?” Grace touched the lettering she had so lovingly embroidered on the front of his shirt.

Jonathan clomped down the stairs and joined them. He, too, wore a Clarke Tire Store shirt. His had a pocket with Jonathan Clarke, President on it that Grace had stitched. He put his hand on Theo’s shoulder and nodded at Ginny. “Come in, Pastor Ginny,” he said. He might as well have said, “Look at me, Grace. I am so great. You left the minister on the porch. I invite her in and even remember her name.” Maybe that did make him great. Minette went nuts when Keith couldn’t remember her relatives’ names.
“I mean we go to the reunions every year,” she would say. And it wasn’t like Jonathan ever went to church. He was too busy with the tire store.

Jonathan opened the door wide. “Come in and have some coffee.” He gestured toward the kitchen. “I’ll get another pot going. I think we’ve got doughnuts, too.” Pastor Ginny bustled past Grace and into the house. Theo followed them through the dining room and into the kitchen. She heard Jonathan say, “I’ll get your breakfast, big guy. Mom’s kind of tired.”

Grace walked outside and shut the door. She sat on the front steps. All she wanted to do was take a nap. A long nap. No interruptions. She slipped out of her sneakers and pressed her bare feet against the steps’ warm concrete. She tugged hard on her ponytail, twisted it around her finger. An early morning silence hung over the cul-de-sac, thick and airless, the way a burial garment must feel. She touched her stretchy shirt.

“Grace.” Suzanne, calling from her own front porch. Lisa held one of her hands, Brad the other. He clutched a giant bag of M&Ms. “Here they are.” Isabel, her own daughter, would have been a year younger than Lisa. Grace gave another twist to her hair. It might as well have been her heart. No one ever mentioned Isabel.

The three walked toward her. A red book bag hung over Lisa’s shoulder. “She’s reverted to diapers,” Suzanne said. Like Grace didn’t know. Everyone in the neighborhood had been talking about it. “Mike and Suzanne better pull their act together. Those kids are paying the price,” Sherrie Gradin had said more than once.

Jonathan, stepped outside onto the porch. “Pastor Ginny wants to know if you can chair the Sunday school graduation celebration? It’s in nine days. June 25th. Right after
services. Last Sunday in June.” The same week Theo got out of school for the summer. “Says it’ll save your mother from having to do it.”

Suzanne thrust the diaper bag at Grace. “Brad will share the M&M’s, don’t worry.” She leaned down and kissed Brad and Lisa good-bye. Not that long ago she would have kissed Grace, too. “I think we’re going to a motel,” she whispered. A tiny knife speared Grace.

“You should say no to Pastor Ginny,” Jonathan said. “You do enough.”

Grace flushed. “What about my mother? I can’t leave her to do it. She already does so much for the church.” She walked past Jonathan into the kitchen. Pastor Ginny sat beside Theo at the island sipping her coffee.

“Of course, I’ll chair the graduation,” Grace said.

Jonathan stepped into the kitchen behind her, Lisa and Brad trailing behind him.

Pastor Ginny stood and put her arms around Grace. “You are such a good daughter,” she said.

Grace had a sudden image of herself unraveling like her father’s yellow scarf, leaving nothing behind, nothing at all, not even a shred of yellow filament.

Grace’s planning paid off. Despite the heat, the crowd at Mitford’s St. Paul’s Church was huge. Dollar bills overflowed the donation baskets she had set from the front steps to the grassy aisles where she had arranged rows of folding chairs. The children would receive their first-year Sunday school diplomas. Grace had made all twenty of them herself, decorating each with bits of material shaped like whales or apples or fish or
crosses—whatever Biblical allusion came to mind. Grace stood in the adult Sunday school room by the window putting the finishing touches on Eliza Hayes’s cross.

The children in Theo’s Sunday school class and their families milled around the churchyard. Heat rippled in the sunlight. People wiped their foreheads, used their church programs to fan themselves. “Nothing good’s going to come of this heat,” George Hartley said, and others nodded agreement. Mountains in the distance shimmered in the late morning heat. The evening before Suzanne had slipped inside Grace’s sliding glass doors to the kitchen while Grace melted cheese for Theo’s macaroni and asked Grace to bring Lisa and Brad, too, so she and Mike could have more time alone together. “It’s getting better, I think,” Suzanne said. “We’re trying new things.” She lowered her voice and said, “We’ve bought some sex toys,” giving Grace an enigmatic smile.

At that moment, Jonathan had walked in through the garage. “Sorry I’m late for dinner.” He kissed Grace on the lips.

“An hour and fifteen minutes late,” Grace caught a whiff of something womanly, something flowery smelling, maybe perfume? She couldn’t bear to think what this could mean. Carol would always smell of vinyl to her. Could it be someone else? She stirred the warm cheese, then dumped it into a bowl of cooked pasta, noodles she had made from scratch.

“I wish Mike would kiss me when he got home,” Suzanne had said. She had taken to wearing skimpy sundresses that showed her white, freckled skin, and flat bosom. She wore too much eye make up, powdery blue shadow and gloppy mascara, pink lipstick exactly the wrong shade for her hair. Looking at her made Grace sad. Impulsively, Grace
had put her hand on Suzanne’s arm. “Let me design a dress for you,” she had said.

“Something special in pale green, I think. With a sash. Tied in a bow in front.”

“And a slit up to there like you always have.”

Now, at the church, Grace shoved Lisa’s red diaper bag into the Sunday school room closet. She went outside and told Theo, Brad, and Lisa to play tag in the graveyard. “Get the other kids to play.” As soon as they vanished behind the church, Grace stood on the church steps with Minette.

“Kind of hot.” Minette spiked her damp bangs.

“Better than rain.” Grace sighed. “Except maybe then the whole thing would have been canceled.” Grace didn’t mean that, though. The earth was parched for rain. Without it, there were no first wild daisies to poke among the graves. No tiger lilies edging the graveyard. She hated that lack of flowery fabric—that flush of flowers that she re-created in her designs. Why, she named one dress Wild Daisy. It had a yellow bodice that clung to her breasts and a swish of white silk petals for a tulle-lined skirt. She had threaded tiny bits of green throughout.

The lone oak tree’s leaves hung limp on its branches. Not a hint of a breeze. The graves spreading out around the church looked orange, as if the dried up grass had turned to rust. The grass crunched beneath the children’s feet as they ran around hollering, “You’re it!”

“You must be sweltering in that robe.” Minette put a hand to her own sheer black blouse and short black skirt, smoldering of seductiveness, cut on a slant, crisp red bows ruffling down the center, an outfit Grace had made her for her birthday. She wore high black sandals, no stockings, toenails red. Grace could tell that Minette wore no bra, just a
silky red lace camisole. She didn’t seem like worn Levis today. No, something was
different. It wasn’t just the glamorous outfit, it was something more. Grace smelled it in
the air as if it were as real as perfume—not _eau de Minnette_—an indolent perfume of
bougainvillea mixed with the crisp aromas of mint and oranges, all mingling with what?
What was the other odor that came to Grace—dung, that’s what it was, dung.

“What is it?” she said. “You seem different today. Brighter. Like Pastor Ginny’s
Easter robes.” Then she added, “I don’t know, though, it’s like there’s something dark,
too, like the black veil over the cross on Good Friday.”

Silence from Minette.

“What is it?”

“It’s nothing, really,” Minette said. “We’ll talk later. You’re beginning to sound
like your Grandma Essie.”

Grandma Essie. Hmm. Her and Theo just regular visionaries. Grace adjusted the
dull maroon choir robe that Pastor Ginny insisted she wear, wishing she could show off
the dress she had created special for the occasion: a slim, sleeveless shiny cotton navy-
blue dress, its low-cut top with the sudden surprise of a zipper, only the slightest
gathering of material at the waist to give it form. The hemline was uneven and a slit ran
up the left side from the bottom to seven inches above her knee. Another zipper could
close the slit, but Grace left it open.

Grace glanced around. “Do you think I set up enough chairs?”

Steve Buckley walked up the steps, sidled close to Grace. “So where’s Jonathan?”
he asked.

“He’ll be here. He’s got tire store stuff to do first.”
Steve edged closer, said, “If you were my wife, you’d come first.” Grace wanted to be angry, but Steve’s words both hurt and flattered her. “He’ll be here,” she said again. Steve put his hand to her cheek in a swift gesture as if he couldn’t help himself. “You ever want to talk, I’m around,” he said. And then in a low whisper he added, “Your skin is soft as a tulip’s petal.” He touched her again, this time on her hand, just the tip of his finger. Grace saw his wife Bev over near the chairs, watching him. He hurried down the steps.

“Soft as a tulip’s petal?” Minette giggled. “What was that all about? Is he fingering flowers these days?”

Grace blushed.

“You’re a magnet for men, Grace. I’ve never seen anything like it. You’re gorgeous, of course. But you must be giving off some kind of signal.”

“Pheromones.”

“You’re an object of desire, sweetie-pie, that’s what you are.”

“Not to Jonathan,” she said, but still, she was flattered. Minette was right. She gave a little shimmy inside her choir robe, enjoyed the feel of her bare legs skimming against each other, her breasts touching. She was a fabric of her own making—rich jewel tones, a glint here, and a touch of sheen there—no other fabric like her existed.

Minette pointed. “Look who’s here.”

Frances and Leon had settled into the first row of folding chairs. Grace could see her mother craning her thin neck this way and that. A wide-brimmed straw hat, a pale pink ribbon winding around it, protected her skin from the sun. The ribbon appeared worn, faded more in some places than others, giving it a curious dappled effect.
“Our Lady of Mitford with her Faithful Consort,” Minette said.

Grace laughed.

“If it wasn’t for her,” Minette said, “you wouldn’t be carting Theo fifty miles from Hudsondale to St. Paul’s Sunday school.”

“I like helping,” Grace said. “It’s just that I’m tired.” She tried to figure out what had changed in Minette. She wasn’t a dormant tree. She was flowering.

Minette squeezed her arm. She pointed again. “Your mother’s put her purse on the empty chair beside her. Jonathan?”

“He’s called twice,” Grace said quickly.

“Is he going to make it to Theo’s graduation?”

“He’s working in the store.”

“On Sunday?”

“He and Frank are doing inventory.”

“Today?”

“Sunday. No customers.”

“And the party afterward? You better send some pheromone signals out to the tire store.”

Grace looked around, put a finger to her lips. Mary Sanfilipo stood within two feet of Grace and Minette. Mary was talking to Jessica Robertson, but still, Grace couldn’t be sure; she might be listening. Jonathan’s absence humiliated her, but she didn’t want anyone, not even Minette, to know that it made her feel inadequate—as if she were a thin muslin blouse when a plush brocade dress was needed. Jonathan hadn’t made it to Theo’s kindergarten field day or his T-ball team’s starting-day parade. Or the beginning of
baseball practice. Or a single PTSA meeting. When folks inquired, Grace always smiled and said he had to work.

“He’ll make it to the party. He left at four this morning,” she said. “But with the stores and now the warehouse under construction, he’s really busy.” Grace avoided Minette’s eyes. “He’ll call,” she said, and her voice cracked. She couldn’t bear her friend’s pity. Or anger. Grace gave her a quick hug, pressing her face to Minette’s cheek, enjoying the real smell of her, her *eau de Minette*.

“Thank goodness you’re here,” Grace said. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.” For one awful minute Grace thought she might cry. She put a hand to her hot face. She was probably as red as her mother with her eternal rosacea.

Minette put her arm around Grace, her hand on Grace’s waist. “Oh, sweetie.” Grace moved closer to Minette. Minette’s fingers tightened on her waist. She had the sensation that Minette was holding her together.

“I need you,” Grace said.

Minette cleared her throat as if she had made a sudden decision. “We have to talk,” she said.

The firm way Minette spoke made Grace feel more unraveled than she already did. “What is it?” she said, and her voice sounded loud.

“Later,” Minette said. “After the party. After you’ve put the kids to bed.”

Graduation got underway. Grace and Pastor Ginny stood off to one side to keep an eye on everyone. Pastor Ginny had to be sweating to death, too. She wore what could only be a tippet, one of those long black scarves, of all things, over her clerical robe.
Grace was pretty sure the pastor was at least fifty years old, so if she had a hot flash, whew, she might melt. “What are you doing in that tippet?” she whispered. “I made you a short summer robe.”

Pastor Ginny touched Grace’s long robe, then fluffed her own long, black scarf. “I can’t help it,” she said softly, “I love the pomp of these formal robes.” She shook her head. “And you, Grace, make them so utterly beautiful. Really, you have to blame yourself.” She gave a light laugh and took hold of Grace’s hand. “You’re a good girl to do all this work,” she said, her voice no more than the lightest soughing of leaves. She kept hold of Grace’s hand.

Teresa sang the opening solo, *Hail Thee Festival Day*. The adult Sunday school band burst forth with *Go Forward Christian Soldiers*, followed by Jimmy Summers’s trumpet sending the notes of *There Is a Green Hill Far Away Without A City Wall*, soaring high into the air like dust itself. The rest of the verse was “where our dear Lord was crucified, He died to save us all,” and everyone sang along, mournful, languid. Did anyone else think this an odd choice for a children’s Sunday school graduation? Tears swelled in her eyes. She looked at Pastor Ginny, who shrugged. She leaned close to Grace, holding tight to her hand, and said, “I can’t help it. I love that hymn.” She gave Grace a quick kiss on the cheek, said, “You okay?” and when Grace nodded, moved off to stand close to the children.

Grace looked at the sky and saw a pale blue ribbon not unlike her mother’s pink one, trailing atop the mountain ridges. The ribbon seemed to curve in on itself, creating patterns of textured blue, some thick and dark, royal blue, others faded, almost gray. It
looked like material. Silk? No. One of the new synthetics? And then it came to her: It was a ribbon of blue brocade. A sign?

The kids marched toward the platform, dust rising from the ground. Far off in the distance, cowbirds flocked together, swooping downward. Must be a grain truck spill. Grace’s dad stepped up beside her. He put his arm around her in a brief hug.”Lost in the clouds?” He squeezed her hand in their timeworn signal. Of course, her mother had sent him over. Did he think she didn’t know that? When Grace didn’t answer, he said, “Everything all right?”

Grace had the strongest urge to scream, a wordless scream of frustration that would echo and swirl in the sky like a ribbon, a ribbon designed by her for everyone to see and hear and comment on: Look! Grace’s ribbon. Grace’s Own Ribbon, Rib b on, Rib b on. “You can tell Mom everything’s fine, Daddy. Just fine.” FFFF ine ine ine ine.

Her dad linked his pinky with hers. It was too hot to link baby fingers, almost too hot to breathe, but Grace didn’t want to hurt her father’s feelings. Sweat trickled down her back and between her breasts inside the maroon choir robe. Her mother sat straight and tall in the front row, an empty chair on either side of her.

Someone had put in a Patti Smith CD, and her raucous voice hollered out from the house into Grace’s parents’ cramped ranch house driveway. Her parents had come into Mitford special from the lake for today. Clusters of people danced on the lawn. Debbie Miller tossed off her shoes. Her husband Tony was nowhere around, thank goodness. Five large coolers overflowing with Coke and Diet Pepsi and Mountain Dew sat inside the carport for the kids. Most of them played dodge ball in the side yard with Theo. Three
little girls swung on the old metal swing set on the back lawn. Lisa napped on a patio chaise longue.

Inside men chugged Genesee and women sipped Chablis from lavender paper cups. Tables borrowed from St. Paul’s held the food: loaves of fresh bread Grace and her mother had baked, platters of fried fish. Bev Buckley, Esther Clarke, and Pastor Ginny brought buckets of barbecued chicken. The Sanfilipos donated potato salad, the Summers an orange Jell-O salad dotted with mini-marshmallows. Minette put a bowl of chocolate pudding inside the refrigerator. The Millers brought a tray loaded with skewers of lamb spiedies. Thank goodness no one brought apple dumplings that might set off her mother on a Baby Nathan kick. Jonathan’s Aunt Judy set two-dozen glazed doughnuts from Dunkin’ Donuts on the kitchen table. “Your favorite,” she said to Grace, and pinched her cheek. Grace opened the box and ran her finger over the sugary glaze on one of the doughnuts. “Thank you.” Her voice trembled. “You are so kind to me.”

“Oh for heaven sakes,” Aunt Judy said. “Don’t be an idiot.”

Now crushed in the living room between one of the food-laden church tables and the open front window, Grace stared through the screen. Minette held hands with Laurie Ceratani, the two of them spinning in circles to Patti Smith.

Minette’s father hovered close to the stereo. A sudden burst of ragtime music filled the air, and Mr. Trow swayed to the music, snapping his fingers over his head. He winked at her, crooked his finger toward her, managed to brush her leg with his. “Let’s dance, honey,” he said. Grace turned away in embarrassment. The music, Scott Joplin, sounded faintly familiar. She frowned, trying to remember. She bit down hard on her thumbnail and touched a finger to her dress, feeling the comfort of the shiny cotton. She
looked up to see her mother standing in the narrow hallway leading to the bedrooms, a cup of wine in one hand, a bottle of Chardonnay in the other. She had removed her broad-brimmed hat, and her hair curved into a bun at the base of her slender neck. Grace met her mother’s eyes. She moved toward her mom, grateful for the slit she’d put in her slim navy dress. The zipper’s hot metal pressed against her bare leg.

By the time Grace reached the place where her mother had stood, she was gone.

Grace walked down the darkened hall. “Mom?”

No reply. She heard a rustling sound and realized that it was the swish of her own dress as she moved. The hall bathroom door was closed, and she heard giggling from inside. “C’mon, we’ve got time,” she heard a deep male voice say. A familiar male voice, but she couldn’t place it. The man cleared his throat. The woman made a breathy, happy sound that made Grace think of a lacy wedding dress floating down the church aisle. The male voice said, “Hush.”

Tony Miller, another neighbor from Hudsondale, appeared in the darkened hallway. He moved so close to her she could smell the beer on his breath, the body odor from his shirt. Before she could think or act, he slipped his hand between her legs. He was a slinky, silvery material with chains, that’s what he was. “God, I think I love you,” he said, voice husky and low. “You’re every man’s dream. Beautiful. Lush.” And there suddenly was Debbie Miller standing at the end of the hallway, hand on her hip. She reminded Grace of something, she couldn’t think what. Grosgrain? A trimming material without much substance on its own. Tony dropped his hands, moved to his wife, put his arm around her. Grace shook her head at Debbie. “You know it’s not me. He’s had too much to drink,” she said. Tears trickled down Debbie’s face. Tony pulled her closer
against his shoulder, and they moved off into the living room. Grace couldn’t even count the number of times she’d babysat the wild Miller twins.

Grace stood in the hall. She hated that Tony felt free to touch her, but some small part of her heart needed that affirmation of her womanhood. That glorious tingling feeling. She loved it. Oh, oh, oh. Why didn’t Jonathan see her as sexy? She’d begun to think that to him she was one of those shapeless tent dresses in dull brown. Again, the word dung came to mind. She took a deep breath and went in search of her mother. She tapped on her parents’ door and walked in.

Her mom stood in front of her dresser, faded lavender feather boa draped over its mirror. She had pulled out her bobby pins, and her hair hung limply to her shoulders. Jars of lotion were scattered across the dresser top. She jerked her hand out from beneath her shirt as Grace entered the room.

“What’s wrong?” Grace’s voice went high in that way that she hated. Two wine cups sat on the dresser beside the Chardonnay bottle. Grace knew they would be on the dresser scarf so they wouldn’t mark the wood. A box of Saltine crackers lay open beside the wine.

“What’s wrong?” Grace closed the door, pressed her back to it. This scene had played itself out at least two or three hundred times.

“What’s wrong?” Her mother’s voice was nearly as high as her own. She put a hand to her flushed face. “Look at me.” Her birthday was the next day, but Grace and her father knew better than to mention it. Fifty-two. The peach suit and lime-green blouse didn’t do much for those red skin tones of hers, thought Grace. If she had listened to me, she’d be in a tight black sheath with a string of pearls tucked in at the neckline.
“Look at you. Twenty-five. Beautiful.” Her mother paused, then repeated in a louder voice, “Twenty-five.”

Grace stepped away from the door. The fish odor hadn’t seeped back here. The room smelled of lavender laced with wine. She walked closer to her mother, dress crinkling, a delicious tickle against her legs. She took one of her mom’s hands, noticed the wrinkly skin, the age spots, and wondered why her mother couldn’t see the signs of aging as something beautiful, each wrinkle, each freckle representing a life’s event. Sometimes Grace peered into the mirror at her own face looking for glimpses of her Grandma Essie, her father’s wild gypsy mother. She’d been dead since before Grace was born, but she didn’t feel dead. Bright colored pictures that showed off her flowing blond hair wrapped in blue paisley scarves, textures clear even in the old albums. And always a colorful skirt. Orange, lots of fringe. You couldn’t look at those colors and not feel Essie’s magic. It glowed in her face, in her blue eyes and dark, arched eyebrows, her chiseled pink cheekbones. Grace thought of her as softened brocatelle—a person in high relief. Grace ran a light finger over the soft skin on Frances’ hand.

“It’s the wine. It’s making you weepy.”

Her mother’s hand stiffened. “That’s it. Blame the wine. As if the truth isn’t staring you straight in the face. Watch this.” She smiled and frowned, and the skin around her eyes and mouth crinkled like Grace’s dress. “That doesn’t happen to your face, now does it?”

When Grace didn’t answer, her mother said, “I can’t leave the shower without glopping on moisturizers, everywhere, face, body. Hypoallergenic, oh yes. And you? You’re the kind who takes a quick shower, towels off, and you’re ready to go.” Her voice
rose as she added, “Look at you. Blooming. Busting out all over that dress.” She averted her eyes from Grace’s cleavage. “You’re so showy, Grace.” She pressed her hand to her own breast, said, “It’s not fair.”

Grace said nothing. Sometimes that was the best strategy.

Her mother leaned toward the mirror, and peered at her hairline. She snatched an opened tube from the dresser and began to smooth white goo across her forehead. She reached for a sleek black lipstick tube. “You haven’t been using my make up, have you?” she asked.

“No.”

“Somebody has.” Her mom poured wine into one of the cups. “You need to do something about your hair. It’s ridiculous pulled back so tight,” she said, adding, “You look as if you’ve gained a little weight. Maybe it’s just as well you’re not having another baby.”

Oh, no, thought Grace. Here it comes. How much Frances had had to give up having a child so long after Baby Nathan. What it had done to her figure. Not that she blamed Grace, of course. Children don’t ask to be born, she would say, and Grace would picture lines of children curled around faceless women pleading, “Let me be born.”

Grace stood against the wall and watched her mother through the mirror as she sipped from the cup, set it down. When her mother opened her mouth and said, “It’s not your fault, Grace, but . . .” Grace interrupted the inevitable to say, “I’ve been thinking about opening my own dress shop,” and the oddest part was she hadn’t known she’d been thinking that until the words flew out of her mouth. Like a miracle. She imagined herself designing fresh dresses from faded ones. Creating new possibilities out of old. She could
see a smiling Grace wearing a flared Teddy Boy pantsuit, hint of faux fur edging the hemline, tape measure in her hand, the busy, happy Grace in Select Seconds. Yes, Select Seconds would be the name of her shop. Something soared inside her. She flung her arms high in the air over her head. Hurray, her heart cried. *Hurray, hurray, hurray.*

“Oh, please.” Her mother glanced at her own reflection, then at Grace. “Don’t smile and fling your arms around like that. You look like you’ve lost your marbles.” She picked up another of the jars lining her dresser. “You can barely handle taking care of Theo and Jonathan. And you’re not doing his books anymore.” She unscrewed the jar lid with one, smooth twist. “I’m worried about you. So’s Jonathan. So’s Pastor Ginny. You’re on the brink.”

Grace sat on the bed. She shivered in the mind-fogging heat, yet she couldn’t catch her breath in the steamy room. Select Seconds vanished into one of her secret spaces as if it had never been. *Br br inin kk of what? Another episode,* that’s what.

From the hallway came that ragtime beat of Scott Joplin. Grace sat up. “I remember that song,” she said. “From the lake.”

“Don’t start.” Her mother’s voice had that itchy cheap-wool prickle.

“It was spooky. Nighttime.”

“Here you go again.”

“You were drinking wine. We sat on your bathrobe. You let your red shoes get wet. More than your shoes. Your bathrobe. Your hair.” Her words blurred together. Was she talking in tongues?

Her mother kept her eyes focused on her own in the mirror. “I knew you were going to say something like this. I knew it the minute I saw you looking at me in that
dazed way in the hallway.” She grabbed a Saltine and nibbled it. “Dreams, hon,” she said. “Same as always.”

Grace met her mother’s mirrored eyes.

She had a sudden desire to put her hands around her mother’s red neck and squeeze. “I smelled the wine. Tasted the damp mist of the lake.”

Her mother daubed a white film around her eyes.

“I saw you walk into the lake. Faded yellow moonlight. Ghostly. The cottage sat on the hill behind us, a witch’s peaked black hat.” Grace walked over to the double closet, flung it open. She grabbed the washed out pink quilted robe from its hook and held it up. “This is what you had on that night. I remember. I was alone with you.”

Her mother shook her head. “I’ve been wearing that bathrobe for years. Here and at the cottage.” She raised her eyebrows. “I seem to remember someone else wearing that bathrobe.”

Silence fell over the room, blotting out Scott Joplin, even the sound of Grace’s ragged breath. An eerie silence full of words that couldn’t find their way out into the open. Grace pictured them beneath the frozen lake, trying to reach the surface so that she could find out what they said.

Grace let the bathrobe fall to the floor. She raised her hand to her mouth, bit down hard on a hangnail. She smelled fish. She heard Blondie screeching from the front lawn. Mayonnaise from the potato salad was in her mouth. She knew sweat showed on her shiny cotton dress beneath her arms. She felt her own dampness. Everywhere.

Frances walked over to Grace and gave her hand a slap. “Stop chewing,” she
said. “It’s nasty.” She returned to the mirror, bending forward, applying fresh mascara. “You’ve got an over active imagination,” she said. “I thought you’d outgrow it, but you haven’t.” She laughed a short, sharp laugh. “Every time I tell you you’re skating on thin ice, you shudder.” She finished her cup of wine.

Grace felt the ground beneath her shifting, slick sheets of flimsy ice, herself tumbling through jagged rents into the lake, into the emptiness of her bad dreams. She sat on the bed.

More wine.

“I did fall through the ice,” Grace said.

Her mother settled beside her daughter. “Oh, hon,” she said, smoothing Grace’s hair, the few escaped curls on her forehead. Her hand felt so soft to Grace, like satin, not scratchy wool at all.

“Jonathan’ll be here soon. I called him an hour ago.” Her mother got up from the bed, hung the bathrobe in the closet.

“I wish you wouldn’t call him.”

Her mother fluffed her own hair, tipping back her head, running her fingers through it. She weaved a bit, almost toppling into Grace’s dad’s gun cabinet.

All Grace wanted to do was cry. That’s all she ever wanted to do anymore. Or sleep. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Yes, you do.” Her mom pulled Grace’s thumb from her mouth. The pungent odor of wine encircled them. “You’re being silly. Take care of Jonathan. And Theo. That’s your job.”
Grace took hold of her mother’s hand and closed her eyes. To Grace’s horror, her mother began to cry great heaving sobs. Grace opened her eyes to see her mother undo a button on her lime-green blouse and tuck her hand inside it. Grace thought she was touching her heart. “Mama,” she said. “Don’t cry, I’ll be okay.”

Her mother fell to her knees in front of Grace. “What would I do without you, without my precious, precious Grace La Lace?”

Grace stiffened. Grace La Lace. She remembered that from somewhere. Her mother dropped her head into Grace’s lap and wrapped both arms around her daughter’s waist. Her tears leaked through Grace’s dress, the open slit, onto her thighs. She clutched Grace tighter. “I couldn’t stand it if anything happened to you.” She grabbed Grace so hard, Grace feared her mother would crush her. Grace patted her mother. The wings in her mother’s thin back jutted against her hand like knitting needles. “It’s not Jesus is it?” her mother said. “Please don’t do that to me again.”

Grace sighed, put her hands in her mother’s hair to calm her down. “I’m fine.” Fff

A knock came at the door. It swung open. Minette stood on the threshold. Grace saw her take in her mother on her knees in front of her. She wanted to remove her hands from her mother’s hair and raise them high in the air as if to say, this scene has nothing to do with me.

Grace stroked her mom’s head.

“Should I come back later?” Minette mouthed.

Grace shook her head, no. St st st ay, ay ay.
Minette’s red blouse stuck to her skin, her black hair looked wet. “I’ve danced with at least five different women. Keith won’t dance.” Something about the way she said Keith made Grace look at her, tilt her head. She tried to loosen her mother’s grip around her waist. Her sharp, pointy fingernails pressed into Grace’s sides. Grace rolled her eyes at Minette. It wasn’t as if Minette hadn’t seen her mother get carried away over the years.

“You’re beautiful, Mom,” Grace said. “You look young. Everybody says so.”

“My mother’s always talking about how glamorous you are, Mrs. Thayer,” Minette said. “She’d kill to have your slim figure. Me, too.”

“Say the Lord’s Prayer with me. Both of you. I beg of you, my dears, my darlings. Say Our Father, say He’s in heaven. Please.”

Grace managed to move out from under her mother. She and Minette knelt on either side of her. She grabbed the girls’ hands. “Our Father,” she began, and Grace and Minette joined in. Then she started in on, “Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid,” but her voice trailed off. Her eyes closed. Grace saw a dribble of drool trickle down the left side of her mother’s mouth.

“I think you need a nap, Mom,” Grace said. She and Minette helped her to her feet. Grace got a Kleenex from the dresser and touched it all around her mom’s eyes and mouth. Her poor face was so red and sore looking. Grace closed the undone button on her mother’s blouse. Her mother threw both arms around her and kissed her on the mouth. “I love you,” she said. “Don’t ever leave me. I love you so much.”

“I know,” Grace said. She folded back the bedspread for her mother, and Minette helped her lie on the bed. Grace pulled off her mother’s pumps.
Grace gathered up the wine bottle and the two paper cups, and the two women slipped out of the stuffy bedroom. A dull thump came from the room. Minette put her hand on the doorknob. Grace shook her head. “She fell out of bed. If we put her back, it’ll just happen again.”

“Oh, Grace.” Minette put her arm around Grace. They headed for the kitchen.

Everyone had gone home. Grace licked the glaze off three doughnuts, but no one else had eaten any. She set out five on a plate and put the rest in the freezer. Her father surprised her by cleaning up everything in the yard, plates, cups, napkins, food. He hosed down the driveway, swept out the carport, lined up the trash bags at the curb for the garbage collectors. The kind of things he did when he felt guilty. Now he sat in the living room in front of the TV, glasses on, purling a lavender scarf, humming his favorite, “Ring of Fire.” He hadn’t worn his retro jeans or black T-shirt. Probably because it had been a church function.

Theo, Lisa, and Brad stretched out on the floor, Theo, the remote in his hand, snapping from a cartoon to a baseball game. Both boys had on superhero costumes, including the tights. This afternoon Theo was Batman, and Brad wore the Robin suit Grace had sewn for him. They looked flushed and spent. Theo got up and pressed his face to the window screen. Grace went and stood by him. He tapped the top of her hand three times, and she tapped back.

“Is he going to get here soon?”

“I hope so.”
“Don’t forget that we need to find Superman boots.” He glanced at her, then away. “Will you make me macaroni and cheese for supper?”

“Of course.”

Theo used the back of his hand to wipe his sweaty forehead. “He’s more like the Joker today.”

“What do you mean?” In her heart, though, Grace suspected she did know, and Theo’s response confirmed her thoughts. “Next to nothing is known about the Joker, and he likes to cause pain.”

Grace hugged her little boy. She felt him take in a huge breath and hold it. My poor baby. She felt the little catch of air in his lungs. She leaned down close to his ear and whispered, “Daddy loves you. He does.” He let his breath out slowly before rejoining Brad on the floor. No tears.

Frances had staggered from bed and gone out to the concrete patio. Through the open kitchen window Grace saw her sit in one of the folding lawn chairs they had bought at Wal-Mart for the party. She pulled another chair close and rested her feet on it.

“Grace?” Frances’s voice drifted inside to where Grace and Minette were doing dishes, putting away food. “Can you girls bring me the Saltines and a couple of aspirin? And my hat?”

Grace found the pink-ribboned hat on the shelf in her mother’s bedroom closet, Saltines on the dresser, aspirin in the bathroom. She walked outside, laid the Saltines beside Frances’ chair, and handed her the aspirin with a glass of cold water.
Frances gestured to another of the fold-up chairs. Grace sat, faced her mother.

“You did a wonderful job with the party, hon.” Her mom settled the hat on her head, pulled down the brim to keep out the late afternoon sun.

Grace gazed at the horizon line. Clouds piled up like tumbling mountains themselves, the red sun peeking out here and there. The same mountain ridges she had seen that morning at the Sunday school graduation sketched their dark peaks against the sky. Variegated darkness against blue brocade would make for an interesting material design.

Grace gave the ribbon on her mother’s hat a gentle tug.

Nine p.m. and still no Jonathan.

Grace and Minette had finished cleaning up. Grace fed the three kids leftover fish and fresh macaroni and cheese with breadcrumbs sprinkled on top. Theo spent most of the meal stirring his chocolate milk with his finger and sucking on it. Now Theo and Brad lay asleep on one of the twin beds in Grace’s small bedroom, Theo’s Humpty Dumpty tucked in, too. Batman rested on a Kleenex beside the bed. Wonder Woman stretched out inside an empty toilet roll nearby. Theo had brought his Grammy’s Hoover into the bedroom. It sat beside the bed. A trail of M&M’s encircled it. Lisa curled up on top of an old sleeping bag at the foot of the boys’ bed.

Grace’s parents had gone to bed.

Minette plunked down on the empty twin bed in Grace’s room. Iridescent stars glittered all over the walls and ceiling, stars that lit up in the dark, giving the room a bright greenish glow.
“When are you going to wear your hair down?” Minette asked. “You don’t look like yourself.”

Look like herself. Ha. Grace rooted through her top dresser drawer. Three spools of thread rolled across the room and landed beneath her old sewing table.

Minette unbuttoned her red blouse, took it off, and tossed it onto the bed. “That thing is rank. Fish, sweat, and Keith.” There it was again, that odd intonation when she mentioned Keith’s name. She yanked off her black skirt and sat on the bed in her skimpy red underwear. She stretched out her legs, wiggled her toes. “What are you looking for?”

“I’m trying to find some sketches I did last winter. You know, newer stuff than my Maternity Medley.”

After a long silence, Minette said, “We have to talk.”

Something in Minette’s tone made Grace long to put her hands over her ears. She wrenched open the second drawer, the third, the bottom drawer. Nothing but old clothes, tank tops from years earlier, a pair of silk bikini underpants. She held up the panties. Huge. Size extra large. “Where do you think these came from?” she said.

“Grace,” Minette said. “Listen to me.”

Theo moaned, rolled over.

Grace stuffed the underpants back inside the drawer. “I’m really tired. I don’t want to talk now.” Even in the greenish cast from the iridescent stars, she saw the hurt in Minette’s eyes. “Can’t we just go to bed? Talk tomorrow?”

“It’s important.” Minette stood.

Grace put up her hand. “I’m tired.” She was a dishrag used one too many times, the once fresh cotton weave turned to dull shabbiness. She lay down on her narrow
girlhood bed, dress bunched above her knees, the zipper on the bodice unzipped, a
sliver of lacy navy bra showing. Minette left the room. Grace thought about going after
her, but she couldn’t seem to lift her arms or legs, her body one of those heavy gowns of
the Civil War era, the ones with the weights in the skirt to keep them from riding up.
When the door opened and Minette returned, Grace sighed in relief.

“Pudding.” Minette sat on the floor beside Grace’s bed and ate a dish of the
chocolate pudding she’d brought to the party. She sat spread-eagled, tiny hairs showing
from the sides of her panties. Grace watched her slowly, sensually lick the plate, then the
spoon. Minette set the dish on the dresser, climbed into bed, and curled in her underwear
beside Grace, the way they had ever since they were little girls, their slick legs wrapped
around each other, both flushed with the heat. Minette’s head rested on Grace’s hot
bosom, her hair tickled Grace’s nose. She flung her arm over Grace’s waist. Grace
wiggled against her, enjoying the hot, sultry feel of her, the moist smell of eau de
Minette. “Let’s get naked,” she whispered, “the way we used to do at the lake.”

Minette didn’t seem to hear her. “I’m moving,” she said, “To New York.”
Minette’s words tumbled out, hot breaths of air on Grace’s breasts. “I got accepted to
Hunter. Social work. I found a sublet that starts in August.”

That thick, airless feeling came over Grace, Minette’s arm a shroud. “College?
You’re going to college in New York?”

Minette’s edged closer to Grace, her mouth now against Grace’s breast, her burial
arm smothering Grace’s waist.

“What about Keith? Tres Minette? Your family?” What about me, me, me?
“My parents are thrilled. Candace and Sherrie are buying the salon. We’ve got it all worked out with the bank.” Her joy skittered around the room.

“Just like that. You’re leaving.”

Minette rolled over onto her side. Her camisole slipped off her shoulders. “I’d hoped you’d be happy for me.” One sweaty breast popped out. Her nipple grazed Grace’s arm. She propped herself up on one elbow, traced Grace’s profile with her finger.

Grace stared at the ceiling, the tingle from Minette’s touch fading as fast as the stars’ glaze. The room was almost dark. “I was the one who was supposed to leave town.” Grace’s voice trailed off, a thin, worn thread.

“You did.”

“Right. Hudsondale. I was supposed to go to college. Become a designer.” She turned a tearful face to Minette. “I wanted to be famous for my work, for *Grace’s Own*.”

“Oh, sweetie. Your life isn’t over.”

Grace got up, went to the window, pressed her nose to the screen and peered at the black sky, broken only by a golden slice of moon like the crescent she’d embroidered on last year’s angels’ costumes for the church. “*Grace’s Own,*” she said, and a vague memory of her and Minette playing Barbies and a familiar warmth between her legs tickled her. A faint glimmer of a diaphanous figure drifted around the house, shiny white in the dark sky, humming, *Come Thou long-expected Jesus, Born to set Thy people free.* . . . And there it was, that small breeze eddying around her, cozy and familiar. Jesus hadn’t deserted her. In the backyard, Grace could make out the swings, dancing slowly back and forth. She pictured lilacs blooming, a Bradford pear, lush and inviting. The pale fluttering film was gossamer wings floating past. Angels. A sign or a warning? She
didn’t care that Minette could hear and see her. She knelt and folded her hands on the windowsill. Through the screen she called, “Jesus?” She called again, louder, “Jesus?”

Minette came to the window, took Grace by the arm and guided her to the bed. She slipped off her own camisole and lay down in just her red bikinis. She pulled Grace close beside her, ran a light finger across Grace’s breasts, but Minette was no longer worn Levis, a perfect fit, nor was she a new unusual fragrance. She was burlap, tough and grainy, smelly like pungent grain.

A huge sob gathered up inside Grace, a basket of musty used clothes. She moved to the far end of the bed. “I’ve got Theo.” Grace bit down so hard on her thumbnail it started to bleed.

“How will be in school all day.”

Grace pressed her fingers to her bleeding thumb. “I have Jonathan and my parents.”

“So?”

“You saw my mother today.”

“She’s a grown woman with a husband.”

“Jonathan needs me. So does my dad.”

“Please,” Minette said. “If there’s two men who can look out for themselves, it’s Jonathan and your father.”

“You don’t know them the way I do,” Grace said. “What about Keith?”

“He’s never going to move to New York.”

“So that’s it? Good-bye, Keith?” Grace’s girlhood sewing machine was no more than a shadow in the dark room.
“He and I will stay friends.”

Grace wanted to throw things around the room. Minette made it sound so easy to do what you wanted. She, Grace, was the one with the talent. She was the one who won a scholarship. She wanted to cry, “What will I do without you?” She wanted to scream, *How dare you?* Oh, she didn’t know what she wanted. It was as if a void had opened up, big, and dark and frightening as the day she had fallen into the bitter cold lake. Worse, the empty space made her think of that far away day when Jonathan took Theo with him to the store, leaving her home alone, no longer a neatly woven mother, but a vacuum of nothingness.

Grace heard the soft wheeze of Theo’s breathing, louder breaths from Brad, the tiniest whistles from Lisa. She swung her legs to the side of the bed, sat on its edge. She pulled hard on her skirt’s zipper. She longed to say, “Please don’t leave me,” but what she said was, “How long have you been planning all this?”

“A long time. You’ve known I wanted to go to school.” Minette now lay flat on her back, knees up, camisole slung around her waist. She edged closer to Grace and ran her finger up and down Grace’s back. “You’re so beautiful.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Her best friend had a whole secret life, and she didn’t know. The hurt swelled like long-ago memories of her friends as swollen scoops of sherbety bridesmaids’ dresses, only this sherbet was icy cold and painful.

Minette moved closer beside Grace. She put one arm around her, caressed her bare shoulder, rested her other hand on Grace’s thigh. “Except for my parents and Keith and the bank and stuff, you’re the first person I’ve told. I was scared I wouldn’t get in. I
was afraid to tell anyone.” Her warm bare breast pressed against Grace’s arm. “But I tried. And I got a scholarship.”

Grace ran from the room, closing the door behind her, wanting to slam it but careful not to because of the kids. She crept into the hall bathroom, shut the door, and huddled in the corner. An inferno. The zipper in her tight navy dress skirt was completely undone, the metal tag hot on her sweaty thigh. The zipper holding her top together was undone, too, her breasts barely covered by the slip of lace bra. She rubbed the hot metal clasp and twisted a loose strand of her hair around the index finger on her other hand.

Minette thrust open the bathroom door. A Batman nightlight Grace’s mother had gotten for Theo sent a blue glow through the small room. Grace had her knees up against her chest, her arms pressed against them. Her whole body trembled. Minette squished down beside her, her arm crunched around Grace’s shoulders. Eau de Minette should have misted them, but Grace’s eyes watered from the itchy grain of burlap. Minette’s bare breasts felt warm, but they weren’t comforting, nothing like Grace’s old nonnie.

Grace couldn’t explain how terrified she was or why. It took her a long time to stop shaking, for her heart to stop spinning the way her sewing machine did as she was threading it. At last she said, “You should have told me.” Minette’s taking such a risk made Grace feel worse than she’d ever felt. “I’ll never be a designer.”

Minette pulled away from Grace, left her on the floor and stood in front of the sink. “We’re not playing Barbies anymore,” she said. “These are our lives.”

Grace wanted to be angry, but she felt nothing. She heard a rapping sound and wondered if it might not be a branch from the Bradford tree, fluttering hard against the house.
“We’re in charge, just like we were in charge of our dolls’ lives. Don’t you remember? Your Barbie locked Ken out of the house for three days one time.”

Grace sat on the floor, her hand to her heart.

Minette pulled Grace to her feet, held her hand, and walked her to the bedroom. Minette sat on the bed. Grace went to the window. The angels’ shimmering film filled the sky. “Jesus,” she called out.

“He’s not going to save you,” Minette said. “It’s no good for you to talk to Him like that. You know what happened last time.”

Grace turned. Minette was a gray shadow. The brass trim on her old girlhood sewing machine gave off a faint dull gleam. “So you want to take Jesus away from me?”

“Nobody wants anything from you. I’m trying to give you something. It’s you, Grace, who has to do something.” Minette slipped on her camisole. “I love you,” she said. “I want you to be happy. I want you to take care of yourself, not everyone else. You. If that’s wanting something from you, well, too bad.”

“Jesus is out there, you know.” Grace turned from her friend, stared outside at frothy angel petticoats in the sky. She looked back at the shadowy Minette. “I don’t know what to do.”

“You do know what to do. And it’s not checking back into that Psych Institute.” Minette’s was voice sharp. “You can visit me. Start a new collection. Apply to a weekend workshop at Parson’s. Maybe a full-time program. Bring Theo and live with me. He’ll be in school all day.”

Minette had changed from burlap to a fearful spiked Halloween costume. The Dwayo? The H-Man? “You always could go to design school, and you know it.”
Grace faced her. “Shut up,” she said. “You don’t know anything.” The rubber band holding her hair felt tighter than any dress she’d ever made for herself. Her face was hot, her skin as tight as the rubber band. “Get out,” she said. “Take your pudding bowl and get out.”

Minette got off the bed, gathered her clothes, struggled into them, picked up her pudding dish. “Listen,” she said. “I’ve worked hard to make my dream happen. You don’t know anything about it.”

She left the room in her bare feet, shoes in hand. She came back to the doorway and said, “You don’t have the courage to work on your design collection.” She disappeared down the dark hallway. Grace heard the kitchen door open and close, heard the *Tres Minette* van engine, heard Minette roar into the dark. FFF OR OR TR TR ES ES OF SOL SOL I I I TUDE TUDE TUDE.

Grace stood motionless in her childhood bedroom. Tears stained her face. She had the bleak sensation of a dresser drawer closing, as if something was now permanently off limits to her, something important.
CHAPTER SIX

JONATHAN


Design school is water over the bridge, Frances tells me. Grace needs to stop beating a dead horse. Minette says I need to be home more. Theo’s too much pressure for Grace right now. She’s fragile, afraid of Theo leaving her.

Grace doesn’t even know what pressure is. Never has. She doesn’t know that there are problems with the loan from the Mitford Bank. With the warehouse. With the tire business. Money. Frank pressuring me. Carol, too. Grace acts as if that missing box of accounts means nothing. It has the second set of books in it. Books nobody but me knows about. Books that supplied the data for the false financial statements I’d created to get the loan for the warehouse that Gordie Couper was demanding. It has to be in the house. Has to be.

If it’s not, I don’t know what I’m going to do.
Here’s what Grace did last night. The night of Theo’s church graduation and party at Frances and Leon’s ranch house:

I had to stay late at the store. Didn’t want to. Had to. Me, Frank, Carol, Mark and Tom Summers, did inventory. Twice to make sure. Took all day. Collected the store’s boxes of seven-year-old sales and purchase invoices to sift through. Toss anything we could. Agreed to do it on our own time—Sundays or after work.

Nothing I could do about inventory. Grace knows what it’s like. The store isn’t that far from Frances and Leon’s, so I’d be close, maybe make it to the party. Soon as we got done counting everything—tires, tire cleaner, hubcaps, mud flaps, motor oil, wax, I’d clean up and head out to my in-laws. Frank and Teresa, too. Teresa sang at the graduation, but she wouldn’t go to the party without Frank. Said Frances made her nervous.

Four, four-thirty. All of us tired. Sweaty. Store hot and sticky. Humidity misting the air. We ran into trouble. Discrepancy between perpetual and manual counts. Sent Mark and Tom home. Started a recount. Frank at the far end of the store, near the open bay doors. Carol and me at the rack closest to the office.


It was the lake, always the lake. Scared me. She couldn’t know what I did at the lake, could she? Jesus. No way.

“She’s been drinking,” Grace said. “I’m worried about her.”

“One more count. I’ll get there as soon as I can.” No answer. “I will,” I said. Added, “Are you okay?”
“Lisa’s crying,” Grace said, and hung up.

I hooked the phone back onto my belt.

“Grace?” Carol pulled a blue bandana from where it looped around her belt.

Wiped her face.

I didn’t answer.

“We should finish this tomorrow,” Carol said. “Shoo. Go on, the both of you. Go meet your families.”

Frank walked outside from his spot near the open bay doors. Lit a cigarette.
Smoke looped into the hazy sky. Cars cruised past on the road in front of the store.
Charcoal exhaust puffing out behind them like a warning.

“What about Theo’s party?” from Carol. Then, “You ought to do something about him smoking again.”

“Go on home,” I said.

“You leaving, too?” Carol put her hand heavily on my arm. Said, “Stop rocking and go home. Shoo.”

“I’ll head for home soon as I’m done.”

Carol did that dance step of hers. White T-shirt, sleeves rolled up, came untucked.
Why couldn’t she understand that I had to get this job done?

Frank came inside, headed toward us. Wiped sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief. Smelled of cigarettes and an oniony body odor. Pretty ripe. Grinned at Carol. Said, “Did you hear the one about the wife who came home with a new leather coat?”
“Don’t you dare say one more word.” Carol clenched her fist, and Frank actually shut up.

Another leap and dance shuffle from Carol. “I don’t get you, Boss, that’s for sure. I’ll see you guys tomorrow.” She raised her hands above her head. Waggled her fingers. Marched to the front of the store where we’d lined up the cartons of old receipts and purchase orders. Grabbed a box and walked out of the store. Loaded it into the back of her used Subaru Outback. Came back for another. Set it beside the first one. One more. Climbed into the car. Squealed rubber and was gone.

Frank and I counted tires again. Went over all the receipts for the last three months. One by one. Found our error. Close to seven o’clock. Frank groped his front pocket, pulled out a pack of Marlboro Lights. Put a cigarette in his mouth.

“You ought to throw those things away,” I said.

He snapped open a red Bic lighter. “I got to talk to you.”

I gestured toward my office. Frank knew the rules. He closed the lighter, tucked the cigarette behind his ear. I snapped on the office air conditioner. Turned it to sixty-five degrees. Air ruffled my desk papers. Put the tire paperweight on top of them. We settled at the desk, me behind it, Frank across from me.

“I need that raise.” Frank stared at his cigarette. Rolled it around in his fingers.

I pressed my hands to my head. That empty, heavy swell of headache. Frank didn’t understand how complicated my life was anymore than Grace did. The risks I had to take. How hard I had to push myself to keep our lives afloat. His, Teresa’s, their kids, Carol’s, Carol’s mother, Grace’s parents. Theo’s. Grace’s. The rest of my employees. Endless list of responsibilities. I pushed the palms of my hands harder against my skull.
All I could think of was Frances saying, “Whatever floats your boat.” Well, my boat wasn’t floating. Where was that box? Without the data for the false financial statements there wasn’t going to be any warehouse.

“Carol, too,” Frank said. “Her mother needs medical tests. They’re going to cost. She’s got blood in her stools.”

“She couldn’t tell me herself?”

Frank shrugged. “You’re pretty hard to talk to lately, Boss.”

I closed my eyes. Jesus. If I didn’t find that box, I was going to be even harder to talk to. I got up from my chair. Snatched the Pledge and paper towels from the office shelf. Sprayed the desk. Swiped a towel across the desk in front of Frank. Squirted Pledge onto every shelf. Scrubbed them down.

Frank got the broom from the corner and swept the office, one end to the other. Dumped the dust into the wastebasket. I polished the sides of my desk, the drawers. Wiped them with paper towels. Sweat stained the front of my shirt. Turned the air conditioner to sixty degrees.

“You want to talk?” Frank set the broom in the corner. He sat again. Wet circles beneath his arms. A triangle on his chest. “Sit, Boss.” He pointed toward my chair. “What’s going on? Grace?”

I placed the Pledge in its assigned space on the shelf, its oily lemon odor filling the small office, blocking out the musty, rubbery smell of tires and concrete floor. Threw away the dirty paper towels. Sat. Cold air blew straight at me.

“The warehouse?” Frank asked.
“What do you mean?” No way Frank could know what was going on. The trouble with Mitford Bank. My financial lies to them—nothing wrong in that. Businessmen do it all the time. How could I grow if I couldn’t get a loan? So now there was the delay in construction. Gordie Couper’s phone calls demanding my financial statements. I kept my difficulties to myself. The false statements. No one else’s business. I had my problems under control. But I had to find that box within the next few days.

I took hold of the roll of paper towels from the desk. Ripped apart the squares. Stacked them. Folded them. Smaller and smaller.

“Talk to me, Boss.” Frank leaned across my desk. Put his face close to mine.


He settled in his chair, put his feet on the desk. “Hey.” Put his hands behind his head.

“What did the man say to the girl with the two black eyes?”

“I don’t know.”

“Nothing. He already done told her twice.”

“Good thing Carol’s not here. She’d kill you for that.”

“There’s more to it. Something about her spending his money or him stealing her money. I forget.”

I didn’t laugh. Money. “Jesus, Frank. Where do you get this stuff?”

“Down at the Rod-and-Gun Club, that’s where. You ought to come down sometime. Let go of the stress. Leon’s down to the club, couple, three times a week. Blasting clay pigeons. He’s good. Damn good.” He laughed. “Despite the new goatee and the black jeans. Next thing you know he’ll be sporting an earring.”

I laughed, too. “Mid-life crisis, I guess.”
“So you ought to join the club. Hell of a good time.”

“Nah,” I said. “Not my thing.”

“Yeah, well, you’ve got to calm down. You’re making everybody in the store uptight.”

I shivered in the cold air. Put all the folded paper towels at right edges to the left hand corner of my desk. Pulled them back toward me. Unfolded them one by one. Smoothed them until the wrinkles almost faded. Frank grabbed a handful, too. Got busy unfolding them. Goosebumps dotted his arms.

“So, you going to tell me?” Frank asked.

“Tell you what?”

“Look, I don’t know what’s going on with you, but I can’t keep working for what you’re paying me. I’ve earned a raise and then some.”

“What are you saying?”

Frank kept unfolding. Smoothing out wrinkles. Never lifted his eyes to meet mine.

I shut off the air conditioner. Walked outside the office to the tire racks. Steam bath. Odor of rubber stronger than ever before. My eyes watered. Jesus. Walked to the open bay and stared at the sky. Sun a ball of fire in a gray-blue sky. No clouds. Eerie. My bones, my entire being, sensed the storm wanting to break through. Heat more oppressive every day.

I moved to the cleaning supplies closet, got a bottle of tire cleaner and a rag. Buffed tires.
Frank kicked at the rack.

I shrugged. Frank would get his raise. Once I found the box. I wasn’t really defrauding anyone. The financial gamble I’d taken would work out in the end. The warehouse would triple my business. Believe me. No point worrying.

Frank walked up and down the racks, slapped at the tires. At last he said, “I mean it. About the raise.”

“Jesus Christ.” I put down the rag. Faced him. “Is that a threat?” My voice resonated in the hazy heat. “Is that what it is?”

Frank flushed. “You’re not the only one around here. That’s all I’m trying to say.”

I took a couple of deep breaths. Went back to polishing the tires. Swirled the rag so hard, my arm trembled. “Give me month. Two at the most.” One, two months, I knew I could make it all work out. No doubt about it. Wasn’t as if I was the only guy in the world who did whatever it took to get the money he needed. I’d falsified financial statements before when I opened the store. No one the wiser.

No jokes from Frank. He kicked a tire this time. Twice. Hard. Once more. Bounced it up against the wall.

“I got to get home. Teresa will have my head. We’ve already missed the party.”

Frank stopped by the boxes at the front of the store. Picked up one. Dropped it into his truck bed. Came back four more times. Sat in the cab and lit a cigarette. It gave off a small orange glow. Toked three, four times.

I kicked a tire. Hard. The one on the end of the stack rolled off the rack onto the floor. Slammed it back into its place. Looked at my watch. Five minutes after seven.
I locked the store. Went to the bathroom to freshen up for Grace. I took off my shirt. Sat on the toilet to catch my breath. Checked under the sink for a washcloth. Towel. Soap. Deodorant. Neat pile of clean shirts. Grace does the store’s laundry. Left the bathroom for my office. Took the knife from the drawer. Ran the blade across the tip of my index finger. Watched the blood seep. Pressed a paper towel to it.

I sat in my desk chair. Touched the bottom drawer. Jumped up. Seized the Pledge. Polished my chair. Frank’s chair. Anything to keep from thinking about how much I needed to open that bottom desk drawer. It felt like forever that I’d been keeping myself from acting out those secret childhood rituals of mine. Hadn’t done them through all this stress with Grace and the stores, hadn’t done them since we’d lost Isabel, but I knew that if I opened that bottom desk drawer, the odds were, I’d head to Grace’s and my house and do what I had to do. No one was home.

I put away the Pledge. Tried to get the greasy feel off my hands with a paper towel. The Pledge’s lemon odor made my eyes water. I took hold of the clammy bottom drawer handle. Couldn’t stop myself. That’s the truth. Anyone with an addiction has to understand this. It’s like the need for a cigarette, a drink. You get the same rush of satisfaction, of release, of being able to breathe again, pressure gone, but what I do doesn’t hurt anyone. Not even me. No second-hand smoke. No enabling wives or children. No AA or NA.

I opened my bottom drawer, reached far into the back recesses, past the Kleenex, and touched the sleek, smooth metal of a lipstick case. I reached further. Felt the square powder compact. The slim, rectangular eye shadow kit. Long, round mascara tube.
I closed the drawer. Hands slick.

Opened it.

Held the cool lipstick tube in my hand.

Closed it.

Pressure was intense, dizzying.

I opened the drawer. Took out the powder. Opened its lid. Closed my eyes.

Smelled it. Musky, womanly flavored, the faint essence of something sugary.

I gathered up my beauty supplies and went into the bathroom. Bolted the door.


Dale Carnegie shouting: *Keep customers updated on new technology or new applications for the products or services they currently use.* Told myself I had to look for that box of date now. The house was empty. Stifling. Grace had turned off the air and opened windows. Jesus. I slammed shut windows. Blasted the air conditioning.

Seven-fifty-five p.m. Didn’t call Grace at her parents’. She might be putting the kids to bed. Searched the laundry room. Opened cupboards, closets, drawers. Moved all through the house. Closets. Cupboards. Drawers. Basement last.

I stood at the top of the basement steps. Looked at the long, dark flight of stairs. She wouldn’t have put the box down there. I snapped on the lights. Put my foot on the first step. Second. Third. Moist, dank air. I could almost smell the cedar, the musk inside Grace’s hope chest. Could feel the soft satins, the barely-there-skimming of tulle against my skin. The supple rayon skirt with pleats upon pleats.

Got to find the box.
Flung open the door to Grace’s studio. Flipped the light switch. A flowered skirt spilled from her basket. Walked straight to the mirror. Eyelashes cleaned of mascara. Eyebrows normal. Wished I could pluck them. Hint of lipstick laced my lips. I touched my face in the mirror. Sighed. Traced my reddened lips with my finger. Closed my eyes. Sniffed my finger. Florid, feminine scent so relaxing. Put the finger inside my mouth, tasted that slick, pink wetness of my spit mixed with Luscious Blush. Leaned into the mirror, pressed my forehead against it.

I wanted...oh, I don’t know what I wanted. Rubbed my lips hard with the back of my hand. Wiped off the smudge on the mirror from my forehead with the flowered dress.


No accounting box.

I moved across the basement to my storage closet. Pulled my keys from my pocket and unlocked the door. Snapped on the lights and stepped inside. Grace’s hope chest sat against the back wall. I’d refinished it, sanded off the black painted veneer to discover a caramel-colored cedar chest, whorls of wood looped in shades of brown and cream. Legs short, four inches high, curved, feet rounded.

I smoothed my hand across its lid. Sat. Told myself wanting what I want doesn’t make me any less masculine than the next guy. It doesn’t. Hell, Frank showed up as Wilma Flintstone at the company Halloween party two years ago. Divine the year before.
I stood. Lifted the lid. Leaned down. My mother’s blue plastic flower right on top. Held it to my cheek. A trace of sweetness, sugar? Flour? Wanted to think so. Touched the next item. A dress I kept because it was Grace’s. Not for me, not this dress. Grace’s senior prom dress, a blue outfit she’d made herself from patched-together silk charmeuse and rayon. Slim, slit high on the thigh, low over her breasts. I pressed my face to it. Ah, Grace. Musky. Blotted out the pungent cedar. Hint of mint. Frances’s lavender. Grace’s shampoo. Vanilla bean. Her smell was hers, and I loved this dress’s vague odor of warm skin, of something secret, too. Grace hadn’t worn panties to the prom. We’d danced in a dark corner of the auditorium, and she got all hot and damp pressing against me. We’d gone outside, lain on the grass in a hidden corner of the school. All shadows. Guns N Roses pounding toward us from the auditorium. Don’t ya think that you need somebody Don’t ya think that you need someone . . . Lifted Grace’s dress above her waist. Pushed up her knees. Spread her legs. Buried my face between her thighs. First time. Vanilla. Sweat. Sweet. Ran my tongue up and down her slick pinkness. Thrust my tongue inside her. Ah, Gracie. She’s pushing against me, hard, fast, wet. Ah. Now I ran my finger across the silky blue material, pressed it to my face again. Dewy grass. Mint and musk.

I laid Grace’s dress inside the chest. Kissed the stain. Left the black satin pumps alone. Gently put the dusty blue flower on top of Grace’s dress. Dropped the lid. Shut off the lights. Ran from the room.

Had to get to Grace.

Psych Institute. Pressed my foot hard against the gas pedal. Raced past the lights, the turrets, the ghostly brick mansion, ivy creeping up it like a cancer. Dale Carnegie: Know when it’s time for them to reorder.


I jumped from the Jeep. Frances perched on the carport step, wearing that old quilted bathrobe of hers. She had on unexpected frivolous fluffy feathered mules. Like Grace would wear. She opened a carton of Saltines on the step. I hurried to her.

Frances stood, folded herself into my arms. The quilting nearly worn away. Cracker crumbs falling to the concrete. Frail. Jesus. I did not want another sick mother. I patted her back. She was cool, not hot or sweaty.

“What is it?” I said.

Her mouth smooshed against my chest. I could hardly hear her. “Leon’s gone missing. I dozed off and when I woke up, he wasn’t in bed.”
Leon? What on earth? Frances stayed crushed against me. Nothing like Grace. Like holding a bony child. No meat to her. She whispered, “I counted the guns. They’re all there.”

Leon and his gun collection.

I didn’t know how to respond. Said, “Grace?”

“Sleeping.”

Movement on the lawn.

Mary Sanfilipo stood in the driveway outside the carport. Skimpy baby-doll pajamas sticking to her skin in the heat. Pink. Peek-a boo white lace trim. Nipples dark circles beneath the sheer cotton top. Dark triangle below. Bare feet. Toenails painted pink. She stepped closer. Leaned against one of the carport posts. Left hand on her hip.

“Is Lee-onne okay?” she said.

“Leon?” I stared at her over Frances’s head.

Another movement. This time at the far end of the carport. A mysterious dim figure dressed in black appeared from the backyard. If Grace had been here, I swear she would have screamed, “The H-Man!” But it was Leon in tight black jeans and a black T-shirt. All I could think of was Johnny Cash—the Man in Black. Leon stared. Cleared his throat. Frances didn’t move. Light bulb droned. Moths skittered around it. Frances and Leon’s ancient Catalina was parked less than a foot away. Dusty. Smeary child’s handprint on the back window. Theo. He knew better. I dropped my arms from Frances. Touched her shoulder. Grabbed a handful of Saltines and pressed them into her hand. Walked to the shelf beside the door into the house and got a roll of paper towels and some Windex. Sprayed the back window. Rubbed it hard.
That heat swallowing us in a dark swirl of unnatural warmth.

The other three didn’t move. Didn’t say a word. Outside the carport’s glare, blackness. I saw Frances slip her hand inside her bathrobe. And then Leon stepped into the carport, opposite me. Put his hand on the Catalina’s hood. Heard the vague, low drizzle of his humming. Yes. Johnny Cash—*I hear the train a comin’, it’s rolling round the bend and I ain’t seen the sunshine since I don’t know when*. . .

Mary walked closer to me. Used the tip of her index finger to draw a circle in the dust on the car’s trunk. I moved away from the car. Held tight to the paper towels and Windex. Pressed myself against one of the poles supporting the roof.

Frances stood between Leon and Mary in front of the steps leading to the kitchen. Facing me. Flush spreading from her neck to her forehead. Crushed the crackers in her hand. Bits of Saltines dribbled down the front of her onto the cement floor. Hand still inside her bathrobe. She pulled it out. Grabbed a Saltine from the carton. Crumbled it. Ground every cracker in the package to crumbs. We three watched. She picked up the empty carton and threw it across the carport. It hit the Catalina’s roof and tumbled onto the floor. Without so much as a glance at any of us, she opened the kitchen door and disappeared inside. Leon’s face ashy, a pasty sick color. Heat rose up from the cement floor, flooding the carport. I could smell Mary’s perfume, a heavy scent, some kind of sandalwood, nothing like Grace’s vanilla bean.

Leon took a tentative step toward Mary. Tripped. Bent down and touched his right ankle. Looked at me. Cleared his throat. Carport light suddenly went off.
I said, “Are you coming inside with me, Leon?” Waited. Smelled Mary moving closer. “Go home,” I said. I put the paper towels on the floor. Tossed the Windex from one hand to the other.

“Lee-onne?” Whiny. None of Mary’s usual flirtatiousness.

Could see their shadowy figures now.

Leon cleared his throat again and pulled on his goatee. He looked oddly naked without his knitting bag.

I picked up the towels. Moved around the car until I found the empty Saltine carton. Grabbed it. Made my way across the dark carport to the shelves beside the door. Crumbs crunched beneath my feet. Set the Windex and towels on the shelf. Shoved the carton into the recycling bin. Wiped my feet on the mat. Opened the door and went inside.

Frances stood in front of the sink, her left arm holding an aluminum bowl, her right stirring wildly. “A cake,” she said. “We’ll have a cake.” I smelled the chocolate. Open wine bottle on the counter. I removed the bowl, the big wooden spoon. Set them on the sink. Said, “Go to bed.” Walked her down the hallway to her and Leon’s bedroom. Wine bottle clutched to her chest. I watched her slip inside the room. Jesus.

I hurried to the kitchen. Covered the cake batter in plastic. Put it into the refrigerator. Rinsed off the spoon. Slammed it into the drying rack. Flipped on the carport light. Peered out into the crumb-covered carport through the screen door. Leon stood beside Mary, one hand on her shoulder, the other by his side. She didn’t move or speak.

“First, don’t worry. Second, I’ll have it. Third, go home,” he said, and limped across the Saltine crumbs, up the steps, into the kitchen. I moved to the sink. Dried the spoon with a
towel. Stuck it inside the drawer. Despite the heat, Leon closed both the screen door and the heavy wooden door. Faced me. Said, “Don’t say anything to Grace.”

I nodded.

He took off his shoes. Used a blue-checkered hand towel to wipe his forehead. Balled it. Tossed it into the sink. Picked up his knitting bag from his chair at the kitchen table. Tugged out a pale lavender scarf. Fringed around the edges. Soft, fluffy wool. “For Frances,” he said.

I nodded again.

He held out the scarf to me.

I ran my index finger up and down it. Fuzzy. “Mohair?”

“Her favorite.” He sat at the table. Pressed his hand against his sore ankle. Said, “I love Frances.”

I sat across from him. Leon didn’t look at me. He stared at the refrigerator. At the pictures of him and Frances, him and Grace, Grace and Theo. Me and Theo. Me and Frances. Me and him. Grace and Frances. All of us grinning. Sweat trickled down my forehead. I felt sick in an empty kind of way. Not as bad as when Grace left me for the Psych Institute. Only thing I could compare tonight to was the feeling I had the day my father walked into the back of the bakery where my mother and I were rolling dough and said, “I’m leaving.” I was six-and-a-half. Theo’s age. My mother looked at him. Arms white and powdery up to her elbows. Blue plastic flower askew behind her ear. Red Converse shoelaces dangling. “It’s that O’Reiley bitch, isn’t it?” Her voice could have sliced through dough five inches thick. Neither one glanced at me. My father said nothing. Stomped up the stairs. Clumped down, suitcase in hand. Came to the back
section of the bakery again. This time he looked straight at me. His body shook for an instant in some minor spasm, and his tight pain-filled face looked at me. Expressing shame. Mixed with a wild and deep satisfaction. Walked through the bakery and out the door. My mother kept rolling dough. Slashed a knife through the dough to create crisscross piecrusts. Twenty-five of them. Slashed the knife, hard. Heard him in the front of the shop. Heard the cash register open.

“He’ll clean us out,” my mother said. Slash.

My father left then, disappeared like steam from my mother’s mangle. But the thing is, I remembered looking at my mother after my father left that second time. I caught a glimpse of her face. It was the face of Frank’s mother after his little sister drowned. Mrs.Perkins’s face after finding out that a tractor had rolled over her husband. A face I recognized from Frances whenever anyone mentioned Baby Nathan.

“Why?” I said to Leon now. A question I’d wanted to ask my own father but hadn’t.

He folded the mohair scarf neatly, tucked it inside the bag. Said nothing. Pulled out knitting needles, one blue, one green, tapped them against the tabletop. They looked small against his thick hands. At last he said, “First, I don’t know. Second, I don’t know. Third, I don’t know.” He put away the needles one at a time. Crossed his arms on the table and buried his face in them. He lifted his head. Kept his eyes on those refrigerator pictures. Eyes wet. Skin pasty. “I’m off to bed.” He clutched his knitting. Hobbled into the dark hallway.

I turned on the cold water and pushed my mouth under the faucet. Heard the whisper of stocking feet on the kitchen floor. Twisted around. Leon.
“I need to borrow a thousand dollars.” Knitting bag still in his hands.

A thousand dollars. Jesus. “Sure,” I said. “No problem.” Didn’t ask why or for what. Maybe he’d take Frances away on a little vacation. One thousand dollars. I had no idea where that was going to come from. Jesus. Had to find that box and get the warehouse back on track.

“Thanks.” Leon stuck out his hand. We shook hands awkwardly, our skin damp with sweat. He shuffled slow-mo down the dark hallway.

I turned to the counter. Saw a plate of glazed doughnuts. Five. I grabbed the plate, jerked four paper towels from the roll Frances kept close to the sink. Sat at the table. Spread out the towels in a straight line. Removed the sticky plastic wrap from the doughnuts and lined them up. Arranged a circle. A square. A triangle. Stacked them. Unstacked them. Sugary glaze made sucking noises in the heat. Stuck to my fingers.

I got up. Jerked a knife from the silverware drawer beside the refrigerator. Sliced those doughnuts in half. Used the halves to make concentric designs. Cut them into quarters. Lined them up. Fingers gummy. Mouth tasted of day-old spit. At last I stuffed the gooey plastic wrap and the gluey pieces into the trash under the kitchen sink and took the bag to the carport. Pushed it to the bottom of the trashcan beneath the other neatly tied garbage sacks. Hooked shut the screen door. Left open the wooden door.

I held the knife in my hand. Slashed at the soft inner side of my arms. Two, three, four light gashes. Washed off the knife. Scrubbed my hands at the kitchen sink. Let cold water run over the thin blood trickles on my arms. Dunked my whole head beneath the faucet. Thrust a paper towel against the cuts until the blood stopped. Saw Grace smiling
at me from the refrigerator, Theo on one side of her, me on the other. Traced her face with my index finger.

The heat in the house was palpable.

The place was dead silent. Uncanny. Echoed with its stillness. I took off my shoes. Left them on the rug inside the door. Walked through the kitchen, down the darkened hallway in my stocking feet. Past Leon and Frances’s bedroom. Past Baby Nathan’s locked room to Grace’s old bedroom. Theo and Brad sprawled on one twin bed. Little Lisa cuddled with a stuffed bear inside the sleeping bag. Theo had Humpty clutched in his arms. I freed Humpty. Threw him to the floor.

Grace lay curled in a fetal position on her girlhood bed. The same position in which she’d fallen to the floor that long-ago day with the wine and candles. Black smoke curling all around as first she fell to her knees in front of an empty chair in our bedroom. Sweet, spicy cinnamon floating everywhere, coating me, her, Theo, oddly erotic like her vanilla smell. “He’s here to help me, He’s here to help me,” she kept saying. Theo wiggling in his baby backpack. Drooling on my neck. Grace kissing the empty air. Reaching toward something. Falling to the floor. Curling up. Sobbing. Dress over her head. I’m yanking off the backpack, pulling out Theo, setting him on the floor, shoving his Humpty Dumpty beside him. I’m sitting in the chair. No sound from Theo. Oh my God. Humpty pillow over his head. I stand. Grab the pillow. Pick up Theo. He’s sobbing. I settle in the chair and hold him as if my life depends on it. It’s then that I see Hollerina. Thumb-tacked to a wooden cross, arms wide-spread, slowly melting, her plastic body like taffy. Stinking like day-old road kill.
Right now I went over to Grace and shook her lightly. Watched her sit. Adjust the top of her low-cut dress. Rub her eyes. Hair slicked back tight in some kind of bun.

“Don’t rock, please don’t rock,” she whispered.

Didn’t know I’d been rocking. This was too much like that other day, that day with the cinnamon candles, the day when she couldn’t stop crying. Still, my penis was hard after that trip to the Hudsondale house.

We moved into the hallway together, and she pointed to the bathroom. The Batman nightlight sent a blue glow through the small room. Grace’s hemline was jagged. I watched her lean down and close her zipper, silvery in the dim light. She zipped up her top, some sleek shiny cotton material, and splashed cold water on her face. Sweat stained the material beneath her arms. She met my gaze in the mirror. Her face was swollen.

“What’s wrong?” I said.

“Minette.”

“Is she okay?”

Grace nodded yes.

“Did she make the party?”

Another nod.

“What then?”

She touched her top, running her finger up and down the shiny cotton, and twisted a strand of hair around the index finger on her other hand. “We had a fight,” she said at last.

I turned her around so she faced me, not the mirror. Saw my own face in the glass. I put my arms around her. Held her warm, wet face against my neck, her breasts against

“I don’t think so.” Her voice was muffled.

I could tell she felt my penis against her leg. She looked up at me. She has the biggest, bluest eyes. Shiny with tears. Beautiful. “Did you just get home?”

“I had to do a recount.” Couldn’t tell her I had to drive to Hudsondale to search for the box.

“You missed graduation, the party.”

I ran my hand up and down her dress. Sleek material tingling against my skin. She trembled. I leaned toward the mirror. Bent down. Yanked open her side zipper. Pulled up the skirt so it covered her shoulders like a cape. So that it touched my arms, too. As if the cape might fold itself around both me and Grace. Her breath hot on my neck. Ran my finger up and down the cape, skin burning.

Grace wriggled so that we both faced our mirrored reflections. She put her arms around her own waist as if for protection. The skirt cape hung on Grace’s shoulders alone. I wanted her. Jesus. Wanted to unzip that dress. Longed to suck her nipples. Put my hand on her breast. Between her legs. Grace leaned into me. “I missed you so much,” she said. “If you’d been here, Minette and I wouldn’t have had that fight.” She paused. “I need you to be home more.”

I slipped my finger beneath her silk panties. Tickled her clitoris. Wanted my mouth on it, sucking, my fingers up her ass and vagina. Oh, Jesus, that trip to Hudsondale had me psyched.
“Tonight?” she said. Moved rhythmically with my finger.

Could barely hear her above my own hard breathing. Ready to lay her on the bathmat, spread her legs and bury my face between them.

And then I saw her stare at me in the mirror as if she were seeing me for the first time. She swung around. Snapped on the bathroom light. Traced my lingering smile with her index finger. She sniffed her finger, sniffed at me. “Lipstick,” she said. “How could you after all we’ve been through?” And still I could see in her face, in the way that she stood close enough for her breasts to touch my chest that she wanted me. “You would come home from Carol and fuck me?” she said.

Tears again.

She opened the bathroom door, disappeared into the hallway.

I splashed cold water onto my face. Licked my fingers. Jesus. She had no idea of the kind of day I’d had. No idea at all. I wiped the back of my hand across my mouth and followed Grace down that sweltering hall toward the kitchen.

What else could I do?
CHAPTER SEVEN

GRACE

Grace stood in the center of her mother’s sweltering kitchen, floor sticking to her bare feet. In the dim fluorescent light from over the kitchen sink, she saw the kitchen clock read eleven fifteen. She’d heard the grandfather clock chime its eleventh stroke. Jonathan would follow her. Oh, yes. There was a pulsing in Grace’s ears, a painful ache in her heart. She was wet between the legs.

And there he was, moving toward her. He ran his hand through his hair. “Look at you,” he said, in his voice low, angry. He unzipped the top of her dress, touched her bra’s black lace. He put a light finger on her breast, his other hand reaching through the skirt’s slit, teasing her satin panties. He said, “I want to fuck you,” in that low, furious tone that drove Grace crazy, that made her want him, that made her long for him to say it again so she could hear those hard sounds, the fffff and the kkkkk.

Grace made herself jerk up her zipper, push away his hand. She couldn’t bear imagining Jonathan’s lips on Carol’s, his hands on her pudgy breasts, her thick waist, her fat butt. She put a hand to her mouth and walked over to the kitchen sink. Her stomach heaved, but nothing came up. Yet, even as she gagged, she was growing wetter, that anger in his voice making her crazy with that familiar velour desire, thick and velvety.

Jonathan came up behind her and unzipped her dress, put his finger inside her sliver of a bra, and circled it around her nipple. She let herself fall against him, let his
finger move to the other nipple. And then came that slight breeze, lifting the few curls
that had escaped her tight bun. She put out her hand, palm up, the cool wisp of wind
fluttering past. The faintest hint of a whisper whistled around her, and she tilted her head,
trying to hear the message, but only the clock over the sink whirred and a dim buzz came
from the light.

Grace faced Jonathan. He grasped her shoulders, his fingers pressing into her
skin. “I want to fuck you,” he said, but that hint of lipstick on his mouth wasn’t hers.
Grace was slipping, sliding, falling into something black and cold and hurtful, someplace
scary she had been before. She stuck out her tongue. No snow. She laughed. She wanted
to go to her room, to get away from the pain, climb into bed and never get up. She
shivered in the heat. She heard her mother say, “There’s a goose walking over your
grave,” and she imagined a fat, white goose waddling across a mound of fresh earth,
*Amazing Grace* etched across its tombstone. “CCC air air llll,” she said.

Jonathan dropped his hands from her shoulders. “Carol,” he said. “She’s got the
box?”

Grace laughed and laughed, that loud echoey laugh that didn’t seem to come from
her at all. “What are you talking about?”

“What’s wrong with you? I told you this morning. The box from the store.”
Jonathan went over to the cupboard above the refrigerator, jerked out a bag of blue paper
napkins, sat at the small table, and began ripping them apart, folding the torn pieces into
tiny squares. “Can’t you remember anything? The box, Grace, the box.” His sweaty
hands stained the thin paper.
Grace sat, hardly able to breathe. Her mother’s voice thrummed in her ears, “The hurrier I go, the behinder I get.” Grace laughed again, the sound spiraling in the shadowy kitchen the same way it had that long-ago day when she’d gone out to the center of the lake on her own, the time her mother said never happened. Loud. Echoey. Grace felt herself falling into a gloomy itchy space of sadness, her mother’s suffocating mottled hat ribbon wrapped around her. A dark closed closet smelling of stale baby. She had the sudden feeling that she and Jonathan were her ghostly parents, that whatever was wrong with them, had been wrong for a long time. That desire wasn’t a thread or yarn or an aphorism that could hold people together. “Two peas in a pod,” her mother’s voice said. “What goes around, comes around. The couple that prays together, stays together.” Grace’s laugh whirled around the hot room again. “A penny saved is a penny earned.”

“There’s nothing funny, Grace,” Jonathan said. “Stop laughing. Just tell me where it is.”

She put up her hand. “I don’t know.” She managed to stand but couldn’t get herself to leave the room. The scent of sex lingered, her wetness a translucent negligee drifting through the air.

Jonathan reached for her, pulled her into his lap, laced his arms around her, but to Grace, he didn’t feel loving, not like that time with the mayonnaise. His arms were rigid, plastic as her dead Hollerina baby doll. He smelled musty, rubbery, but that oily, floral tang of lipstick clung to him, too, and a sandalwood odor, a smell that had to belong to Carol.

“I drove to Hudsondale tonight,” he said. “Went through the whole house.” He pressed her face against his chest. The tightness of his body smothered her. “I’ve got to
have that box. For the bank. Does Carol know something about the box?” When
Grace didn’t answer, Jonathan shook her. “Why do you keep bringing her up?”

Grace leaned back in his arms to find some air, so that they could see each other’s
eyes. “You know why.”

“I don’t know shit.” Jonathan pushed her off his lap. “I need that fucking box.
His voice shook. “Don’t you get it?”

Grace fell into her chair. Laughter kept bubbling up inside, sheer and frothy like
the red blouse she’d made Minette for her birthday. She pictured bubbles sweeping
through the sky like Superman, and she laughed again. Jonathan had never cursed this
way before except about sex, so now she’d lost that part of him as her personal territory.
She touched her bra, ran her index finger back and forth across her breasts, wondering if
she was turning into her mother. She remembered that other night at the lake, the night
her mother tried to drown herself, the way her mother had laughed, called out,
“Whooeee.” Grace sensed even then how her mother longed for her father, how her father
used guns and knitting to keep his distance. Maybe in a few years she’d be downing
wine, too, keeping cases on the back porch. Maybe a rifle would have a special stand in
her and Jonathan’s bedroom. Minette would be off in New York, a professional social
worker, no more worn Levis but a tight blue business suit with hand-sewn buttons shaped
liked stars.

She walked to the window, knelt down and folded her hands on the windowsill.
“Are You there?” she whispered. Out of the blue, the Bradford pear tree bloomed. And
the lilac grove with its light flowery fragrance. And then she saw they weren’t lilacs at
all, but a voluminous layered organza-and-lace poodle skirt, the kind the girls wore in the
fifties. She heard the message then, a hymn sung in a lovely female soprano, *I love to
tell the story, to tell the old, old story, to tell the old story of Jesus and His love.* . . .the

Virgin Mary? The angels she’d seen earlier? Help me, Jesus.

Jonathan paced the small kitchen. “With the papers in that box, I think we can get
the warehouse finished this winter, maybe spring. Gordie will give Ausherland the go
ahead. More money for us.” He tapped the counter twice, turned around, walked across
the room, tapped the back door two times, turned, headed for the counter. “And Frank.
Needs a raise. Carol’s mother’s sick. Wants time off. I need that box.” He stared at her.
“What are you doing?”

Grace got up from her knees, faced him. She wanted to concentrate on the
argument. She tilted her head. There was something important that was not getting said.
She couldn’t say what, she only knew that she felt like that little girl who heard the
hushed tones of her parents speaking of the *indiscretions.*

“No one will get hurt. I just need Gordie to back off right now.”

“What are you really talking about?”

“Jesus. If you weren’t so fucking into your own dream world, you’d know.
You’d know what was important to me.” He slammed the counter with his fist two times.
“You want it, too. Material success. You couldn’t have grown up with your mother and
not want it.”

Grace clutched the edge of the table with her hand. She should have known he
wasn’t going to make love to her, not now, not ever—it was she who was the Virgin
Mary. The tire store would come first. It always had. If the store meant Carol, then that’s
what it meant. She felt dizzy with loss. She glanced outside. The angel petticoat floated to
the ground like snowflakes falling from a sheet of black sky. The froth mixed with the
black, turning the night gray. Like flannel.

“To the lake,” she said suddenly.

“What about the lake? What do you know? What are you talking about?”

Jonathan stepped toward her, fist raised.

Grace’s arm flashed inadvertently upward to protect her face. She said, “I want to
go to the lake. Whooeee.” She laughed. “To skate on the ice. To swing on the swing. To
soar. To be sent through space to safety.”

“Jesus. Shut up about the lake.”

Grace had no idea why the lake should freak out Jonathan. The anger connected
to sex still filled the room. Jonathan yanked open the freezer and pulled out a frozen fish.
He went to hurl the fish across the room, but his arm snagged on the freezer door’s shelf.
The fish caught Grace full in the face, hitting her nose, her cheek, her eye. She stared up
at him, hand to her mouth. She tasted blood, felt it fill her mouth, roll down her chin.

There went that hand through Jonathan’s hair. He snatched napkins from the table
and put them under cold water.

Grace crouched on the floor in the darkest corner behind the table. Jonathan got
down on his knees, crawled into the corner beside Grace, pressed the cold napkins to her
face. He held the napkins against her skin until the bleeding stopped, then set the
bloodied paper on the table. He gagged. He ran the back of his hand across his mouth. He
put both arms around her. “I didn’t mean to hurt you,” he said against her ear. “I’m so
sorry.”

Jonathan’s heart pulsed against her. He left his arms around her, but she felt as if
he had put a billowy dress between them, thick with rippling taffeta petticoats.

“What’s happening to us, Bibby?” Grace licked her lips, tasting the blood. Once more she had that fearful sensation of slipping, sliding, into freezing blackness. Her mother whispered, “Can you believe the wine in church last Sunday? So vinegary.” This is My blood which was shed for you. Grace’s teeth chattered.

Jonathan tightened his sweaty arms around her. They sat in gray flannel silence, the kind of thick silence she knew from growing up with her parents, the kind she vaguely remembered from a gun accident at the lake, a haunting kind of silence she might slip into from which she’d never return. And then she felt his hand on her bare thigh and his hot voice licking her ear, “I’m sorry I missed the party, Gracie.”

Gracie, he hadn’t called her Gracie in so long. He ran his index finger lightly across her bruised cheek and eye, his lips a breath away from hers, but she put up her hand so that he couldn’t kiss her.

Jonathan rubbed his cheek against hers, his cheek with its slight stubble, the way he knew she loved, the way he hadn’t in at least a year. Oh, how she loves those burning sensations sending the heat all through her. Oh, yes. Tantalizing. Grace crossed her legs. He bent closer and put his tongue inside her ear. He traced his finger across her breasts, ran it down between them. His hand crept up her leg, tugged at her dress. He pushed at her legs to make her spread them.

No, no, no, she wanted to say, you’ve got Carol, but his finger eased beneath her panties, slipping inside her. Another. And she leaned into his fingers and the pleasure. She raised her arms, putting them around his neck, bringing his mouth to her breast. He licked her nipple hard in a circular motion. She put her hand between his legs, felt his
stiff penis. He pushed at her panties. “Remember that day in the Dwayo caves?” he said. “Remember the time in the family room? Remember all those afternoons off from school? Remember when we first counted Theo’s fingers and toes?”

Grace lifted her butt, helping her Bibby pull down her panties.

“All a long time ago. Too long ago.” Jonathan’s voice was husky, and she knew from the way he sounded that those memories filled his heart, too, that they were something that could not be erased.

And then he said, “I’m going to fuck you, Gracie.” FFF uhuhuh KKK UUU GRRR aaa SEE.

His head bumped her nose. Blood flowed again, down her face, onto his hair, his hands, her dress, the floor.

“Don’t stop,” Grace said, don’t st st st op op op, ddd onn ttt st st st st o op oPPP, DDDD on’ t ST OPPP, but Jonathan turned away from her, bumped the table. He moved fast, made it to the sink before vomiting. He kept his head in the sink. “It’s the blood. I can’t take the blood.”

Grace stood, grabbed a towel from the counter and put it to her face, wiped off her dress. She unzipped it, both top and bottom and stepped out of it. She left it, a dreary heap on the floor. She never wanted to wear it again. She sat at the table. Jonathan kept his back to her. She watched him rinse out the sink, splash his face with water. He used a sponge to mop the blood from the floor, dry-heaving the whole time. He settled in the chair beside her and ran his hand through his hair.

“Stop,” Grace said. “Just stop. Don’t even think about the leg crossing.”

Jonathan reached for the bag of napkins, started creasing and folding them. He
stared at the napkins. She watched a fly walk across the kitchen counter toward the
sink, a moth buzz against the faint fluorescent light.

Grace kept her eyes on the table and said, “Minette’s starting college in New
York this fall.”

Jonathan concentrated on the napkin he was folding. “You’re kidding.”

“No.” She ran her index finger up and down her leg.

“Why?” Jonathan pressed down hard on the napkin, making the seam razor sharp.

“She says she’s been planning it for a long time.” Grace kicked at her dress.

“She’s found a sublet. She’s moving.”

Jonathan finished folding the napkins. He began to unfold them. “What about
Tres Minette?”

“Sherrie and Candace are buying it.”

“Where does Keith fit in?”

“He doesn’t.”

The frozen fish lay across from Grace on the floor. Its eyes glared at her. She
smelled the trash under the sink now, a mix of fish and chicken, crumbled cookies, cake,
frosting.

Grace kept her eyes on her dress. “She and I had a fight. A terrible fight.” She
sensed rather then saw Jonathan’s agitation, knew he’d be running his hand through his
hair again. Crossing his legs. Rocking. She didn’t think she could stand it. She tried to
imagine going off to New York with Theo, leaving her parents and Jonathan behind. An
odd choked sound came out of her sore mouth. She had to do something, anything. She
got up and went to the refrigerator. A thin beam of light entered the kitchen. She pulled out leftover potato salad and chicken. “Do you want olives with the salad?” she said.

“What happened?”

“She left. She’s not spending the night like we planned.”

Grace plunked the cold food on a plate, set it in front of her husband. “Iced tea or coke?” she said. “Lemonade? A beer?”

“Iced tea.”

She plopped down the tea in front of him and stood beside the refrigerator, its hum and Jonathan’s chewing the only sounds in the room. He finished eating, put the plate and glass in the sink, ran some water.

“You two will make up,” he said.

Grace sat across from him. She shrugged. “It was about my designs.”

He reached out his hand, lightly traced her mouth. “Does it hurt?”

“Not as much as what Minette said.”

Jonathan leaned forward, kissed the edge of Grace’s eye.

“I need to talk to her,” Grace said, but she didn’t really mean it. Oh, she did need to talk to Minette, but that could wait. They both needed time. What she meant was I need you to take me by the hand, Jonathan, lead me to the empty twin bed in my old bedroom, spoon yourself around me, and hold me. Ask me about the fight, the details, why she left. Ask me about my designs. What she said. You could put your penis in me from behind and the kids would never hear a sound.

“I’ll sleep on the couch,” Jonathan said. “Your bed is too small for both of us.”
Grace focused on the unfolded napkins he’d placed in a pile at right angles to the small table’s edge. “It wasn’t always too small,” she said.

Jonathan took hold of both of her hands. “The blood. I can’t think about sex,” he said. “I can’t help it.” He kissed her gently on her sore lips, careful not to set off any bleeding.

She wiped a little sliver of chicken from the corner of his mouth. “Theo has two T-ball games this week. One practice.” She gnawed on her thumbnail. He hadn’t answered her about Carol. Not really. What good did shared memories really do?

Jonathan gently took her hand from her mouth. He held it to his cheek. He didn’t let go. “I have to work this hard right now,” he said. When Grace didn’t answer, he said, “It’s for us. All three of us. Your parents, too.”

“I know,” Grace said.

“I have to clean up some Saltines in the carport,” he said. And then in a voice she could barely hear, he added, “And I have to find that box.”

Grace awakened in her narrow girlhood bed, damp with sweat, gasping in the hot, airless night. Her bun had slipped out, the rubber band now holding her hair in a ponytail. She lay dry-eyed, watching the hot dreary dawn edge in through the window, that sheen of angel petticoat gone. She glanced at the clock. Five-forty. Grace looked at Theo, saw his hair damp, matted against his forehead. She got out of bed, pushed open the door, and stepped into the hallway.

Someone else was up.
“Jonathan?” She crept down the gray hallway, her hand brushing the wall.

Sounds came from the living room. “Jonathan?”

Dull silence. Then the whir of a fan.

Grace tiptoed into the gray flannel living room and saw her mother leaning over the couch. She winced. Her mother wore what had to be a new peignoir, filmy, floaty, lavender that swept the floor. Her slender body gleamed through the sheer lingerie. Good grief. A naughty inky ribbon laced through the bodice added a come-hither raciness to the already bold negligee. Instead of her usual curlers, her hair drifted around her shoulders. And of all things she wore frivolous ebony feathered mules. A faint smell of mint misted the air like the shimmering costumes Grace had made for a Christmas pageant. One hand rested on Jonathan’s face. Her other hand was holding his, pressing it to her waist. The other hand hidden. Was she kissing him? A small fan sat on the end table. Jonathan appeared sound asleep, oblivious, stretched out on his back. His shirt was neatly folded in a square on her father’s armchair. The comforter Grace had gotten for her husband lay on the floor.

“Mom?”

Her mother straightened and whirled around, a hand to her throat. No white wrinkle cream marred her skin. She appeared to wear pale-pink lipstick and a hint of blush, innocent touches to the sultry ensemble, but Grace wasn’t sure in the dim light slipping through the blinds. Her mother put her hands to her sheer dressing gown and shrugged. “I knew he’d be too hot out here on the couch.” She pointed to the fan. “You should have thought of it yourself.” She swirled across the living room, past Grace, into the hallway. Her lavender negligee danced and fluttered, light as lace. She avoided her
daughter’s eyes, but in the morning haze Grace noticed the sad flush spreading upward from her neck.

“Grace?” her mother said from the hall.

Grace turned from Jonathan to face her mother. Was that the smell of wine? Was that filmsy peignoir peek-a-boo? Grace caught a glimpse of her mother’s pink nipples. What *was* she thinking? Her mother had never dressed in something so sexy for her father as far as Grace knew.

Her mother ran her eyes up and down Grace’s body, making Grace aware of the soft smidgeons of skin swelling above her satin bikini panty line, the way her breasts spilled over her bra. Grace’s pulse wove a wildly flirty boa sash in her heart. She told herself hadn’t seen what she thought she’d seen. She added glittery sequins to her heart’s sash, a black sash that kept tightening, making it harder and harder to breathe. No, her mother couldn’t have been caressing her husband. *Silly Grace.*

Her mother’s hand was on her and Grace’s dad’s bedroom door. She dropped it, moved toward Grace. She kissed her once on the forehead, once on the nose, once on the lips. The smell of wine wove its way into Grace’s strangling sash. Her mother stumbled over her long gown, the peek-a-boo top tearing, a small breast popping out. Grace put her arm around her mom and led her to her bedroom. She saw her mother put her hand inside her the tear in her gown, filmy thin layers of lavender, a touch of tulle edging the hem. Grace tucked her mother into bed beside her sleeping father. She touched her mother’s hot cheek before shutting the bedroom door.

Grace stood in the hall and stared at her parents’ closed door and felt nothing. She looked at Baby Nathan’s locked door and felt nothing. She peeked in at the children
and felt nothing. She walked into the living room, stared at her sleeping husband and felt nothing. She pictured Minette walking out the door and driving away in her van and felt nothing. She walked slowly into the kitchen. Too tired to get her bathrobe, Grace walked outside, slow-mo like her father, into the silvery morning. The sky seemed an odd color, one Grace had never seen, last night’s golden moon faded, drooping overhead in the dull bluish gray.

Grace sat on the middle swing of her metal girlhood swing set. She clutched the swing’s rusted chains, and orangy brown came off onto her hands. Grace used the tip of her dusty right toe to push at the ground, to get herself moving.

A cool breeze swept past Grace, a gentle, cool brush of air. She let go of the chain and held out one hand. A whistle of wind whispered across it. She felt as if she were under the maple tree at the lake, its leaves wafting overhead, a coolness coating her skin like a dip into Silver Lake.

“Amazing Grace?”

Another wisp of air, this one smelling of sunshine, lifting her hair, dusting her breasts like a mist of fresh dew.

Grace raised her face. Purple and pink stained the horizon, no more gray smearing the sky.

“Amazing Grace?” came the voice again.

Grace turned. Jesus sat in the swing to the right of her, legs thrusting, blue robes undulating in the wind.

“Help me,” she whispered. The wispy wind came ever faster, gentle and cooling, lifting her tight ponytail up off her sweaty back. Looking down, it seemed to her that her
silk bra and panties were coming apart, threads trailing down her leg, across her breasts, shivering out into the air. This is a dream, I am coming apart in a dream, but it didn’t feel like a dream. The Sanfilipos’ house was right next-door, the Wal-Mart chairs sat on the patio.

“You want Me to save a wretch like you?” Jesus said.

Grace caught her breath, grabbed the chains on both sides, trying to hold on, but no, there’s that familiar warmth, the warmth that pulls her in, cozy and safe, and without thinking she sticks out her tongue. No snow. A sign. And she knows she’s sliding, slipping, soaring, into one of her secret spaces, swept by the breezes whisking around her.

She’s twenty-five years old, no older, and she’s swinging on a rusted swing set in her parents’ backyard in the glow of early morning. The house looks empty, each window blank. She’s pumping her legs and as the sun starts shining, I feel its heat on my bare body, my unraveling underwear slick against my warm skin. Jesus swings beside me. He’s wearing his blue robes but no sandals. Has he left them somewhere? His feet will get dirty from the dust beneath the swings.

He holds out his hand. I shake my head no, no, no, and he stretches his hand closer to me. Like magic, I let go of the right chain. We grasp hands in the sky like two old friends. A faint musical undertone sounds, a light humming, and for a second, I fear that even with Jesus beside me, I am hearing voices. But it’s Jesus, singing. I shift in my seat to bring my swing closer to his. Oh, I wish I could sit in his lap, that’s what I really want. Just to sit in his lap and lay my head on his shoulder. To fall into him, become one with him, to surrender.
What is he singing?

Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound, That saved a wretch like me! I join in, and Jesus turns to me and smiles. The fresh morning sun grows dim next to his smoldering radiance.

“You have a beautiful voice,” I say.

“I’ve had a long time to practice.” Jesus taps the top of my hand three times.

I am so startled I pull back. How can he know Theo’s and my code for I love you? Jesus takes my hand once again. “You think I don’t know how much you and Theo love each other?” he says. Of course he would know about me and Theo. Of course. Does he know I considered abortion? He smiles at me, taps the top of my hand three more times. I tap his hand three times and then squeeze it gently.

We sail high into the sky, a rapidly bluing sky, yet a sky dimmed by the glory of Jesus. A hush settles between us. The swings swish. I pump slowly, rhythmically, my thighs touching each other, damp, hot. Our swings almost collide, and his robe flutters against my bare leg. I suddenly realize that I’m naked, my bra and panties gone. A flush like my mother’s skims up my chest, my throat, my face.

“Don’t be embarrassed. You’ve nothing to hide,” Jesus says, “You’re made in my father’s image,” and something in His voice, maybe kindness or acceptance, nothing like my mother’s glances that make me feel fat, puffy with flesh, I only know that more than ever I want to get closer to Him. I slow the swing and reach out my leg, slowing his swing, too, and stroke His wrinkled cotton robe with my toe. “You need a blue brocade robe,” I say suddenly. “With Lycra. You wouldn’t have that problem with wrinkles.
That’s the material I created. I made a dress, I won an award, You were there. You remember, don’t You?”

“Grace’s Own.” Jesus pumps gently, His legs thrusting into the air. My bottom is moist with sweat, and I slide on the seat.

“Oh, help me,” I say for the second time. My hands clutch the chains now, my fingers orange and damp.

“Help you what?” Jesus puts his hand to my hair, rubs his finger up and down my tight ponytail. “Where are the curls?”

“Where are the curls? What does it matter?” I cry. “Who am I?”

“What is it you want?”

I’m oddly excited. Jesus’ words have hit a tender spot. I’m tingling between my legs. The air tickles my nipples and I thrust out my chest into the sky and I want to yell, fuck me, fuck me, FFC uc uc uc KKK me, but I don’t, that’s not what I really mean, I don’t know what I mean, I only know I want, I want, I want, and I push my legs harder to sweep higher and higher into the sky.

Jesus sways, in and out, in and out of my vision, we’re no longer in tandem, He’s in and out. He reaches to slow my swing. Soon we are side by side, our rhythm leisurely, but steady, and He says, “Put out your tongue,” and I do, and He sets a communion wafer on it, dead center. I’m not a chewer like my mother. I close my mouth, let the wafer sit on my tongue until it melts into me, becomes me. Jesus and I continue to move together, rhythmic, musical, and maybe I hear Amazing Grace, maybe not. No, it’s not. It’s “In the Garden.” I can hear it. . . “And the joy we share as we tarry there, None
other has ever known. . .” I’m growing warmer and warmer in that way that comes from deep within, not from the hot sunshine at all.

The wafer is a ring of fire inside me, and then it’s gone. I’m floating higher, higher, my body arching, shuddering toward heaven. Is this ecstasy? This is the glory of creation, it is. “I want You to last forever inside me,” I whisper.

“That’s up to you,” Jesus says.

Grace tilts her head.

Jesus puts his hand to her tight hair, leans very close, and says into her ear, “Listen to your heart.”

“I’ve tried so hard.” She stares at the house’s blank windows. “You don’t know,” but when she turns to face him, he’s leaping from the swing, high, high, high into the wild blue yonder. His robe sweeps out behind Him, blue as the wild blue yonder, but not glorious like her blue brocade. He’s translucent, now, slipping away into the dawn.

Grace’s hands hurt. She used her toes to stop the swing. A little cloud of dust swelled around her feet. She unclenched one from the chain holding up the swing and stretched it out. Rust coated it. She put a hand to her body. She was naked. She hadn’t imagined that. Her underwear lay in a heap two feet in front of the swing. Oh, God, was she having an episode? No, His presence was a sign, that’s all. A sign that she had to work harder at her marriage, harder at pleasing her mother, harder at taking care of Theo. Harder, harder, harder.

Grace laughed. “I’m going to work harder,” she said aloud. She took hold of the swing with both hands, used her foot to start its motion. I will JJJ um um um PPP this
time, I will. She laughed and laughed. The chains squeaked and the CR CR CR un un
CH CH CH becomes a CR CR ACK ACK and she’s slipping, sliding into the black
cold. Grace put down her foot and stopped the swing. Dust rose from the dirt and
hovered like grainery sift over Grace. The air had closed in on her again. No breeze, no
gentle wind, just another blaze of sunshine gearing up for another searing hot day.

She stepped off the swing into the dust, put on her frayed underwear, walked into
the kitchen, and went straight to the counter to get the plate of leftover glazed doughnuts,
but they were gone. She opened the freezer and took out the Dunkin’ Donuts box and sat
down at the table with them. She peeled off the plastic wrap. Swept her finger lightly
around a doughnut’s rim. She lifted it to her lips and licked at the frozen glaze, her
tongue darting in and out. She thrust her finger through the doughnut hole, skimming its
edges, not caring that she was swaying on the chair, legs spread wide. She took another
doughnut from the plate, licked it, put her hand inside her underpants, touching, swaying,
velvet, satin, oh God, thinking of Jonathan, looking straight at her, licking his fingers,
slowly, one at a time. I slid my fingers outside my panties, touched their silky wetness to
the glaze, to my mouth, the sugar melting, an ooze of sweet stickiness. Oh, oh, oh.

Grace panted, then caught her breath. Was this what Jesus meant?
Whatever’s wrong with Grace is worse.

Last day of November. Thanksgiving come and gone. Continuous Indian summer after a hot, dry August and September. Humid. Still no relief from the heat. Days went by, and it still didn’t rain—all of us grew more edgy. My head ached. Pumpkins shriveled. Thick heat during the day. Bitter cold, thick fog at night. Nothing like normal Catskill autumn weather. When those who don’t live in the Catskills think of Upstate New York weather, they think of the cold, snow-stung winters. They forget about how hot the summers can get, humidity trapped within the mountains. Frigid winters making the air ache for heat. Once hot air grasp, mountains refuse to let go.

But this was no ordinary hot fall. Ominous. Leaves shockingly bright. Orange. Red. Yellow. Or completely absent. Gray jagged branches next to brilliance. Gives me the creeps. Weeks since Theo’s Sunday school graduation. Started first grade three months ago. The days shortened to the point Grace tells me the skies are graying as Theo steps off the school bus. She puts his monitor inside his book bag. He takes it out. She puts it back. People are talking about her.

She’s hearing voices again.
Here’s what happened two nights ago. Friday:

I got home late. Missed Theo’s school drama performance in *Spidey, The Play*, written by one of the teachers. Grace made all the costumes and most of the stage sets. I missed the neighborhood’s Halloween celebration. Sky murky gray. House dark, silent. Windows wide open. Cold air spread through the kitchen. Grace didn’t sit out on the front stoop to greet me.

I slipped upstairs. Theo. Sound asleep in his Batman pajamas with his Humpty pillow. Jesus fucking Christ. She’ll make a sissy out of him yet. I tossed Humpty to the floor. Superfigures lined up in their positions across his dresser top. Superman, Batman, and Robin capes folded into perfect squares. On top lay a pair of Spiderman gloves I’d never seen before, black embroidered geometrically on the red. Grace must have created them for the play. Behind my back. I didn’t want my kid dressing up for drama or real life. Except to play sports. Scatter rugs aligned with his bedposts. Comic books in neat piles at right angles on his bedside table. Baseball cards cattycornered. Electric Broom beside the bed. Batmobile. Kissed him. Held him close to my heart. Felt him take a deep breath in, Smelled of Grace. Vanilla bean. Theo exhaled at last. I shivered. Freezing in here. Kind of cool that crawls inside your bones and makes them ache. I was glad Grace’s Grandma Essie wasn’t around to scare us with horrors that come from this kind of weather. Old man Jones from out at the trailer park where Teresa used to live says he’s only seen weather like this once—the gray rainy autumn Leon’s brother Charlie got shot.

I shut Theo’s window.

No Grace in our bedroom.

I hurried to the basement. Down the stairs into the dark. Studio door open. Light
beaming into the black. I looked toward my storage closet. Door invisible in the gloom. Made myself walk toward Grace’s studio, away from my own basement corner. My locked hope chest. Grace’s behavior making me need that chest more than ever.

Frances and Leon’s empty ranch house, too. That’s right. I act as caretaker while they’re at the lake each year. Yep, helpful ol’ Jonathan. No wonder Frances loves me. I check the mail, make sure Jimmy Summers actually mows the lawn. Not that the dried-up grass needs mowing. Frances and Leon plan to stay at the cottage as long as the warm weather continues. At night Leon says he builds a fire in the living room fireplace, and they roll out the sofa bed. They’ve never stayed at the lake this long before. Bothers Grace. Thinks it’s too secluded this time of year. Once Frances and Leon move back to the ranch house, I can spend hours alone in the cottage if I want. My favorite spot. The cottage. Glorious isolation. Take my gear out there. Gear from the Hudsondale and ranch houses. I can stroll up and down the outside porch and gaze at the frosty lake, frothy layers of fabric swishing. Swing on the swing. Ghostly shadows rising up from the water and down from the sky. The H-Man doesn’t scare me.

I moved swiftly to Grace’s studio. Stepped into the room. Muggy.

She lay on the floor on her stomach, feet in the air, sketching on a large drawing pad. Ever since Minette left for New York, Grace has been sketching. Refusing to share her drawings with me.

She wore one of the oversized skirts from her thrift basket. I had gone through the stuff a few days earlier. Recognized it. An amazingly voluminous organza-and-lace skirt, lavender, spread out in a swirl across the floor. Tight white button-down blouse with a faux-fur trimmed collar. Amethyst antique brooch. Wide belt. Dangerously high high-
heels. Open-toed. Hair still slicked into a tight bun. Humidity making her curls break free. She stared at me in surprise. Must have seen the fear in my eyes because she said, “I’m fine, okay?” I glanced at her sketch, but she ripped it from the pad. Tore it in half.

“You sure?”

She started humming as if I weren’t in the room.

“I didn’t think you liked lavender,” I said. “You’ve always said that was your mother’s thing.”

She shrugged, hummed. Some hymn, I’d lay money.

“Did you know Theo sometimes holds his breath when he’s sleeping?”

Grace nodded. “If you knew your son, you’d know what that was all about. Did you hug him?”

I nodded. Noticed the wineglass beside her on the floor.

“No.” I pointed at the glass. “We’re not going the Jesus route.” She snatched it up, held it against her chest. Some sloshed over the side onto her hand, onto the balloon of organza and lace.

I picked up the pieces of her torn paper. Said, “I’m sick of worrying about you.”

Grace hummed.

On my way upstairs, I recognized the song from hearing it in church my entire childhood: There is a green hill far away without a city wall. No. Not Jesus. Not again. Fuck. Where our dear Lord was crucified. He died to save us all.

neckline, shoulders bare, slim-fitting, tight. Mid-riff cut out with darts. Some kind of smocking bunched at the sides. Slit up one side. Hint of belly button showing.

Intoxicating. Notes reading “liquid fashion, fluid clothes steeped in sensuality and a sumptuous practicality. Brocade and Lycra. Blue,” she’d written. “Wild Blue Yonder Blue?” Followed by “Divine Inspiration?” Blue brocade stitched to sky-blue Lycra with bold royal-blue thread. I loved this dress. Snug. Form flattering. Amazing. Grace was good. Really good. She’d written “break the ‘grande logique’,” and I knew just what she meant. Shatter the familiar, create something new, something with her signature. Oh, yes, I understood, and I understood how good she was. I’d spent hours in New York shops studying fashion—I recognized good when I saw it. And here she was creating her own fabric. She wrote, “Everything is shape and proportion.” Another notation read, “Pair with bell-shaped coat?” A second drawing on the same paper showed a blue-brocade skirt with a bustle effect. Next to it she’d written: “Delicious roux of opposing details—collage-wear? Montage? All designs must have little spills of glamour and sunshine.” Oh, I loved those descriptions. And these drawings were way better than the collection that got her into college. I remembered that day she showed me her acceptance letter to design school in Providence. Heard her say in that crazy high voice, “Maybe the city is a sign?” And what had I done? Taken her to the Dwayo caves and made love with her for the first time. No protection. Jesus.

I shoved the design into the trash. Grace is no designer. She’s my wife. Theo’s mother. Frances and Leon’s daughter. Nobody forced her to go to the caves that long-ago day. That vast well of empty headache almost killing me. Pressed my hands hard against my head.
I hurried to the basement again. Stopped in her studio doorway. My breath short and fast. “Come to the kitchen with me.” Added, “Haven’t seen you all day.” I took the wine bottle from the table. A brochure from Parson’s School of Design lay beside it. An application. I turned away fast.

Grace glanced at me. Used her arm to hide her sketch. Wineglass empty.

Said, “Let’s put on our superhero sweatshirts, sit by the pool. Sip lemonade or tea. I’ll wear my cape. Come on.”

She shook her head, no.

“That hymn scares me,” I said. “The wine, too.”

Silence, hot and sticky down in that basement. I touched my face. Slick. All our sins and griefs to bear. Hands, damp. At last, she said, “No, I’m not okay.” She looked up at me from her place on the floor. “That’s what you want to hear, isn’t it?”

“What do you mean?” I moved into the room. Stood over her.

She sat. Skirt whirled around her. Folds of lacy organza. I leaned down. Had to get closer. Had to caress the frills. Let my fingers glide across the organza. Sensuous silk. That floaty, layered skirt made her look like a love goddess to me. Aphrodite. Remembered that from Mrs. Clagett’s class.

“If I’m crazy,” she said, “then you can justify anything to yourself. I know you. You always have to rationalize.” Sudden laughter. She raised the empty wineglass to her lips. Said, “The blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

I got on my knees in front of her face. Heart hammering. Wanted to hold her close. Wrap the skirt around us.

She laughed again. Loud.
Parson’s School of Design appeared in my brain in blood-red letters. “Shut up about Jesus,” I said. “I’m not the one who fucking crucified my precious baby doll. Nailed her to the cross. Burned her up.”

“I hated that doll.”

“That’s not what your mother says.”

“Are you listening to me?”

“You’d had her since you were five years old. Changed her diapers. Fed her that pink plastic bottle. As if she were a real baby. Your mother told me that. Told the doctor. Told him how you designed and sewed all her baby clothes. Satin christening gown. Fleece nightie. Silk-feather barrette for her hair.” I took her by the shoulders. Shook her.

“You loved Hollerina. Jesus did not tell you to nail that doll to the cross and burn her.”

And there it was. That tilt of her head. I hated that tilt. Meant she saw possibilities I didn’t. I shook her again.

“You don’t know that,” she said. “None of you do. Only I do. But no one listened to me.”

“Jesus Christ, come to your senses.”

“What does that mean? Believe whatever my mother says about me is truer than what I know in my heart?”

I held tight to her hands. Said the only thing I could think of: “I am so sick of this shit about Carol.”

“Why don’t you start being home then? Or better yet, push me into the island? Throw a frozen fish?”

I said, “You look just like your mother when you flush like that.”
She pulled away her hands and put them over her ears. I didn’t wait to see the hurt on her face. Ran upstairs. Rooted through the freezer. What had happened to that box of doughnuts I brought home last week? At the time I bought them, I refused to admit to myself exactly why it was I had, but I knew. Grace was making me crazy. I needed to chop doughnuts. I wanted to holler down the steps that I was running out to Dunkin’ Donuts, but I didn’t dare. Didn’t know what she might do or say.


I straightened the stuff so the bills and magazines lay at exact right angles to the edge. Then I saw the Spiderman watch I ordered with Kellogg’s coupons. A thick red-and-black-plastic watch, same black crisscrossing as on Theo’s gloves, Spiderman across its face. Black snaps to close it. Masculine. The box had been opened. Watch left on the table. Hadn’t Grace shown it to him? Theo would love it. What was wrong with her?

The sliding glass doors hung open. Chill coming in through the screen. Sat back in the chair. What was happening to us?

Minette. That’s what.

Grace’s and her fight.

Minette’s move to New York.
I stood. Walked over to the wall phone. Hit speed dial for Frances. Hung up before it had a chance to ring on her end. Stood with my arms dangling at my sides. Picked up the phone. Hit speed dial. Slammed the receiver back on the wall.

Minette.

Ideas she planted in Grace’s head before she left.

I moved rapidly through the house, yanking down the windows. Slammed shut the sliding glass doors. Went upstairs to bed.

Saturday worse. Much worse.

When I awoke that morning Grace lay beside me wearing that big lavender skirt. I could smell thrift shop on it. Dust and must. Her body turned away from mine. Her blouse had a pleated back, metallic detailing I hadn’t noticed the night before.


Grace hadn’t gotten out of bed. Hadn’t made my breakfast. Let Theo get in bed with her. Cape pinned to his shoulders. Why did she let him do that? What was wrong with her? Super figures crawling around her and the covers. Superman perched on her breast. Wonder Woman on her shoulder. Electric Broom stretched across the bed. Grace was stitching something red onto a sliver of shiny sliver material. She could sulk, but I had to go to work. She had no idea what a bad summer and fall we were having at the stores. No idea how much was at risk. How Gordie Couper had put off letting Ausherland Construction begin building the warehouse. How I much I needed to find the missing box with the false data.

“See you guys later,” I said.

Theo jumped out of bed. Grabbed his vacuum cleaner. Snapped it on. Raced it up and down the room in straight lines. Cape flapped hard behind him. Turned once and looked at me, then at his mother. Back to vacuuming.

Grace? Nothing.


Grace shrugged.

“Theo,” I hollered. Went over to where he was shoving the cleaner between the dresser and the wall. Tugged on his cape. “Take it off,” I shouted.

“Leave him alone!” from Grace.
“Did you see the Spiderman watch I got you?”

Theo yelled, “Too big. Mom’s going to fix it.” Louder, “Soccer practice this afternoon.” His eyes on the straight carpet lines. “Two o’clock. The field behind the school.”

The shop closes at noon on Saturdays. Busy morning. Retail doesn’t stop because it’s the weekend. Oh, no. More intense, and my guys all know that I work the same hours they do—and more. Sent Jimmy Summers home with a stomachache. “It’s the weather,” he said. I think it was the overpowering rubbery smell the warehouse had from the heat. I had to do his job and my own. The hot days and freezing nights, the overcast sky with the ball of orange behind it affected us all.

When I talked to customers in the store, though, I was cheerful as ever. Too cheerful. Shouting over the fans in the warehouse section, whinnying with laughter. Crazy as Grace’s wild laughter. Out of control. Leon said he couldn’t bear to think what Mama Essie might have said was in our future, but it’d be bad. *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. Over four months of this now. And no storm. Rain in the air, but no storm. No normal Catskill fall. Everybody knew it. It’s all anyone talked about. That and Grace. She’d refused to run the church Christmas pageant or to sew the costumes. She’d refused to serve as PTSA president. She quit being Theo’s classroom mom two weeks ago. She spent all her time in her studio.

One fifteen. Sat alone at my desk. Everybody had gone home except Carol and Frank. I saw them through my office’s glass windows, stacking tires, sweeping the floor. Chatting, glancing my way, me pretending I didn’t see. I straightened each object on my
already neat desk. Aligned the incoming and outgoing baskets with the edges of the desk.

I got up, grabbed the Pledge from the corner cupboard and a coated dust cloth. Sprayed and wiped the desk, the bookcase, my chair. Anything to keep from thinking about how I longed to open my bottom desk drawer. For the last months I had resisted the urge to go to Frances and Leon’s empty ranch house except the night of Theo’s party. But here’s the thing. If I opened my bottom desk drawer, the odds were, I’d head out to the ranch house. Let me remind you, what I do doesn’t hurt anyone. And I’m not the only one who does this. So what’s the big deal? I’m not hurting anyone. It doesn’t make me gay. It just makes me different. So big deal. Who was to say Frank or Jimmy Summers or Mike Kost didn’t do the exact same thing?

I shoved the Pledge back into the cupboard. Unlocked my bottom drawer, reached for the lipstick. A Rush of Raspberries. Rolled the tube in my fingers. Closed the drawer. No.

I yanked open my office door. Saw Frank and Carol shake hands. Had they ever done that before? Then Carol did her dance shuffle.

“Frank,” I called. “Let’s go look at the construction site.”

Frank and I left the Mitford store and headed to where Ausherland Construction had broken ground for the warehouse. It’s on an acre of property on the outskirts of town. Dirt road leading to it. Nothing much taking place on this strip of road yet. More like a field with the outline of the mountains off to the north and the faint delineation of a townhouse development edging up in front of the trees. Lots of empty acreage. Give it
time. That’s what I told the banks. Bank of New York didn’t know squat, but Gordie Couper knows I’m right. He’s from Mitford. I guarantee I’ll make a fortune when I go to sell the property. That’s why the loan. Worth the financial risk now. A couple of rough months, years. So what? That’s the nature of retail. As Frances would say, What you don’t know can’t hurt you. Still, Gordie had stopped Ausherland from moving forward until I showed him additional financial statements planned to prepare. From the false figures. In the missing box.

The sun had become an orange smear behind the dull sky, rays rusty, fanned out, hot, tough, ugly. Across from it the moon hung clear as could be. Made a frightening haze like smoke on the mountain tops. Trees gray-powdered wigs. Frank kept his distance as I walked the edges of the giant hole in the ground that would one day be my building. If the bank let us move forward. If the fall tire season went better than last year’s. I needed that box. I squinted, waved Frank over.

“It’s coming along, isn’t it?” I playfully punched him in the shoulder. I’d made sure Frank knew nothing of my financial troubles. Left him to draw whatever conclusions he wanted about the delay in construction.

He shrugged.

The two of us stood in the deadly heat, arms crossed over our chests. Gazed at the stacks of baked dirt piled high around the hole. It had been dry so long the ground inside the pit had begun to crack. Like a crater. “By the end of next week, they could have it framed,” I said. Depending on the bank.

“Yep,” Frank said.

“You want to sit for a minute or two?” I pointed to a couple of two-by-fours stretched across part of the opening the construction crew had dug.
“I got to talk to you,” Frank said.

We settled ourselves on the board, legs swinging over the hole. Two o’clock. Air hung still, quiet as death. Not even the long field grass rustled. Starlings careened in the scorched sky. Thunder muttered in the distance. Clarke’s Tire Store shirt stuck to my back. Shucked it off. Frank did the same. We tossed them onto a dirt mound. “Like old times,” I said.

“Not quite,” Frank said.

I picked up stones from the nearby dirt pile and flicked them into the hole as if I were skipping pebbles across Silver Lake. “What do you mean?”

Frank collected a stack of stones.

“It was simple back then,” I said.

Frank didn’t look at me. He rolled a stone between his index finger and his thumb. “Was it?” His face shone with sweat.

I jerked back my arm hard. Sent a pebble flying clear across the hole. Felt Frank’s eyes on me. Said, “Everything okay?”

“Not really.”

I kept waiting for the joke. None came. Said, “Teresa?”

Nothing from Frank.

“Everything okay with the pregnancy? The kids?” Glanced at him, but he wasn’t looking at me. Frank added larger stones to his mound. A distant truck droned past on the thruway.

It had to be the raise. “I told you to give me two months. It may be more, that’s
all.” Grabbed my shirt and wiped away the sweat trickling down my face, my chest.
Tossed it back onto the dirt pile. When he didn’t say anything, I said, “I’m having trouble
with Grace.”

Frank hurled another stone out across the empty pit. Kept his eyes on the dirt.
Mouth shut.

“So where’s the joke?” I said. “You’ve always got a joke.”

“Maybe Pastor Ginny could help?”

“Minette’s going to college upset her. Haven’t spoken since Theo’s graduation
party. I think it’s good she’s gone, but it’s hard on Grace.”

“Teresa says Grace hasn’t been coming to church.”

I had no idea. I’d been working Sundays. “Theo at Sunday school?” I flipped
another stone across the pit.

Frank shook his head, no. Glint of lightning. Glimmer of sunshine.

Why didn’t I know this? What was wrong with Grace?

Frank said, “People are talking.”

“What do you mean?”

Frank shrugged. “I don’t know. Women like to think the worst, I guess. Teresa
says Grace’s clothes make the men at the kids’ practices go after her. She thinks it’s
deliberate. She says there’s talk that Grace has a boyfriend.”

I slammed a rock into the hole. It cracked another rock in half. “Grace would
never have a boyfriend.” Jesus. That was her style, those clothes. “This is bullshit.” I did
not need this right now. I blocked out all those nights I’d left her home alone. Empty ache
swelling inside my head. She might be Leon’s daughter, but she was Frances’ baby girl
“I know that, and you know that,” Frank said. “What does Frances say about Grace?” he added.

I pressed my hands to my head. “She told Grace she better shape up or I’d ship her out.” Waited for Frank to laugh. He didn’t. “Frances would tell me if anything was going on with Grace. She’d put an end to it, too.” I dropped my hands. Said, “Grace loves me.”

Frank heaved two more big stones into the pit.

“Something’s going on between Leon and Frances, though,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t know.” And I didn’t. Didn’t seem to have to do with Leon and Mary Sanfilipo. Something else. Something private between them. Grace noticed it, too. I said, “Frances told me she and Leon have a tough row to hoe right now, but that’s all she’d say.” Our voices in the heat sounded hollow. Likes voices in a dream.

I pitched more pebbles into the pit. Had never mentioned Mary Sanfilipo to Frank or anyone else. Grace didn’t know. Frances didn’t know. I wanted to believe whatever was between Mary and Leon was over. Couldn’t look Leon in the eye. Him wanting that thousand dollars. Given him five hundred so far. Money from rotating and balancing tires on a cash basis. No receipt for the files. No one knew I did that. No one. Why I worked Saturdays and Sundays when my employees weren’t around. Been paying for groceries that way. Clothes. Serious cash flow problems.

Frank picked up rocks, flung them into the dirt hole. The last rock cracked hard against a boulder jutting up from the dirt. Another crackle of lightning.
“It’s not the raise,” Frank said.

“Teresa?”

“She’s lost two hundred and thirty-five dollars at Bingo.”

We sat in silence. Side-by-side on our board over the construction hole. Sun turning to a white ball of fire. Sky turning a dull and colorless shade of gray. Clouds piling up like an old tire heap, beginning to block out that white fire.

“One of the boxes I took home the day of Theo’s party,” Frank said.

I didn’t move. Didn’t breathe.

“Wasn’t old invoices.”

Frank pushed all his stones into the pit. Used his arm to wipe the sweat from his face. “Look at me,” he said, and I did. “Those figures are forged. You fucker.”


“I looked up to you. Like an older brother.” He pulled a crumpled pack of Marlboro Reds from his back pocket. Jerked one out and lit it. Inhaled.

My headache swelled. “Don’t you see? It’ll help all of us. I’m going to make it right. You know that. I couldn’t get enough money from the Bank of New York to expand. Had to do it this way.” Pressed my hands to my head. Frank didn’t know the pressure I was under. “You’ve got to see that.”

“Does Grace know?” Exhale.

“Oh, Jesus, no.”

“Frances or Leon?” Deep inhale.

“No one does. I’ll make it right. Gordie needn’t ever be the wiser. Once I’ve got the warehouse, I’ll make the money. Everything will be fine. You’ll see. Nobody gets hurt.” Hands so hard to my head, I thought I might crush it.
“Quit rocking,” Frank said. “You’ll knock us off the board.” He shook his head.

“I can’t work for you.” Another drag on the cigarette.

I coughed. “You’ve got a baby coming. You need me.”

“Darrell Spence offered me a job. Better pay. Fewer hours.” Frank pushed his hands through the dirt. Gathered more stones. Threw them one after the other into the pit.

The board we sat on shook.

A plane whirred by overhead, invisible in the gathering clouds.

“Give me another month.” Took a deep breath. “We’re best friends, Frank. Since childhood. I’ll make it work. You’ll get your raise.”

“It’s not about the raise. Quit rocking. You want to break the board?”

Sparrows gathered below us in the dusty hole.

“I’m not hurting anyone. I did it for you, for Carol, for Grace, Teresa and the kids, the Summers boys, for all of us. I’ll make it up.”

Frank stood. Flipped his cigarette butt into the pit. Lit another. Walked off the board to the edge of the big empty hole. Faced me. “I took Darrell’s job. I’m starting Monday. General manager.”

“Darrell doesn’t know squat about tires.”

Frank shrugged. “I do.”

“Does Carol know about the books?”

Frank dragged on his cigarette. Said, “I haven’t told anybody. Not even Teresa. I told her and Carol that I was changing jobs, that’s it.” He kicked a stone hard. “So now I’ve got secrets from my wife. I might as well be cheating on her.”
A streak of lightning. Muffled clap of thunder.

Frank headed down the road toward the store. Left his Clarke Tire Shirt on the dirt mound.

I sat on the board. Smoke in my lungs. My mouth. Vomited into the pit. No way Grace had a boyfriend. Sure, we might be going through a dry spell, but it’d pass. Hadn’t been that long since the miscarriage. Once Leon and Frances moved back to Mitford, things would get better. The cottage would be mine, all mine.

I grabbed my shirt and put it on. Seized Frank’s. Jumped into the Jeep. Used my cell phone to let Grace know I was running late, but all I got was the answering machine: “We’re not here, leave a message.” Myself listening to myself. Until that moment, I’m not sure I realized how much I needed to hear Grace’s voice, that sing-songy hello of hers. I would have been happy to listen to her yell at me or tell me she was having wine with Jesus or how I’d let down Theo once again. Anything. Just Grace.

I headed toward the store, dust floating up and around me like an omen. Passed Frank on the road. Stopped. Rolled down the window. Said, “Look, it’s hot. Get in the Jeep. I’ll give you a lift to the store so you can get your truck.” Frank waved me on. “Are you going to tell Gordie?” No response. Jesus. He was my best friend. “Grace?”

“Get in,” I said, and pulled over beside him.

Frank flung down his cigarette. Stomped on it. Climbed in. Opened the glove box. Pulled out the lipstick tube. Rolled it in his fingers. “Another secret?” he said, voice low and ugly. I felt as if he’d punched me in the gut. He couldn’t know. No way.

I parked the Jeep in the store parking lot. He got out. Threw the lipstick to the far side of the lot. Bent down. Looked inside at me through the open window. “Get this
straightened out with the bank. I’ll give you until January. That’s generous and you
know it. I won’t say anything to Grace or anyone else.”

“What about the box?” I said.

He walked over to his truck. Opened the door on the far side. Pulled out the box.
Shoved it inside the Jeep through the open window. “January,” he said.

“Your shirt.” I held it out. “Take your Clarke shirt.”

“Keep it.” He got into his truck. “I’ll be at Darrell’s.” Lit another cigarette. Drove
off in a swell of dust.

I shut down the Jeep’s engine and went into the cool shop. Washed up in the
bathroom. Grabbed a clean shirt. Tossed the dirty one into the laundry hamper. Threw
Frank’s into the trash.

Three p.m. I was heading toward Frances and Leon’s ranch house. To bring in
the mail. To water the flower pots out on the front porch. To change the lighting so the
place looked lived in. To make sure Jimmy Summers was mowing the grass. Tried Grace
again. Answering machine. Foul taste of Frank’s betrayal in my mouth. Not that different
than the gut clenching I felt when my dad left, when I saw that look on his face, then the
one on my mother’s. Meat gone bad. Road kill. Sweaty feel to my skin despite the chill of
the Jeep’s air conditioning.

Someone had taken in the mail. Grace? What was she doing in Mitford? Theo’s
soccer practice? A meeting at St. Paul’s? Had she gone to Tres Minette for a manicure?
None of these reasons made sense. Soccer practice was in Hudsondale. And she’d never
gotten a manicure that I knew of.
The mail sat in a heap on the kitchen table. *Sporting News, Money, Good Housekeeping, Family Circle Easy Knitting, Reader’s Digest, Church Newsletter,* personal mail, bills. I stacked it into one precise pile, edges aligned. I’d take it with me when I left. Grace could run it out to the cottage on Monday or Tuesday. Or maybe we’d all drive to Silver Lake tomorrow.

My heart beat clear in my ears. Like the steady beat of Jimmy Summers’s trumpet when he played *Onward Christian Soldiers.* Frances kept every window shut and locked. The ranch house hot in a clammy kind of way. No air stirred. Don’t do it, Jonathan. Don’t go down that hallway. Be a good son-in-law. Rotate the lights. Check the lawn. Look for signs of bugs or mice. Go home to Grace.

I walked into the living room. Stuffy. Snapped off the lamp beside the easy chair. Turned on the overhead light. Braided rug in the center of the room askew, as if someone had hurried through the room. Theo and Brad? I straightened it. Fluffed the couch’s pillows. Dusted with a damp sponge from the kitchen. Grabbed the Hoover from the closet. Ran it around the living room and kitchen. Sweat trickled down my face. Wiped it off with a paper towel.

Time to go. Pack up the mail and head to Hudsondale. My heartbeat became the thud of a flat tire moving fast down the highway. Painful. My shirt sticky. I decided to take a quick stroll through the house. Change more lights. Shut or open blinds.

A knock on the front door.

My heart thumped, a dead flat at the side of the road. Hurried to answer it. Looked through the peephole. Barry Sanfilipo, Mary’s father from the house next door, stood on the stoop. Must have seen my Jeep. Jesus. What did he know about Mary and
Leon? About me and the ranch house? Jesus. He worked at the bank. I swung open the door, hands slippery on the doorknob and stepped outside on the porch. The air was lifeless, heavy as dust.

“Hey,” I said, my voice loud and hearty. “What’s up?”

“Wondering how Frances and Leon are doing. Margaret baked a blueberry pie for Frances. Knows it’s her favorite.” Barry held out a circular pan, neatly covered in aluminum foil. He must not know anything.

“Wow,” I said. “How about one for me?”

“Right,” Barry said. “You’ve got Grace. You don’t need Margaret’s help.” He laughed. “Frances doesn’t, either. But we miss her and Leon in the summer. This fall, too. They’ve been at the cottage forever. Never stayed this long before. It’s this muggy heat. Haven’t seen either one of them in months. Not since Theo’s graduation party.” He gave a laugh. “Not the same without ol’ Leon and his whiskey tumbler and knitting setting out here on the porch. No Frances drinking her wine and hollering at him. It’s damn near Christmas. They need to come home.”

“They’re something, those two,” I said.

“Theo’s party was some party, hey?”

“You got that right.” Guess he didn’t notice that I wasn’t there.

“They’re okay, aren’t they? Not like one or the other of them not to stop by the house.” He paused. “Thought I saw somebody in there the other day, but no cars, so I figured I made a mistake.”

“Place looks good. No sign of intruders. Leon and Frances are fine.” Realized I hadn’t seen them in over a week. We’d definitely go to the lake tomorrow. Pictured the
cottage high on its green hill far away, the water slivery blue. Yes. To the lake.

“How’s Mary?” I said.

“Oh, she’s all right, I guess. Kind a jumpy lately. Says she’s moving out. Wants a Ford Escape and says that’s it, she’s escaping.”

“Guess that happens.”

“She’s our only child. Our little girl. Don’t think her mother’ll take kindly to it.”

“Sounds like Frances. She wants Grace close.”

We both stood, arms crossed over our chests, looking out toward the mountains. Hot as it was, a vague, unpleasant chill hovered close by.

“Weather’s something,” Barry said. “If it keeps on like this, it’ll burn up the grass. Already burned up the corn. We’re going to have brush fires all over this county. When the storm finally hits, it’s going to be a doozy, that’s what I say. Nothing like this since my granddaddy’s day, or so my mother tells me when she’s in her right mind.”

“You say right.” I didn’t want to hear another word about his mother. The whole community knew she was in the old people’s unit at the Psych Institute. I didn’t want to mention Leon’s Mama Essie, either. Her dark, scary visions. Something Wicked This Way Comes.

The sun had started its slow-mo slide toward a clutch of trees edging the gray sky.

“Sooner or later it’s bound to rain,” Barry said. “Guess I better get the grill going for the Mrs.” Barry gave me a salute and walked across the yards to his place. Made me nervous to think someone could show up like that. Spur of the moment. I peered around the neighborhood. Waldron’s house on the other side of Frances and Leon’s place appeared shuttered and closed.
Inside, I called Grace again. No answer. My own voice clicked on. Grace had no right to worry me like this. I put my hand to my head trying to ease the weight of its emptiness. The pressure was a pounding force all its own.

I sat down on a kitchen chair. Jumped up, ripped open the freezer door, looking for the doughnuts I had bought several weeks earlier. None. Nothing in the freezer except for a pound of ground round and some boneless chicken breasts, something labeled bkbns in a Tupperware container. Where were the doughnuts?

I headed down the hallway toward Grace’s childhood bedroom. Past Baby Nathan’s locked room. Reached Grace’s door. Pink throw rug halfway across the room from its usual dead center position. What was with the rugs in this house? The bed mussed up. Not much. The pillow. It was the pillowcase. Wrinkly. Picked up the pillow, shook it, put it back on the bed. Sniffed. An odd odor. Bitter almonds mixed with flowers.

I didn’t want anyone in this room except me. Opened Grace’s closet. Touched a high school dance dress, long, tight, slinky. A corset-type bustier that pushed out her breasts. Lace edging the hemline. One slit, straight up the back. Ah, Grace. Vanilla bean. I sniffed the room again. Grace? No. Something else. A vague salty sourness.

I moved to the double closet. Slid open the door. I knew if I put a hand to my chest I’d feel its furious pump.

Nothing had been moved.

No smudge smeared the pale red chalk marks I’d scribbled on the clothing rod to determine if hangers had been shifted. I shoved aside Baby Nathan’s clothes. Terrycloth jumpsuits. Two quilted snugglies. Snowsuit. Hint of baby powder. Found my new dress on its hanger beneath an old winter coat of Grace’s I’d brought from her closet. Sniffed. Unwashed newness. Fashion For His Lady Boutique’s herbal fragrance. Christopher Street. Greenwich Village. Queen named Toddette runs the place. She always wears the latest trends—stilettos with spandex dresses, slouch boots with mini skirts—looks great. Every dress comes with a song motif and a free CD. She knows a lot about makeup, too. What she doesn’t know, the queens in the Kiss Kiss Makeup Boutique around the corner do. Same products as women use, but drag queens selling it. Clementine’s my favorite clerk. Oh, my darling, oh, my darling, she sings whenever she sees me, and it’s like that little boy beneath the staircase in the bakery comes out to play.

skirt’s snappy swish swirling around my legs, its rustle as I move. I ran my finger
down its length. From the yellow beaded top to the bottom of its wide floor-length skirt.

If I had been Grace, I might have fallen to my knees to thank Jesus. But I stood.
Heard my father’s voice. Stand your fucking ground.

I covered my dress with Grace’s coat. Pushed it into the far reaches of the closet.
Jerked shut the bedroom door. Tucked the key it inside my pants’ pocket. Ran to the
kitchen. Grabbed a paper towel from its roll beside the sink and wiped my sweaty face.
Swung open the freezer door. Breathed in the cold air, let it brush against my skin.
Yanked my cell phone from where it lay on the counter. Punched redial. Grace. No answer. I grabbed the block of frozen chicken, a knife from the drawer, a cutting board
from the cupboard, slapped them all onto the kitchen table. I wanted to cut that chicken
into pieces, align them, place them in circles, squares, neat rectangles.

under the kitchen sink, wrapped my finger tight. Slapped band-aids over the cuts on my arm.

I cleaned up the mess. Tossed the chicken back inside the freezer. Moved down
the hallway toward Frances and Leon’s room. Relocked Baby Nathan’s door. Passed
Grace’s room. Stepped into Frances and Leon’s room again. Went right to Frances’
dresser, a waist-high bureau with an antique mirror above it. Opened the jewelry box and
laid Baby Nathan’s key in its nest of bracelets. Fingered the faded feather boa. I wanted a
black one so badly. Saw one on a guy on the street in New York. Oh, la, la!
Bottles lined the front of Frances’ mirror. Beauty aids, the family calls them. Pictures of Frances and Leon stuck into the mirror. The jewelry box. Breathed in the lavender smell. Sweet and minty. Unique in the world of aromas. The color fits the odor, sheer, elegant. Like Frances. Nothing like my mother’s floury scent. Or that faint blurry chemical odor that drifted from her open casket.

I left that room and entered Grace’s as if all choice were gone. Stopped dead in front of her dresser. Stooped. Bottom drawer. My satin panties. Lace trimmed. Bows. Bubble Pink. Jesus. Put the panties to my face. Let them slide up and down against my cheek. Breathed in. Out. Jerked off my pants and boxer shorts. Folded them into squares. Lay them on the floor. Felt the slide of satiny underpants as I slid into them, my tongue all too ready to taste the glossy lipstick I had hidden, to smell my L’air du Temps, just a hint, a slight spray, that’s all.

I pulled the chair from Grace’s sewing table to the dresser, sat down in front of the mirror. Opened her top dresser drawer. Scrabbled around. Pulled out my Zip-loc bag, the bag I’d hidden the day Frances and Leon moved to the lake for the season.


I sighed, let out air I seemed to have been holding in for years. Didn’t matter to me that my make up melted into itself, tiny rivulets of Teint Idol Ultra dribbling into
Misty Pink Plummage. I rummaged in the storage bin beneath Grace’s old sewing table. Three spools of thread beneath it. Grabbed one of my wigs from its nest amid piles of scrap cloth. Blond, long, lots of feathery bangs. Searched for the one with the long blond braid. No luck. Or the one with short blond curls. No time today for a more careful search or for taping down hair and fastening the wig to my head, so I pulled it on. Flipped the ends outward into gentle waves. Bent my head. Felt the hair brush my cheek, my neck. No time for fingernails. Or waxing. I snatched a cotton swab from Grace’s drawer and patted my melting face. Spritzed myself with my flowery L’air du Temps.

I unfolded my shirt and put it across Grace’s pink pillowcase to keep my makeup from smearing her bed linen. I collapsed onto her twin bed. Caught my breath. Breathed in and out. Ever so slow. Closed my eyes and felt relaxation creep through me. Tension ooze out. Alive. I was alive.

And I wasn’t hurting anyone. Plenty of heterosexual cross-dressers out there. No statistics. I’ve checked. Too many guys in the closet on this one. Even if statistics existed, they couldn’t begin to tell the story. Only the stories of those willing to tell them. And that wasn’t me, that’s for sure.

And I hadn’t dressed up in my beloved taffeta, now had I? I felt the smile on my face. Touched my index finger to it. I could control this.

I stretched out. Touched my wig. Blond like Grace’s hair. Ran a finger over my smooth, hot skin. Whiskers softer. Soothing. Touched my satin panties. Soft. I breathed in slowly through my nose, out through my mouth. I remembered the hamster Theo’d once had, Ralph, we’d called him, a hamster who seemed perfectly normal and then one day he ran around and around a wheel inside his cage until all his fur stood on end. He
wouldn’t quit running. Twelve hours straight. Twenty-four. Then he stopped and lay on the cage floor, looking as relaxed as if he’d just had a full body massage.

Calm now.

She sat on the edge of the bed. Three deep breaths. She stood. Walked to the mirror. Smiled. Gave a little laugh. Walked up and down the bedroom. Breathed in that faint mist of Graceness. Vanilla bean and warm skin. She bent down and looked at her face full in the mirror. Traced her reflected lips with her finger. Collapsed on the bed and laughed. Oh God. Clutched the pink bedspread. Folded herself into the sweep of nubby material. Heard the whisper of a car cruising down the street. Her own breathing.


“Well, hello, Miss Johanna,” she said.

And then she heard something. A door opening? A car? She twirled around. Faced the closed door. Heart a painful pulsing. She took a step backward. Pressed herself against the wall. Door remained closed. She eased herself onto the bed one more time. Breathed deeply. Startling realization that I was an extension of her. I was more real as Miss Johanna than the phantom that was Jonathan. No, that can’t be. No way. That’s shameful. My parents’ faces that long-ago day. Shame and pain.

I got up. Stared into the mirror.

“No dress,” I said. “I am in control. I am Jonathan.” Hadn’t worn my dress, my stockings, the black satin high heels I’d bought for my mother, my mother’s blue flower.
I reached Hudsondale sometime after five o’clock. Shoved in Dale Carnegie CD as the Psych Institute neared. Pushed harder on the gas pedal. I had to get home to Grace.

Swerved into our cul-de-sac. Margaret’s blueberry pie and the mail on the seat beside me. Sitting on top of the box Frank had given me. Neighborhood had that odd, haunted silence of dinnertime suburbia. Clouds hid the sun completely.

Garage door open. Hate that Grace leaves the garage exposed. Invites dirt, mice, leaves. Drove inside and shut off the Jeep’s engine. Her van parked parallel on her masking-taped strips. Moist heat seeped into the Jeep. I opened the door to breathe.

I climbed from the vehicle. Bloody finger, arms still hurting. Walked to the front door, pie in my hands, mail beneath my arm, box still in the Jeep. Don’t know what I was thinking. If Grace had heard me drive into the garage, she’d expect me to come in through the laundry room. Never figure I’d enter through the front entrance.

Cracked open the door. Listened. Water running in the kitchen. Slipped inside. Closed the door. Pressed my back against it. Inched further into the dining room, toward the kitchen. Told myself I wasn’t spying, but surprising her. Heard her voice.

“Can I get you a glass of wine?” Something in her low, sultry voice said this was someone familiar, a man.

Every part of me went on alert. Heard Frank’s voice, “There’s talk that Grace has a boyfriend.”

No way. Then who? Mike Kost?
Inched closer to where I could peer into the kitchen from the dining room. Sweat trickling down my chest. Air conditioning off. One of the hottest days we’d had this November and Grace had the dining room windows open. No wind. Not even the odd chilly threat I’d felt in Mitford. Blast of heat. Used the back of my arm to wipe my face. Moved behind the dining room table. Set down the pie. The mail. Pushed myself hard against the wall, not daring to glance into the kitchen.

“Oh,” I heard Grace say in that sensual voice, “honoring Your body and all that? God’s vessel. That kind of thing?” She laughed, then, a friendly kind of laugh, a little flirty, not nervous and out of control, but the kind of laugh I used to try my hardest to get her to laugh for me. And she did, too. Lots of times, I tell you. That laugh a woman gives that lets you know she thinks you’re funnier and smarter than anyone else she knows.

I remained motionless. Pulse a rapid thump in my ears. Hands slick against the wall. Heard a movement. Another soft laugh. Grace: “What is it? Tell me.” Laughter gone. What was that in her voice? Awe? Who did she look up to like this? I thought it was me.

No answer.

I poked my head into the kitchen for a fast look. A surprise streak of sunshine struck the window. Through the sliding glass door screens I saw sunlight skitter off the chlorinated pool water. Grace gazed out the open sink window. She turned around. I jerked my head back into the dining room. She said, “Oh, I am, am I?”

Another silence.

I could barely make out Grace’s soft giggle. “You are too much,” she said. Another giggle. “My mother would call you the cat’s meow.”
I risked another glance into the kitchen. Watched Grace sit at one of the island stools. No one else in the room. Part of me breathed a huge sigh of relief. No boyfriend. Another part, thought, Not again. I needed her to be okay. To stay home. Not to go to the hospital. And in my heart I hated that I was relieved that it was only Jesus. Jesus was not a good thing. Not for Grace.

She seemed to be holding something. “You’re serious?” she said, her voice fuller, more confident than I’d ever heard it. “Don’t tease me.” After a pause, she said, “So I didn’t get it earlier?” I watched as she leaned toward the other island stool. She sat at an awkward angle, as if someone sat beside her, arm around her. “Oh, our communion,” she said. “The communion wafer? Becoming one?” I heard happiness in this fuller voice of hers. She laughed again, a low, throaty laugh. “Oh, yes,” she said.

I stepped into the frame of the doorway between the kitchen and dining room. My wife stared at me. Napkin on the island shifted. A breeze must have wafted in through the open sink window. Grace opened her arms wide, as if protecting someone. Almost December and she wore a skimpy puckered blue-and-white-checked seersucker halter. Back completely bare. Swell of breast visible from the side. Matching capris. Tight with slim pockets on the hips. Big blue buttons on the waistband. Blue flip-flops. On anyone else, that outfit would have looked ridiculous. Not on Grace. She’d wound a blue bandana around her hair that made her eyes the color of a clear summer day, a blue to knock you dead.

I leaned against the doorway. Grace gazed at me, arms widespread. Her hair escaped her tight bun, strands floating down her back. The odd late November heat turning her face pink. She looked beautiful.

Grace turned from me. Dropped her arms. “You know better than that,” she said.

I looked at the empty seat beside her at the island. The loose, curly hair escaping the bandana matted against her face and neck. I sat on the stool beside her. Our shoulders brushed. Our thighs touched. The Spiderman watch sat in front of us. I took a deep breath and placed one hand over hers, and to my surprise, she put her own hand on top of mine. Slow-mo. As if we were performing a secret ritual with which she was familiar. She didn’t look at me. Stared straight ahead out the open window at the dull sky. I wrapped my arm around her shoulder protectively. Grace leaned against me, her hand still on top of mine. My heart slowed its frantic racing. Said, “What’s this all about?” Voice controlled.

Neither of us said what this was. We both knew this was Grace talking to empty air. But it wasn’t another man. Not really.

“Where’s Theo?” I asked.

“Brad’s.” Her monitor sat close by on the island.

“It’s Theo going to school fulltime, isn’t it?” I said. “Three months now.” It wasn’t about Frank and the stores. Or Gordie. Or Minette. Or her fixation on Carol. Of course she didn’t have a boyfriend. It was Theo. Relief swished through me. Theo. Like before. When I’d taken him to the store with me that long-ago wintry afternoon despite her pleas. “Leave him with me,” she’d begged. “Stay home with us. Please, Jonathan.”

When she looked at me now, the expression in her eyes confused me. Joyous and
fearful. I had the feeling she wanted to share something with me. Didn’t know if it
was good or something dark, unnamable. My head ached.

Outside the sky was gray tinged with rust. All I could think of was my Sunshine-
on–My-Shoulders-Makes-Me-Happy-Yellow dress. Did she know? Was that it? But she
couldn’t. No way.

“He’s got to go to school all day,” I said.

“I know,” Grace said.

Neither one of us mentioned Jesus.

Chinese.” I remembered Margaret’s blueberry pie for Frances. “I’ve got a blueberry pie
we could eat for dessert,” I said. “Cheer up, Gracie. You’ll be fine. I’m home. I’ll stay
home tomorrow, too.” Got up. Collected the napkin from the island. Put it in the trash
beneath the kitchen sink. Sat beside her again. “That’s what you want, isn’t it? Me to stay
home with you?”

“Gracie,” she said, and tilted her head as she looked at me. Her eyes filled with
tears.

I looked at the refrigerator door. All the store photos gone.


“I’ve got supper made. Why would I want to order take-out? You know I love to
cook.” Grace ran her forefinger up and down the skin of my hand. “What happened to
your finger? Your arms?”

“Nothing. Sharp edge at the store.”

She tugged at my other hand, held it down hard, kept me from running it through
my hair. “Stop,” she said. “Just stop it.”
I love you, I wanted to say. I love you, Gracie.

“You don’t look right. You look pale.” Grace’s hand was on my arm, her head tilted again. “Is something wrong?”


“I made a salmon loaf,” Grace said. “Fresh raisin bread.”

“I’ll go over to the Kosts’. Get Theo.” Headed toward the patio doors.

“You missed his soccer practice.”

I slid open the screen door. Stepped outside. When I looked back, Grace was on her knees, hands clasped together, eyes gazing upward.

Theo and I sat on the couch. Him in his soccer uniform. Thank God. Odor of hot boy flickering around us. First time I’d spent with him in weeks. TV on. Wonder Woman sitting on the sofa arm. She had wrist bracelets. Silver cuffs with bright red stars. That’s what Grace had been sewing this morning in bed.

Theo saw me looking. “Those cuffs can deflect speeding bullets,” he said.

“Don’t you like your new watch?” I said.

“Mom said she told you she’s fixing it for me. Didn’t you listen?” Theo got up. Disappeared into the kitchen. Came back with the vacuum cleaner.

“Never mind,” I told him. “Sit with me. It doesn’t matter.” He leaned the Electric Broom against the wall. Settled on the couch.

Grace in the kitchen setting the table, heating the salmon loaf, stirring macaroni and cheese for Theo. Joe Torre heading to the mound. “It’s too hot in here,” I said.
Walked all around the house closing windows. Flipped on the air conditioner. Strolled into the kitchen.

“Want me to help?” I said.

“Sit with your son,” Grace said.

I moved to stand behind her. I needed to touch her. Hold her. Feel her against me. That afternoon at the ranch house in my panties and make up had gotten me all fired up.


She slapped away my hands. “Salmon’s ready. Get Theo.” She looked at me, then away. Opened the range door.

“It’s Saturday night,” I whispered, hands on her waist. “I’m giving you what you want.” I lowered my voice further still, said, “Don’t you want to me to fuck you, Gracie?” Deeper, angrier. “Fuck you?”

Grace lifted her head. At one time, a flush would have spread from her neck to the roots of her hair. She would have sent Theo back to Brad’s. Moaned, “FFF uhuhuh KKK MMEEE, FFF uhuhuh KKK MMEEE, FFF uhuhuh KKK MMEEE.” Let me take her right there on the island.

Now she said, “You smell like perfume.”

“It’s your mother’s,” I said. “From the ranch house. I checked on the place. You know. Like I always do.”

“It doesn’t smell like lavender.” Grace faced the oven again. Yanked on a mitt. Hauled out the salmon.
“I come home after working all day to provide for you and Theo and driving out to your parents’ property, and you’re talking to thin air. Do I make a big deal of it? No.” Couldn’t bring myself to say Jesus. Said, “You’re always telling me I’m not home enough. Well, here I am. Ready to fuck. Just like you say you want. So what’s wrong with you?”

Theo walked into the kitchen. Electric Broom clutched in his hand. Went straight to the closet. Hauled out the Batmobile.

“I’m fine,” she said. “Fine.”

“You need to get yourself under control,” I said.

We three sat around the kitchen table.

“Hope it rains before the weekend’s over,” I said. “Having the storm hang in the air makes my head ache. Had to send Jimmy Summers home today because his stomach hurt.”

“Brad doesn’t have a chance at making the spring soccer team,” Theo said, “but I do. You want to play after supper, Dad? Mom got me a new soccer ball.”

“Depends on your mom. Maybe she’ll want our help doing the dishes.”

“Please,” Theo said. “You’re never here.”


“The pie?” I said. It must still be on the dining room table.

She pulled out the cutting board and a long, sharp knife. Sliced three, four, five, six chunks of cookie dough. Snapped the oven buttons. Laid the knife on the counter.
Opened the sliding glass doors and stepped onto the patio, closing the door after her. She stood on the patio, back to us. Theo put the cookies on a cookie tray and into the oven. I cleared the table. Loaded the dishwasher. Sponged off the table. Theo set to vacuuming. Wonder Woman’s head stuck out of his pants’ pocket.

Outside, gray. Shadows thickening. Harsh orange rimming the mountains.

I walked to the doors and pulled them open. It was cooling off in the swift way it had been doing the last six, seven weeks. Maybe I shouldn’t have turned on the air conditioning. Theo came and stood beside me. When he took hold of my hand, I held on tight.

“Well, I said. Grace didn’t turn around. She held her arms up to the sky. I had had enough for one day. “You have to think about more than just yourself,” I said.

“You’re sure?” She faced the sky.

“Grace?” I said.

“Mom?”

“All right, then. I will.” She got down on her knees. Hands clasped. Face still aimed skyward. Said, “I’ll start tonight.”

“Mommy?” Theo’s high voice could have been mine after my parents had had a fight and my father had slammed out the door and my mother stood silent, staring down at her untied sneakers. Desolate. That was the word I didn’t know as a boy. It came to me now. Desolate.


I picked up my napkin, wrapped it over the band-aid.

Theo left the table. Got his Electric Broom from where it rested against the wall. Snapped it on. Ran it up and down the room. Bashed it into the Batmobile.


“No good,” I shouted over the vacuum cleaner. “Spoiled.” Shoved cookies off the tray and into the sink.

Theo yanking my arm. “Cut it out,” he yelled. “I want those cookies.”

Another cookie down the drain.

Theo clutching me.

I set down the spatula. Clenched my fist.

Grace up and out of her chair. Between me and Theo. I took a step backward.

“I’m sorry, baby,” she said. “So sorry.” I got down on my knees behind him, facing Grace. Put my arms around both of them. Rested my face on my son’s back. Hands grasping my own arms behind Grace’s back. Rocked. All of us. Back and forth. In control. I would never hit my child. I was not my father.

Electric Broom screeched.

“I’m taking Theo for ice cream,” Grace yelled.

“I’m not a baby,” Theo shouted. He pulled Wonder Woman from his pocket and held up her bracelets.

“I’m going to Wal-Mart to buy batteries for Theo’s monitor,” Grace said. We stood in the kitchen. Faced each other across the island. Her voice excited. Not sad. Energized. Different from the monotone I’d grown used to over the summer. As if this errand were a big deal, something special. She had taken Theo for ice cream, peppermint stick, his favorite, down at Zake’s Ice Cream Parlor. Come home, tucked him in. Both monitors lay on the island.

I had cleaned up the crumbs. Put away the Electric Broom. The Batmobile. Noticed the Spiderman watch had disappeared. Mopped the floor. Polished the table. Island. Counters. Cleaner than the tire store. Salvaged a few cookies. Stored them inside a Zip-loc. Walked down the steps to the basement. Came back up. Down. Stood in front of
my closet. Up. Polished the sliding glass doors. Panes in the dining room. Scrubbed
the downstairs bathroom.

“I’m going to Wal-Mart.”

“Tonight?” I said. “He needs them tonight?” Grace was not someone who ran out
in the evenings to do errands.

Grace’s flip-flops slapped across the linoleum floor. She grabbed her keys from
the hook near the laundry room door.

“Look,” she said, as if speaking to a slow learner. “Theo’s in bed. I read *Frog and
Toad Together* to him. Sang *Jesus Loves the Little Children* and *There Is a Green Hill
Far Away*. Read the new Spiderman comic. I think he’s asleep. He’s been upset for
months. Maybe because you missed every one of his baseball games. His soccer
practices. His play performances. Tonight didn’t help.”

“How do you know he’s upset? Did his teacher call? His coach?”

“Don’t you get it? He’s just like you. If you knew him at all, you’d know that.
The way he deals with anxiety is to clean, to tidy his room. It’s spotless. Every super
figure in order. Batman on the left. Superman to his right. Wonder Woman a step ahead
of Superman. Superwoman beside him. Robin behind the lamp. The bad guys in his
bottom dresser drawer.” She shrugged. “A diagram that shows each one’s place on the
dresser top. His pants, shirts, underwear folded so neatly it looks as if I’d ironed them
with a steam iron. He put as much of his Electric Broom as he could fit inside his Fortress
of Solitude.”

“Fortress of Solitude? What are you talking about?”

“Theo’s got a Fortress of Solitude just like Superman. You should know this.
You’re his father. He’s had it for over six months.”
“How can he have a space carved into the Arctic?”

“It’s just a cardboard box, an imaginary retreat. It’s not like he’s got the city of Kandor inside in a glass bottle.”

“City of Kandor?”

“Don’t you remember?” Grace asked. “Kandor, a city in Kytpon? Brainiac, the evilest space villain, used a hyper-focused ray to shrink the city to a microscopic size and put it inside a glass jar. Superman recovered it and put it in his Fortress of Solitude for safekeeping. Don’t you ever read those comics with him?”

“What’s Theo got in his Fortress?”

“I don’t know. It’s private. His headquarters, he told me. Secret and solitary. Like Superman’s. Not open to the public.” She looked at me. “I’m getting those batteries,” she said.

“Maybe the fact that you haven’t taken him to Sunday school is why he’s upset,” I said. “And you haven’t been to the PTSA meetings.”

“Maybe the fact that you haven’t taken him to church—ever—is the problem. Or ever once gone to a school meeting.”

“He’s too old for that monitor,” I said. “You’ll make a sissy of him.”

“I need to know he’s safe.”

“What if it starts raining? Remember that time you hydroplaned? Those radial tires made no difference.”

“I’m going to Wal-Mart. Stay here. Listen for Theo. Lie down with him if he wakes up. Do not take his Humpty off the bed. Or his cape off his shoulders.”
“Sissy,” I repeated.

She walked into the laundry room and slapped shut the door behind her. Sputter of the van engine. Van’s smooth hum as she pulled into the driveway. I hurried to the front door. Opened it in time to see her drive away.

It had turned cold outside. Clouds completely covered the stars. A river of wind raced past me. No rain yet, but that wind smelled of snow, snow that would fall after the rain. Lightning crackled. Grace hadn’t taken a sweater or jacket or umbrella, and she was in that halter capri getup. I shut the door and leaned against it. Decided to follow her. Make sure she was okay.


“What about Grace?”

“She’s not home.” I was not going to tell Suzanne that I planned to follow Grace. I held the phone against my ear, pulled open the freezer. Sure enough. Glazed doughnuts. I knew Grace would have them. She’d been buying them every week for the past six, eight weeks. Every single week. And eating them, I suppose. Or feeding them to Theo and his friends. Or Frances and Leon. Or Suzanne. Or Debbie Miller down the street. Or Pastor Ginny. “She’s shopping,” I said.

“At night?”

“Wal-Mart.”

“That doesn’t sound like Grace.” Suzanne’s voice held suspicion. “Wal-Mart? At night? Are you sure?”

“Maybe an hour at the most?”
“You know she hasn’t been coming to church,” Suzanne said. “It makes me nervous for Theo. And for her.”

“Can you do it or not?”

“Let me check with Mike.” I heard subdued talk in the background. Mike got on the line. “Hey,” he said. “I’ll stay with Theo. I want Suzanne with our kids.”

“No problem,” I hung up. Stared at the doughnuts, shoved them back into the freezer. Stepped into the bathroom. Put a new band-aid on my finger.

Five minutes later, Mike opened the sliding glass doors and walked inside, clutching a six-pack of Genesee Cream Ale and his cell phone.

I spied the van near the public telephones outside Wal-Mart. Parking lot lights bright. Sky black. Afternoon moon gone. Clouds turned to ink.

I wiped my hands on my pants, careful not to rub my hurt finger. Parked two rows away from the van. Turned off the lights and engine and sat slouched over the steering wheel, a blue sweater Leon had knitted for Grace on top of the box in my front seat. I wanted the old Grace back, the Grace who went to church, who pressured me to go, who tried to make me show up at Theo’s teacher conferences, the Grace who complained about her mother, the Grace who wanted me but wasn’t pushy about sex. The Grace who cared about tires. The Grace who didn’t announce that she was doing errands at night. The Grace who didn’t talk to Jesus.

I looked up, watched for her familiar figure to come out of electronic doors. A fat woman with frizzed hair. Polyester pants. Lawn green. Two men in tight shorts and sweatshirts reading You’re Part of God’s Team. A lone teenager. Spiked hair. Black
leather pants. Jacket to match. No Grace. How long did it take to get batteries? I got out of the Jeep. Locked it. Pulled on my Clarke Tire Store jacket. Walked toward the doors, clutching her sweater. Rubbed the bulky yarn. Stopped. What would I say if I ran into her? That I was worried she might be cold? I started back toward my Jeep when a movement caught my eye.

Grace.

In her blue-and-white-checked capri pants and halter top standing at one of the outside pay phones. Cord wrapped around her arm. “It’s wonderful to talk to you.” A pause. “I want to do it. I do. Keep your fingers crossed for me.” Her voice rose. “I don’t know. I just don’t know. Don’t push me.” Grace hung up the phone.

I stayed where I was. Unmoving in the parking lot. Watched her stand beside the phone. Chew her fingernails. Who had she been talking to? Saw her look up at the sky. Heard her say, “I am?” Her voice trembled. “The right track?” She got down on her knees right there on the Wal-Mart cement in front of the phone and bowed her head, hands clasped. Jesus. I started toward her. Stopped. Ducked down behind a gray Corsica that was missing one headlight.

She stood. Raised the phone and snapped some digits. “It’s me again.” She twisted a strand of hair around her finger. “I promise,” she said. “Janelle Chantelle. Tomorrow.” Heard, “Penn Station. In the morning. The workshop’s not until afternoon.” Said, “Me, too. We’ll catch up. I’ve missed you. So much.”

I lifted my head in time to see her hang up the phone. Now what? Who was she talking to? Frances? Leon? Oh, not Jesus. Please. Did I confront her? No way. I had to get out of that parking lot, get home before she did. I watched her step away from the
phone. She pulled off her blue bandana, flung back her shoulders, and shook out her hair. It floated down her back, angel-like. First time she’d worn it loose and free for months. She should have been shivering, but she wasn’t. No warm breeze that I could feel, but her hair lifted as if there were one just for her. She marched toward Wal-Mart. Shoulders straight. Flip-flops flapping. Of course. Batteries. When a man held the door for her, she looked up at him and smiled, a slow, steady smile. Flipped her hair over her shoulder. He stopped. Gazed at that fabulous butt of hers swaying into the store. I wanted to punch him out. When thunder snarled again, I knew rain had to be on its way.

Here’s what I longed to do more than anything else in the world: Drive to the Mitford ranch house and dress up. Be Miss Johanna. My second self. My beautiful, relaxed, comforted self. And then go home and make love to Grace.

I was parked inside the garage within ten minutes. Rain a light sputter. Sat next to Mike. Piazza up to bat. “When Grace gets here, pretend you stopped by to be friendly,” I said. Had to catch my breath. Mike spoke into his cell phone, “Hang on a minute.” He turned to me. “Give me a second.” He went into the kitchen. Heard the whisper of “I love you, too.”

Ball two, hollered the umpire. How’s that a ball? I thought. Stars always get the calls.

And then Mike was back on the couch, sipping his beer. Offered me one. Snapped off the top and handed it to me. Stared at the TV. “Pitchers take so long between pitches.” He turned to me. “So what’s going on, buddy?” Another sip of beer. “I’m listening if you want to talk.”
I took a long pull on the beer. Set it down. Said, “Wait a minute.” Went into the kitchen and got the doughnuts from the freezer. Micro-waved six. Returned the other ten. Carried the sticky plate and a cutting board into the family room with four napkins and a knife and put them on the table beside the beer. Sat down. Balanced the cutting board on my knees. I gestured to the doughnuts. Mike laughed, shook his head no. “My waistline.” Pause. Then, “Suzanne and I are going through a rough spell.”

I sliced a doughnut in half. “So who was that on the phone?”

“I’ve met somebody.”

“Jesus,” I said.

“The kids make it hard.”


“The thing is,” Mike said, and by now he’d finished his beer and started on another, “I don’t know if I love Suzanne. I don’t know if I ever did.” He paused, added, “I want a separation. A divorce. She won’t hear of it.”

“Jesus, Mike,” I said. “I’d never leave Grace.”

Used three napkins to wipe the stickiness from my fingers. Band-aid came loose. Tore it off. Wrapped the fourth napkin around the cut.

“That’s you,” Mike said.

Garage door rumbled.


“Suzanne says Grace isn’t reliable anymore. That something’s wrong.” Mike
snapped open another beer. He glanced over at me. “Where was she tonight? Maybe she’s up to something. Maybe she’s met someone else.”


In the family room, I sat again on the couch. Said, “Grace would never leave me.”

“Baseball needs to speed up,” Mike said.

I heard Grace come in through the laundry. “Jonathan?” she called.

“Here,” I said.

She stepped into the family room, a brown paper sack in her hand. Started when she saw Mike. Asked, “Where’s Suzanne? The kids?”

“You are ridiculously good looking, aren’t you?” Mike turned to me. “Sorry, man, but she is.”

Grace stayed where she was. Mike was right. With her hair down like that, the curls going wild from the rain, and that outrageous outfit, she looked amazing. Amazing Grace. “Suzanne?” she repeated. Her tone wasn’t friendly.

“Home,” Mike said. “Where I ought to be.”

“That’s right,” Grace said.

At that moment came the sound of the sliding glass doors. Suzanne walked into the family room, a sleepy Brad holding her hand, Liza sound asleep on her hip. She looked at Grace, then stared at me and Mike. “What’s going on?” She moved over to Mike. Pulled on his arm. Said, “Come home.”
Suzanne dumped Lisa into Mike’s arms. “Let’s go.”

Grace walked over and put her arms around Suzanne. “It’ll be okay,” she whispered.

Suzanne moved back. She shook her head. “I don’t think so,” she said. Touched Grace’s halter. Shrugged her shoulders. “You’re so beautiful,” she said.

Mike and I both stood. Lisa’s head curled against his shoulder. I clapped him on the back. “I’m here if you need me,” I said.

“Same here.” Mike disappeared into the kitchen. Suzanne followed close behind him. The sliding glass doors squeaked open and shut.

“What was that all about?”

“Nothing,” I said. “Troubles with him and Suzanne.” Looked at her.“ I could ask you the same.”

Grace said, “I need to make her that outfit we talked about. She needs to feel beautiful.” Grace pointed to the doughnut squares and circles, the rectangles on the cutting board, said, “What’s this?” but I could see she didn’t really care. She licked the glaze off two pieces, popped them into her mouth. She left the room. I heard a rustle in the kitchen. The batteries. She headed upstairs.

I’d meant what was the whole Wal-Mart thing about—not Suzanne.

One-fifteen in the morning. I got out of bed. Grace lay on her side of the bed, facing away from me. Even in the hallway light’s dim glimmer, I could see the fluff of her hair spread on the pillow, the white lace of her silk georgette camisole. I traced the line of her cheek. She was so beautiful. I pulled the covers over her shoulders. Still in my
T-shirt and boxer shorts, I left the room. Listened outside Theo’s bedroom. Soft
whistles of breath. I crept downstairs to the family room. Shivered in the chilly air-
conditioning. Lightning flashed through the window. Seized the cutting board from the
family room, shoved the doughnuts down the kitchen sink disposal, cleaned off the board
and put it away. Thunder shuddered.

I opened the basement door, snapped on the light, and hurried down to Grace’s
studio. Pushed open her door. Moved across the room to her drafting table, the cement
floor warm against my cold bare feet. Pressed on the fluorescent light, an eerie glow in
the thick, dull darkness. I didn’t see how she worked down here. The place was hot and
muggy even in the chilly night air. I saw a cardboard carton next to the basket of used
clothes sitting to the right of her table. Blue brocade. Like in her sketch. I pulled out the
material from the box. Ran my hand up and down it. Spectacular feel, the brocade and
Lycra together. Never seen anything like it before. Like a definite shape but with
freedom. She must have used brocade from drapes, maybe. Appliquéd it to the Lycra.

From the basket I yanked out large cotton dresses, thrift-shop dresses she cut up
to create new skirts or tops or pants. Grace always saw possibilities where no one else
did. I held up one dress after another, buried my face in them, not minding the wasted
old-people smell, the must of unwashed clothes. It would be nothing to slip on one of
these big dresses. I needed to feel the material against my skin, needed to feel calm,
needed to let go of my worries about Grace, her phone call, Jesus, the store, Frank,
Gordie, Leon.

I sat Indian style on the rug facing the basket, back to the door. Held the soft plaid
button-down dress in my lap. The kind my mother wore in the bakery, always with a big
white apron covering it. I pressed the material to my cheek, set it back inside the basket. I wanted to sniff Grace’s old drama costumes, dresses from high school plays she no longer wore. Where were they? In this house? The ranch house? At the lake? Hold them to my face. Feel the safety of silk, cotton, twill, muslin, chiffon, jacquard.

The studio’s overhead light came on. I jumped up and turned around so fast, I bumped my knee hard against the sharp edge of Grace’s drafting table.

She stood just inside the door. She pulled it shut behind her. Silk lace-trimmed panties to match her camisole. Blush-colored. Hair loose. “What are you doing?” she said.

I stared at her. Did she know I knew her basket of clothes as well as she did?

She moved across the room to her drafting table. Two feet from me. Vanilla bean. Snatched up a glossy brochure. Flapped the paper in front of my face. “This?” she said.

“Is this what you’re searching for?”

I put out my hand. She slapped the paper into it. Parson’s School of Design. The application. Handed it back to her. Wiped my face with the bottom of my T-shirt. Didn’t want to know anything about this application. If she’d come down five minutes later, I would have been wearing a plaid dress.

“ Aren’t you going to ask me about it?”

I reached for that brown-plaid dress. Ran my hand over it.

She grabbed at it. Pulled it from my hands. “Stop. Listen to me.” She threw the dress into the basket. “This is something I want,” she said.

“What?”

“To study at Parson’s. To go to some workshops.” She ran over to her closet.
Flung it open. “Look,” she said, and pulled out the most amazing spill of a skirt. A jacket, too. “Trompe l’oeil,” she said. I saw it was a seven-eighth length blouson jacket in Easter-egg colors, powdery fuchsia and aqua, canary yellow woven throughout.

“Jackie Kennedy,” she said.

“What?”

“She inspired this creation with the trompe l’oeil door she did at the White House. JFK was furious at the expense.” Grace put back the dress and looked at me. “I’m calling it La Jac-leen. To rhyme with queen. That’s the way she said it.” She returned it to the closet and slid out a creamy silk blouse with a bunch of lace spilled across its front. “It’s a fount of Proustian lace running down the front. I’m working on a black sateen skirt, a sliver of lace edging its hem. Maybe a hint of faux fur here and there. I’m thinking about shoes to go with it, too.”

“Pink,” I said. “They have to be pink. Rounded closed toes. Black stiletto heels. Almost no sides.”

Grace look at me, amazed. “You’re right. That’s it exactly.” She snatched a pencil from the drawing board and did a quick sketch. “A tiny black bow, I think, in front,” she said. “Black faux fur.”

“What does all this mean? This dress, this application?”

“I don’t know what it means.” A little pulse beat in Grace’s throat. She hung the blouse in the closet. Her excitement at my suggestion of pink high heels vanished. She refused to face me. As if she couldn’t bear to look at me. Then she said, “My black mousseline is missing.”

“Is this an Internet course? Or what?”
“It’s in New York. On weekends. And there’s a nine-month course, too. There’s a free workshop tomorrow afternoon. Two o’clock. Janelle Chantelle will be there. I’m going. And I need my mousseline. I’ve got an idea for that material, but it’s not quite clear yet.” She faced her clothesbasket, the box with the blue brocade. She lowered her voice. “If I don’t go tomorrow, I might never go at all.”

“What does it mean if you go chasing some silly dream to New York? What about me? What about Theo?” I said.

“I don’t know what it means to us if I move forward with my plans. I don’t know what it means to us if I don’t.” Her voice was so quiet I had to lean closer hear her.

“And Theo?”

“Theo always comes first. You know that.”

I lowered my tone to a whispery child-like voice. Said, “If you bungle raising your children, I don’t think whatever else you do matters.”

“How dare you make fun of Jackie? Where did you learn that quote?”

“It’s taped to your dresser mirror. Has been for years. You think I didn’t find out who said it? The words of your idol?”

“Taking a workshop is hardly messing up Theo’s life. Don’t you dare imply that.” She kept her eyes on the clothesbasket. Said, “You’re never home. You don’t know about Theo’s and my relationship.”

I snatched the brown-plaid dress out of the basket again. “Did you talk to Minette about this plan of yours?” I took a step toward her, my bare feet slick against the concrete. Twisted the dress like a washrag.

She looked at me now. “Yes.”
I sat in her chair. Put the dress over my lap. Said, “I thought you two weren’t speaking.”

“We’re speaking now,” she said.

“You talked to her about this before me?”

“Yes.”

I wrapped the plaid dress around my shoulders. Stared at the blue brocade. Said, “You went behind my back on something this important. Did you call Minette from Wal-Mart?”

“You followed me.” She stared at me in the chair. “The way you did in high school.” The fluorescent light flickered, but she didn’t so much as glance at it.

We gazed at each other. She didn’t see anything wrong with what she’d done anymore than she’d seen anything wrong with burning up Hollerina and carrying on with Jesus. The shared years between us sat like worn tires at the side of a road. Rimless. Treadless. Useless. She sat on the floor. Crossed her legs Indian style.

If she’d spoken, I don’t think I would have heard her over the dull thud in my ears. I got on my knees in front of her. Shrugged off the brown-plaid. Reached for the blue brocade. Wrapped its folds around both of us. This stretchy but firm cloth felt soft and strong against my skin. I took her hand in mine. “Stay home with Theo the way you normally would tomorrow,” I said. “Please. I’ll stay home, too.”

Silence.

“Let me see your new sketches.”

Long pause. “I don’t think so.” Within our blue brocade tent she pulled her hand from mine. She ran her finger gently over my cut.

“Don’t make this harder for me than it already is,” Grace said. “You have to baby sit tomorrow. Theo needs you.”

“I need you. You know that. You’ve always known that.”

Her breath brushed my cheek. “Leave me alone.”


She used the brocade to dab at my cut. “I fixed it,” she said. “Cut the plastic, stitched on Velcro. It’s up to him if he wears it.”

“Grace,” I said. “I’m not having an affair with Carol.”

I held her close beneath our fluid blue folds. Incredibly plush material. I took her finger and pressed it to that soft space between my collarbone. Said, “I love you.” She trembled. I brushed back a strand of her hair. Put my tongue in her ear. Traced my finger across her breasts. Ran it down between them. She was sitting Indian style, legs spread. Said, “You belong at home. We need you.” I eased my finger beneath her panties, slipped it inside her. I leaned closer still. Whispered, “I want to fuck you, Gracie.” I took out my finger, slowly, used my hand to gently push her down. I rubbed my cheek with its slight stubble against hers the way she liked. Smelled vanilla bean. Oh, Grace. The brocade puffed out around us like the flounce of a bubble chemise dress I’d seen at Fashions for His Lady.

“Bibby,” Grace said. “Bibby.” And then she rolled away from me. “Leave me alone.” She started to cry. “Please.” When I didn’t move, she said, “I’m begging you.”
Her words the slice of a knife. I left her tangled in the blue brocade. Walked out of the room. Closed the door behind me.

Upstairs, the first thing I did was call Frances at the cottage. Didn’t care it was the middle of the night. Sky loomed tar-like outside the sliding glass doors. Pool a sheen of black marble. Frances’s voice sounded smudged around the edges as if she’d had a glass or two of wine. Scratchy from sleep, too.

I said, “Sorry to wake you. She’s acting like she did after Theo was born. Unstable. Hearing voices.” Crackle ripped through the phone wires. Lightning. Storm breaking at last. Said, “She says she’s going to a workshop in New York tomorrow. At Parson’s. Might sign up for a nine-month program.”

“Storm’s going to break,” Frances said. “That girl isn’t going anywhere.”

Leon got on the line. Groggy. Heard him tell Frances he’d have a word with me, for her to get him a scotch, three fingers, straight up. In a low voice he said, “I need the other five hundred. Tomorrow.”

I’d had enough for one day. Said, “Don’t have it. Won’t have it.”

Leon cleared his throat. “What do you mean?”

“What I said. That’s it.”

“Frances is hollering at me. Trouble with Grace?” Leon cleared his throat again. “We’ll talk later.”

I stood gripping the phone in my hand, long after we’d hung up. Thunder shuddered outside the house. Storm or no storm, Frances wouldn’t be able to leave well enough alone. And Leon was in on it now, too. What had I done?
I went outside and sat on the porch in the granite dark. A shadow self. No longer just a boy with an inner invisibility, but a completely Invisible Boy. Maybe that’s the way it had always been and I’d never realized it before tonight. A nobody I never wanted to be again. Couldn’t escape him no matter how fast and hard I ran. Or how hard I fought. Slipping outside time.

Heard the noise, a mile or two away, of something—rain? From living in the Catskills my whole life, I knew it was snow I smelled. Crisp, clean air. Just as I had earlier. A storm looming somewhere far in the distance, but it would come. Thick, wet snow, bearing something horrible toward me, some change, subtle and terrible.

Thunder cracked, shaking the whole mountain range, and it rained. But later there would be snow.
Leon and Frances sat at the cottage table after Jonathan’s urgent phone call. She with her wine and Saltines, he with his bourbon. Frances wore that worn pink housecoat Leon hated, the new lavender mohair scarf he’d made her draped across her shoulders. White cotton socks on her feet instead of those wildly feathered mules of hers that he loved. Made him think of Grace every time she wore them.

The small kitchen was cold and dank, a scent of slimy mold seeping upward from the stonewall crawlspace. An unpleasant, dismal chill. As if Leon were still a small boy attending one of his mother’s ghostly séances, his job to hide in the secret wall panel and emit gasps through empty tin cans, moans that came out otherworldly, terrifying him. He pulled his gray-flannel bathrobe belt tighter.

A blaze of lightning followed by a thunderous roar made Leon jump.

“I hate cold and rain. Hate it. Time to move back to Mitford. I’m freezing.”

“I don’t know if I’m ready to move back,” Frances said. “The days are so hot. They’ll be hotter in town. The fires here at night are warm. And we need the rain,”

“I want to move back. I wanted to move back in September when everyone else did. I don’t like being out here all by ourselves on this hill. It’s cold and damp and spooky at night. The heat from the wood fires goes straight up the flue. I’ve lived in these mountains my whole life. Snow is on the way.” In his heart, he feared a terrible storm
was approaching. Already the weather at night had turned cold and gray, the temperature hovering near freezing.

“Who told you that? Mama Essie? Channel it to you, did she?”

“You can make fun, but Mama Essie knew this rain dance that told if the rain would turn to snow. She knew when the weather wasn’t right, and it’s all wrong this year. All this heat. No rain. She knew if snow was hitched to a blizzard, too. She’d tell anyone who’d listen, and she was right. Remember that blizzard when we were kids? And the one when we were in high school? Always rained before them.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You sound like a kid worried about the H-Man. With the rain, I was thinking about planting bulbs before the sun turns it to straw. Tulips, gladiolas, irises. Or winter pansies.”

“We’ll plant pansies in the spring.” Leon cleared his throat. “I’m ready to get back to town. It’s not going to be long before winter presses down on us like a heavy salt lick.” He looked right at Frances. “And then we’ll never get out of here.”

He saw his wife reach her hand inside her bathrobe. The lump. Oh, God. Would she even be here in the spring? “We’re completely isolated,” he said. “I worry. What if something should happen to one of us?” They both knew he was referring to Frances’s breast lump.

“It’s only a little bigger and so smooth. It keeps rolling around like a marble. It only hurts if I bump it or touch it.” Frances pushed down cuticles on her left hand. “I like being far away on our green hill.” Her voice trailed off in that annoying victim tone he hated.
Right. So you can smother me. “Look, it’s December first. The hill is not green. It’s rust,” Leon said. “It’s time,” and again they both knew he meant it was time to do more than move back to Mitford. Frances’s regular ob-gyn had given up his practice due to malpractice rates. Still, they had to get a diagnostic order for a mammogram or insurance wouldn’t cover the procedure. He wanted to talk to Grace. She’d know what to do.

“How don’t you build a fire?” Frances said.

“The heat from a fire will go straight up the chimney. You know that. And the wood I chopped is soaked through by now.” Leon gulped down half his glass of bourbon. “Grace?” He stared at his tumbler, at the ice cubes, the deep-gold-colored Jack.

“Jonathan said she’s hearing voices. Like after Theo was born.” Frances finished off her wine, poured another glass. “A fine kettle of fish.” Shadows lurked in the kitchen, the light over the kitchen sink giving off a sickly shimmer.

“Jesus?” Leon reached under the table for his knitting bag and yanked out a mass of black yarn. He searched for his favorite green needle, but couldn’t find it. Instead, he inserted the tip of his blue left-hand needle into a row of stitches.

“Says she’s going to a workshop tomorrow in New York. What about Theo?” Frances drank more wine. “What about Jonathan’s dinner? The laundry? The choir robes? She’s made her bed just like the rest of us. She’s going to have to lie in it.” She lowered her voice, “Jonathan says she’s talking about a nine-month design program at Parson’s.”

A tree branch thudded hard against the cottage.

“And Jesus?” Leon repeated.
“Oh, yes,” Frances said. “He’s in on it. Up to His eyeballs. It’s up to us to straighten her out.” Frances’ voice whined through Leon like his own wails through the tin cans. “Does she think she can pull off this Jesus stuff and get away with whatever she wants?” She sipped her Chardonnay. He watched her nibble, as Grace would say, on a Saltine. Like a rabbit. Twitching red nose. Pink-rimmed eyes.

Leon cleared his throat, kept his eyes on his knitting. “Have you seen my green knitting needle?”

“Is that all you have to say? I tell you your daughter is getting away with murder and you ask about a knitting needle?”

“A hospital stay isn’t really getting away with anything.” He slipped the needle into a second row of stitches. He hated how Frances disregarded his knitting, and furthermore, Grace had never seemed unstable to him, not now, not after Theo was born. If anything, she reminded him of himself as a youth, uncertain, easily led to questioning what was real and what wasn’t. So she burned up her doll. Big deal. The mental hospital had scared him. All those white-clad doctors. Crazy patients loping around the ward, circling it, muttering. The stretchers racing past with patients tied down, screaming. His Grace was nothing like those crazies, never had been, and he’d told her doctor that, told him it wasn’t some genetic defect, no psychos in his or Frances’s families. Dr. Balentine said Grace’s case was situational, whatever that meant. Leon didn’t ask, not with Frances sitting beside him on that cool beige couch, nodding as if she understood every word the guy said. They’d never discussed that hospital stay or the prescriptions they never filled. An episode, to use Frances’ word, that’s all it was. Grace didn’t need medications. She didn’t need follow-up visits. She had her family.
“Oh, I don’t think we’ll be taking her to the hospital,” Frances said. “That’s not feed for Grace’s fodder. Never was. They filled her head with God knows what nonsense. Pastor Ginny’s warned me about psychiatrists. The power of prayer, that’s what we need.” She raised a lifeless gaze to Leon. “We’ll handle this. If we don’t, we’ve failed as parents.” The word failed sloshed out of her mouth, deep, almost a man’s voice, reminding him of his mother’s when she went into her uncanny trances. Frances was drunk. He panicked she’d bring up the bankruptcy, or worse, the indiscretions. He clicked his needle into the front of a row of black stitches from left to right. He refused to consider her accident that night at the lake. She wouldn’t bring that up. Or the other one. Not now. Not that accident. And now her lump. Sitting inside her since April. And Mary wanting money for a new car, wanting to get married. Ever since that night in the carport, he and Mary had been really careful. Except for one time at the ranch house, the only place they’d met was at the circle of boulders off the towpath trail around the lake, way up in the mountains. He’d swear on the Bible that no one but Jonathan knew anything. He didn’t think Frances did despite the fact that she’d shown up in the carport that awful night. She’d never breathed the word indiscretion to him, not once.

His hands shook, and he had to keep repeating the slipstitches, trying to keep count. He couldn’t tally the number of nights over the past thirty-odd years that he’d been unable to sleep, had gotten up, sat in his chair, and knitted in the dark same as when he was a kid. Or when times were really tough, the way he’d slink up the rickety outside cottage staircase to the gunroom and clean his guns. It relaxed him to clean and oil a gun—taking apart a pistol, washing the bores of the cylinder and the barrel and running a rag through the bore with a long rod until it came clean. He’d reassemble the pistol,
tapping the barrel pin until the cylinder was snug, setting it out on the cot to dry.

Rifles took the longest, and he worked in slow-mo, enjoying each part of his task. He’d keep his knitting beside him, a comforting bundle of yarn. Sometimes he’d peek at his girlie magazines, hidden in one of the passages.

He slapped his knitting onto the kitchen table, a black muddle, leaned forward, pulling the mohair tighter around his wife’s thin shoulders. A torrent of rain dinned against the cottage roof.

“You’re right about Grace.” Leon swigged the rest of his Jack. The ice clinked against his teeth. He was a two-drink-a-day guy, always at cocktail hour, but lately he’d been drinking more. Something about these last weeks felt different. It was more than the odd weather, the strangely hot days, the gunmetal sky. Even this storm didn’t feel the way a storm should. It felt like a warm up for whatever else was in store for the Catskills.

But, for him, there was more going on than creepy weather. It was as if the whole family and Mary, too, were playing Russian roulette. He thought of the Cold War. The Cuban Missile Crisis. He’d been a kid, but his mother had forever imprinted the terror of turning to ashes in his sleep. The night America went to bed and didn’t know if it would ever wake up again. Risk lurking in every corner. This evening no different. Mary’s demands, Jonathan’s refusal to come up with the money, Frances’s lump, Theo going off to first grade. Grace and her dress designs. Now her plans for Parsons. The Cuban Missile Crisis had begun all over again right under his own roof.

Frances staggered from the table and refilled his glass. He took a mouthful, rolled it around inside his mouth. Grace had to consider family. Look at what he’d given up in
order to be a good parent, a solid family man. No one at St. Paul’s could ever accuse him of being anything other than a good family man.

The dreary din of rain continued. It groaned across the roof, beat the sides of the cottage, drummed the windows despite the porch roof. He felt sick, same way he always did when it rained. Pull yourself together, he told himself. Get Frances to bed. He knew what Mary was like. She’d show up at their scheduled rendezvous early that morning even if the rain had washed away the whole of the mountain. He cleared his throat, started humming without even realizing it, *I hear the train a comin’, it’s rolling round the bend, and I ain’t seen the sunshine since I don’t know when.* . .

Frances pressed his tumbler against her face. “Just the right song for you. ‘Folsom Prison.’” She refilled both their glasses. “You handle Grace.” Frances’ voice had taken on that terrifying otherworldly quality. “Tomorrow. You get her out to the lake. I’m going to talk to Pastor Ginny. Drive to St. Paul’s before the early service. Grace isn’t going anywhere. Not on weekends. Not for nine-months. What’s wrong with her? She has a family to think about. Pastor Ginny will knock some sense into her. Guaranteed.”

Family. Ah, family. A shiver shook Leon, one of those inadvertent quivers that Charlie had taunted him about. “You got problems, Bro?” he’d say. “You got Tourettes like those boys locked up in the asylum towers?” Leon’s shivers one of many things Charlie ridiculed him for—his knitting, the way he used to stutter, even the way he cleaned his guns. “What’ll you think’ll happen if you don’t oil them guns every week? Huh? Tell me. Think they won’t shoot?” Leon shivered again.

Frances mumbled, “A goose walk over your grave?”
God, he hated it when she said things like that. Made him feel as if she were making fun of him. Like the way she referred to his gun collection and his knitting and now his jogging as “your little hobbies.” Diminishing, that’s what it was. He took another drink. As the bourbon slid down his throat, a warm, burning sensation, as close to comfort as he was likely to get right now, he wondered if he had had enough of Frances. But he’d questioned that for years, and here he was. He knew right from wrong. He had taken the marriage vows in front of God. He’d let her get pregnant again. Grace was his gift to Frances. A living child that kept them together instead of a dead one. And by God, Grace wasn’t going to traipse off to New York. She had a child and a husband and two aging parents. She could design clothes in her own house until the cows came home, as Frances would say. He cleared his throat, a deep gurgling noise in his throat.

“Stop that,” Frances said. “Just stop it.”

The gloomy specter of Frances’ breast lump hovered in that cottage kitchen along with the mold and booze and Grace. Cash. Johnny Cash. . . the mud and the blood and the beer. Not so different. He kept humming. He lifted his eyes from his tumbler to meet hers. He stopped humming and took a deep breath and did what he had to do. He knew the routine. He liked it, actually. Something warm and familiar in it that he didn’t get anywhere else and never had and it made him feel good. It belonged to them. Him and Frances. Grace wasn’t part of it. He put his hand over hers. She smiled, said, “Oh, Leon,” and put her own over his. As always, her beautiful smile took him aback. Gave him a sense of wellbeing. The softness of her hand surprised him, too. Like a baby’s. He picked it up and kissed it, let it drop back over his own hand.
“It’s time to tell her.” His words ran together like Grace’s crème caramel custard fresh from the oven. Mush. Sweat gathered in his armpits. “It’s been months.” God, he needed Grace’s help. She would take charge of this lump. He knew she would. He could admit that much, but he ignored even the slightest self-awareness that might have let him know how much he needed Frances, how much her breast lump terrified him, how much he wanted not to deal with it. “Grace,” he mumbled. He’d kept his promise not to tell anyone, but deep inside his furtive knowledge was making him sick. He should tell Grace. Yet it was so much easier to do what Frances wanted. What she wanted was for the two of them to have a secret, something dark and scary that only they knew, that only they could do something about. Frances had always wanted him all to herself. On some level he’d understood that as long ago as their baby boy, and it seemed with her lump that she had found a way to make him hers at last.

“We have to tell her.” His voice trembled, and he took her slender hand in his, held onto it.

“Did you hear me?” Frances pulled away, gulped more wine. Her face and neck flushed red. “I said you get her out to the lake tomorrow. She’s not going anywhere.”

Hear her? How could he not? Her voice was a shrill whistle. A police siren. He shoved his knitting to the floor. “First, I heard you. Second, I’ll handle it. Third, shut up about it.” He watched his wife drink more wine. He saw how scrawny her neck had become. He pictured himself reaching out and wrapping his hands around that veiny neck and choking her until her face turned blue and the breath was knocked out of her. An accident.
Her tears started. He knew the drill. Wipe away the tears, say he was sorry, guide her to bed. The funny thing was, he wanted to help her. That’s what confused him. He loved Frances.

He sat in his seat and drank more Jack. The sky outside the window was black ink. He cleared his throat. The rain knocked against the cottage the way with a dull, rapid thump. The H-Man. A warning. Like that other time at the ranch house. And maybe out on the mountainside. Don’t think about those things, he told himself. An accident is an accident. The H-Man wasn’t real.

He drank more. Frances’s head lolled onto the tabletop. Leon closed his eyes and remembered the vulnerable nineteen-year-old he’d fallen for so many years before, the fragile girl with the wings on her back and soft white angel’s skin. Her slim, delicate body, those tiny breasts, her slender back had bewitched him. He could break her in two if he felt like it. She made him feel powerful in a way that he never had before meeting her. Her old man had been a vicious drunk who’d struck her more than once. Leon didn’t want to hear what else went on in that motherless household she came from, so he never asked. Best way. By the time he and Frances fucked in her father’s bed, the old man was no more than a soup can of ashes she’d tossed into the trash. Frances had sat up in the bed and said, “Ha! Take that, you bastard,” and begun to laugh so wildly that she’d frightened him. She’d used the money from the sale of that dump of a house to start their insurance business.

The kitchen light blinked off, came back on, went off and stayed off. He lurched to the fuse box on the far wall. “Not the fuses.”
Frances whimpered. He stumbled to the window. No moon. No stars. No lights anywhere. Blackness and the lash of rain. “Electricity must be off all over the lake.” Of course no one else was at the lake. Just them. Outside a shriek—what had to be the pistol-crack of a beam breaking off a maple tree limb.

He made his way to the table. “I hate the rain. Hate it.”

Frances cried out, “Say the Lord’s Prayer with me. I beg of you, my dear, my darling. Say Our Father, say He’s in heaven. Pray with me.” She fell from her chair to the floor, her fist full of Saltines.

Leon managed to pull her up in the dark. The Saltines crunched onto the floor.

“Please,” she said. “On my cushion.”

Leon fumbled with his knitting, set it on the table. He put his arm around her, and they swayed toward the bedroom in their familiar two-step rhythm. His ankles hurt. The jogging had to stop. He wished Frances were sober enough to rub them in that slow, smooth way she had, hands hot and stingy with Ben Gay. Sometimes he’d come back from a run and she’d have a pail of warm water laced with healing herbs waiting for him. He and Mary had to find some other way to meet.

He used his hand to feel the walls. At the bedroom door, he tripped over a coffee cup, of all things, and fell. Frances toppled on top of him. He didn’t know how long they lay in the dark. He feared he’d touch that lump of hers by mistake, hurt her. He smelled the wine, the bourbon, her minty lavender, Saltines, and something else. The cold, the mold, the dankness, that’s what it was. Death, that’s what it smelled like. Rotting death. A deer by the side of the road for three, four days. If he could get her onto the bed, he would sit in the living room and knit. Get away from her for a while.
And there was her voice, the otherworldly one. “Pray, we have to pray.”

“We’ve got to get into the bedroom first.”

“No,” Frances shrilled. “In the living room. Beneath the crucifix.”

Oh, God. It was better to just do what she asked. Mama Essie had been like that, too. He’d been afraid she’d put a curse on him if he didn’t do what she wanted. He’d thought she’d leaked some potion of hers into his soup or milk to cause his stuttering, his shiverings, his so-called Tourettes. Leon groped the doorframe to get up, grabbed Frances by the arm, hauled her to a standing position. Dark as pitch.

“My cushion. Get my cushion.”

Leon propped her against the wall. He felt for the coffee cup, picked it up, made his way into the shadowy bedroom, set the cup on the dresser top. He pulled the old prayer cushion out from her side of the bed. It smelled of must, like those old-lady dresses Grace dragged home from tag sales. The velveteen was nearly worn off, and he could feel dribbles of stuffing, like cold, stale cornbread. The first time they’d knelt on this cushion was at the side of her father’s bed, right after they’d made love and she’d cackled that wild laughter. First time and he’d gotten her pregnant with Baby Nathan.

Leon cleared his throat. Adjusted Frances so she wouldn’t topple over.

He hadn’t allowed himself to think of that child’s name in years. Blocked it out when Frances brought him up, always let Grace handle Frances’ depressions. He’d let his wife make a shrine of the baby’s nursery. He’d been in that room once to hide some girlie magazines, and seeing the crib and basinet, the blue lamb Frances and he’d painted on the second dresser drawer, the little blue rocker they’d painted, the three teddy bears nearly killed him. A wound in his soul. The diaper pail full of brown water and disintegrated
diaper made him want to throw up, but he’d never say a word to Frances, never altered anything in the room. Never. He put the magazines beneath Grace’s mattress.

It had to be the rain making him think like this. “I hate this rain.” His voice echoed, watery, in his ears. He shuddered.

Frances slurred, “Goose walk over your grave?”

“Shut up about graves.” Leon shoved the worn cushion into his wife’s hands, put his arm around her, and they lurched down the darkened hallway to the living room. At one time, Leon had helped dig the graves and bury the bodies for the church but no longer. Too dismal. He didn’t let the truth enter his consciousness if he could help it: digging graves was too damn close to home.

Now his eyes had grown accustomed to the bleak grayness in the cottage. He took the cushion from Frances’s hand and set it on the floor in front of the sofa. Together they knelt on the old pillow, Leon’s left knee on the rough wooden floor, their arms clasped around each other’s waists as usual. A flash of lightning illuminated the room. Jesus stared down from the cross right at him.

Frances started crying. “I can’t remember the words, I don’t know the words, oh, Lord, forgive me.” Her voice swirled around Leon like the prophecies he’d grown up on. He launched into “Our Father who art in heaven,” as fast as he could, but not fast enough to erase the memory of Baby Nathan, that day Frances had left him with that crying baby he didn’t want, the marriage he didn’t want, a house he didn’t want, a whole life he didn’t want. She’d run out on some errand, her car skidding slick in the driveway as she drove too fast in the rain, and when she came back home and into Baby Nathan’s room, she’d
walked right in on him silencing those piercing cries with her prayer cushion. He’d never even heard her enter the house.

“Hallowed be Thy name,” Leon said. “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done. . .” Had it been His will? Leon had always told himself it was, that his son was better off in heaven with the angels. He’d known what it was like to have a father who didn’t want you. He’d thought with the baby gone, he could leave Frances, go on his way, maybe head out West. He’d heard there was prospecting in Colorado, people finding gold nuggets. Frances would find someone else, she was a beautiful girl, things would work out.

But she’d walked in on him.

Seen him with the cushion and the unmoving infant. She’d moved toward him. He’d taken the cushion off the baby’s face. She stared at Baby Nathan, his face ashy, grey-like, a tinge of blue at the lips, eyes a little less than half open, looking up, motionless. An unreal stillness hung over the baby, as if he were a plastic baby doll. Hands flung toward his head. Frances and he looked at each other then, the kind of look that said everything and nothing, unspeakable words remaining in their memories forever.

Leon stood watching her. He wanted to think of some words that would make a difference, but none came to him. She’d taken the cushion and left the room. He tucked a small blanket around his son, pulled it up to his chin, leaned down and kissed his pallid cheek. Frances came back, took Leon’s hand, tugged him into their bedroom. Leaving the baby in his crib, still and silent. Rain thumping dully onto the ranch house roof. She’d put the cushion, this very same one they prayed to God from now, on the floor beside their
bed as she did every evening, nudged him into place beside her, pulled his arm around her waist and put hers around his, and she recited every prayer from the prayer book, his voice a tinny whisper alongside hers “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. . . Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known. . . Our Father who Art in heaven. . . forgive us our trespasses. . . Eternal God, in whose perfect kingdom no sword is drawn but the sword of righteousness. . . He was pretty sure she had them say the Pledge of Allegiance after singing “When We All Get to Heaven and “The Old Rugged Cross” and a hymn he’d never heard before, “There Is A Green Hill Far Away.” He’d felt as if he’d entered into a Sacred Prayer Circle, like his mother’s Sacred Séance Groups reserved only for the strongest believers. When Frances dialed the operator, Marietta Bone, to call for help, her fingers jabbed into the holes almost before they stopped spinning, and then let Coroner Anderson call that baby’s death SIDS, he knew he was trapped inside her Sacred Prayer Circle forever.

Look at him. On his knees beside her. Her waist so tiny, he could feel the bones of her rib cage, the edge of her hip. Like the girl he’d fallen for years before. So delicate, so in need of protection. Not everyone saw that about her, but he did. And Grace. Pastor Ginny did, too. He cleared his throat, feeling the past and the present blurring in this god-awful wash of rain and whiskey and wine and lavender mist.

“On earth as it is in heaven,” Frances said. “Give us this day our daily bread.” She pressed his waist hard, and he joined in, their voices an eerie whispering echo circling the dark room. “Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of Thy Holy Spirit. . .”
“Sing,” she said then, and she trilled that same old hymn they’d sung when Baby Nathan died, “There is a green hill, far away, without a city wall. . .where our dear Lord was crucified, He died to save us all. . .” Verse after verse. . .“And trust in his redeeming blood. . .” Leon had what Charlie called a Tourette attack.

He’d gotten her onto the couch and shoved the prayer cushion beneath her head. He sat opposite her in the dark, knitting, knocking back Jack straight from the new fifth he’d opened. He was knitting a black Batman sweater for Theo. He planned to stitch Batman in gold yarn across its back. He’d make a Superman red sweater. Settle the cape issue once and for all. He looked at the Indiglo watch Theo had given him for his birthday. Three-thirty a.m. One-and-a-half hours until he had to meet Mary by the giant elm at the top of the woods that the jogging trail looped around. His needles clicked, and he thought of Mary, thought of all the women he’d left rather than leave Frances. How he’d abandoned Catherine and their son. He’d sent her money every now and again, but the last sealed envelope came back. Moved. No forwarding address. Thank God he’d gotten the mail that day.

Lightning glimmered on the crucifix. Jesus looked miserable, his head slumped like that. Had he been thinking of Mary Magdalene in those last moments? Had, they, too, been having an affair? Was that the real reason God set Him up to suffer so hideously? Angry that his savior son had gone and fallen in lust like any other guy? So He’d nailed Him up in the rain? Leon was sure it was rainy and muddy the day Jesus hung bloody on the cross.
Leon kept trying to do the slip, slip stitch that the Batman sweater required, but the black yarn kept curling, snakelike. He slugged down more Jack. Frances’ breast lump took on a life force in his drunken mind. He saw it big, blurry edges green, with an ugly smile, like a monstrous dwarf’s face. More Jack. “Frances will die. Ha, ha,” it said, and Leon didn’t know if that idea terrified him, or if maybe he was in love with the idea, but he wasn’t going to think about that. No. Grace would help him sort out Frances and her lump. Mary floated into his vision. When was it he’d first noticed her? Grace’s high-school graduation party. She’d grown up. Golden skin. Breasts like Grace’s. Bigger. Spilling out all over the place, an invitation to bury his face in them. A tight little miniskirt showing off the most beautiful legs he’d ever seen. Slimmer even than Grace’s. Ankles tapered just so. Luscious brown hair cascading all over the place the way Grace’s golden curls did. Oh, God, fucking Mary was better than anyone else he’d ever fucked. Better than Catherine. Sonya, Abigail, Tammy. Linda didn’t count. A quickie out back of the Olde Towne Tavern. Not like Mary. Sliding inside her. Losing all sense of himself. And she kept his mind off Grace.

Leon’s penis engorged. He drank more whiskey. He tried inserting the tip of needle into the fronts of the stitches but couldn’t. He threw down his grandson’s sweater, tossed the needles to the floor. How had this thing with Mary happened? He picked up the bottle, set it between his legs. He’d done nothing about her at graduation, nothing. He’d kept his word, more or less, to Frances right up until last May. He gulped from the bottle. And then something happened to change that, something at Theo’s Sunday school graduation party. Mary. She came on to him.
Leon pushed himself up from the chair and moved over to Frances, the bottle in his hand. Cracker crumbs stuck to his wool socks. She lay passed out, face up on the couch. Her skin ashen in the shadows, lips a faint gash of blue. He tucked her mohair closer around her small shoulders. He kissed her pale cheek, ran his finger lightly over her jaw line. She was a beautiful woman, no question. And he knew in a way no one else did, even Pastor Ginny or Grace, how defenseless she was.

He weaved his way across the room to the door and went outside. Rain splattered him even beneath the porch roof. He pulled his bathrobe belt tighter and hurried down the steps and around to the side of the cottage to the stairs leading to the gunroom. His ankles throbbed. A quick look at some girlie magazines would calm him before he went to meet Mary. He tripped three times getting up the stairs, nearly falling. On the landing he got down on his hands and knees, searching for the secret cubby where he kept the key and a pen-sized flashlight. Rain soaked him. He got the key, opened the door, snapped on the penlight and stepped inside, the room so dim his blood turned gray, so cold he felt as if no human heart had even beaten in that room. He shuddered, shrugged off his sopping bathrobe, let it fall to the floor. Leon dropped the tiny flashlight and put the bottle to his mouth and guzzled what was left. He pulled off his wet socks. They had that soggy damp wool odor, like a wet dog but not so heavy, sort of sudsy in a clean way, yet dank, an odor Leon thought of as a winter smell. He lit three kerosene lanterns for light, an eerie glow of fume-filled shadows.

He went over to a small door that opened into a closet. Inside the closet was another door, small, invisible unless you knew where it was. He bent over and pressed the hidden lever he’d installed and unlocked it. An old porcelain jug sat in front of him. He
pulled out a couple of magazines from inside it. Then he sat in his damp boxer shorts in the middle of the room, a blanket from the cot thrown over his shoulders. Guns surrounded him. On the walls. In cabinets. He had a rare three-barrel shotgun hanging on the wall. A Luger in a special glass case. He stared at the magazine covers. Half-naked women. His father used to look at girlie magazines with him and Charlie when they were no more than nine, ten years old, sweaty, excited, his face and hands slick. Leon deliberately failed to remember his confusion at the time, the way he didn’t want to talk about it with Charlie, the way Charlie kept bringing it up, pushing it in his face, not letting it alone, talking about tits and cunts, the way he didn’t want to be around his father. Instead, he wondered if Theo was still too young for this kind of guy thing. Maybe he’d bring him up here for a look-see one of these days. A private thing between him and his grandson. The sweet odor of dead mice filtered out from the walls.

Mary. He was going to see Mary. He shouldn’t be drinking like this. How was he ever going to make it to their meeting spot? How was he going to get it up? A second wind, that’s how.

He managed to stand and get another fifth of Jack from the cupboard next to his twenty-two-rifle cabinet. Oh, God. Why’d he have to notice that? Why’d he have think about Charlie? His death. It was all so long ago. Leon fell onto the cot amidst the guns lying across it. He opened the bottle and sipped at it the way a baby might suckle a nipple. God. A baby. Nathan. No. That was an accident. He wanted him to stop crying, that’s all. And Charlie. Who knew what had happened to him? Not even the Sheriff.

The rain pounded on the cottage roof and inside his head. Leon put his hands over his ears as if that could stop its unrelenting sound, its terrible memories. He wanted his
knitting, but it was too much effort to get down those stairs and retrieve it. He could hear Johnny Cash crooning, *Somewhere far away a lonely bell was ringin’ And it echoes through the canyon like the disappearing dreams of yesterday.* He cleared his throat, a deep guttural sound that would have given Frances a fit.

More Jack. When these kinds of thoughts entered his mind at all, Leon told himself it was the H-Man. The H-Man haunted these mountains. Mama Essie had brought him up on those stories, told him she’d met the scarred man, touched his burn. “He drove your father away,” she’d whispered to him. The H-Man came outside on rainy days—that’s who’d been inside Charlie that afternoon, making up stories about Anna and her dead baby. “He killed the baby,” he’d grinned at Leon. “Suffocated it, choked the mother. The guy didn’t want a wife, a kid. Yep, killed the kid, killed them both.” Why’d he say that stuff and smile at him? A smile like he knew. “He didn’t want them.” Another grin and a wink. A wink creepier than Anna Stevens’s and her dead baby’s graves or the grin or even the rain that drowned them, washing the pine needles down the hillside, leaving the graves exposed. “Suffocation city,” Charlie said. “What do you think, Leon, a pillow? A teddy bear? Right over the kid’s face.” His voice keeping time to the ghastly thud of the rain and that drenching deluge every time the tree limbs rustled. The H-Man creeping ever nearer.

Leon gulped the Jack now. Great gulps in a way he hadn’t since when? Since Charlie’s death? Frances knew nothing of those circumstances, nothing.

Charlie headed off down the secluded mountainside, an area so far from civilization that he and Leon’d thought that they were the only two who’d ever stood on this land, seen this cemetery besides the H-Man and the killer of Anna and her baby.
He’d never heard any talk in town about these ancient graves. Not even from Mama Essie. Dead leaves from nearby birch and poplar trees, sticky pinecones and needles coated the ground. Sanctity encircled those lonely graves, maybe due to the absolute and utter loneliness Leon felt as he stood before them by himself. A loneliness that he thought might be him. Giant frogs crouched around a fetid pond nearby. He’d read about poison-dart frogs somewhere and wondered if these frogs were deadly. A stream, rushing from above, fell into a stone cavern no more than eight feet away. A sense of amazement filled his heart, his mind, and he’d felt on the edge of some unknown precipice.

Leon hurried to catch up to his older brother. Wet through to his skin despite the slicker, the rain pants. He followed behind Charlie for a half-mile or so, leaving those dreadful tombstones in the distance. Charlie never wore orange or any required hunting gear, so an accident wasn’t all that strange. It was November. Men from all over the county hunted in these hills. Every year, somebody got killed or hurt. Leon’s finger slipped. He was sure that it slipped. His twenty-two went off. Somewhere, Leon heard an answering shot. He thought it was Charlie. He kept walking toward his brother, calling his name. And then he saw the body, sprawled face down in the muddy leaves. He smelled the ripe, acrid scent of blood. He saw it then, red goo oozing down the hillside. Still, he leaned down beside the body, whispered, “Charlie?”, picked up his wrist and felt for a pulse. Nothing. Leon held his brother’s hand and peered through the dense trees. Nobody. Their house was far away, not even a dot in the distance. The rain pummeled him. A wind started up, rustling through all the woods, whispering, “H-Man, H-Man, H-Man.” Johnny Cash’s bass rumbled through the mountains, I shot a man in Reno, just to watch him die. This was no killing. No. An accident. Could have been Charlie’s own gun
done the damage. Leon didn’t feel anything except his own urgency. He saw Charlie’s gun half under him. Maybe Charlie had accidentally shot himself. It happened. A month or so ago, on a rainy day like this, Darby Harris’s finger slipped on the trigger of his twenty-two, and just like that, he was dead in his own backyard. Leon left Charlie’s gun where it was, dropped his brother’s hand, and ran as fast as he could to the secret path to the lake, a path he and Charlie staked out as their own. They laid traps to see if others ever walked that trail. No one did. Only him and his brother. Would he see Charlie in the sweet by and by? He flung his own rifle into a nearby section of the lake, a bottomless cove that no one but he and Charlie ever visited. Black water snakes and poisonous water moccasins slunk in and out of its algae-glutted water. Cattails clumped together, long stems waving in the building wind. The gun disappeared deep into its depths, part of the lakebed for all eternity.

He hurried back to Charlie’s body, knelt down and prayed. “Our Father who art in heaven”— always the Lord’s prayer. The calm the prayer brought to him blocked out the sounds of the rain, of the squirrels and chipmunks skittering around in the wet and the croak of the giant frogs that only he and Charlie knew about. An empty silence filling his ears until they ached. A pool of blood seeped from under his brother, dampening the leaves a sour crimson.

Leon wanted to turn him over, touch his face one last time, but he left him, his face in the mud and leaves and the blood. The mud and the blood and the beer humming through his brain. Yep. By the time he got home and alerted his family, he was desperate, crying, believing his own story because in a way it was true. “Charlie’s gone missing,” he said. Whole town trampling through the wet woods. Sheriff Anderson and his men
clearing away the hunters. Pastor Ginny and Frances leading prayer vigils. Rain
dousing candles faster than they could get them lit. “So soon after Baby Nathan,” Frances
kept wailing, “so soon, so soon.” Not to him. She wouldn’t look at him. To Pastor Ginny.
To any member of the parish who would listen. Inside the church the candles went out,
and the rain drummed so hard on the roof, their prayers got washed away. He and Frances
never talked about that rain-soaked day. Not the day Charlie went missing, not the day
Dave Smith from over to the far side of the lake found him. Sheriff called it an accident
and said a hunter either didn’t realize what he’d done or a scared hunter simply ran away.
Coroner Anderson said the angle of the bullet was such that Charlie could have done it
himself by accident. Mama Essie cremated Charlie, scattered his ashes, a flutter of soft
gray into the lake. Nothing left of him. No gravestone as a reminder. Nathan had
remained alone in his Styrofoam casket out at Mount Olivet’s Babyland. Nowhere near
Grace’s Isabel or Jonathan’s mother.

The Jack was gone. Leon tossed the bottle across the dank attic room upstairs in
the cottage into the wastebasket he’d fashioned out of tamarack and cattails. He picked
up his Colt 45 from the cot. This family wanted to play Russian Roulette, why, then,
they’d play Russian Roulette. He emptied out the bullets, left one round inside, spun it to
the right. He set one of the kerosene lanterns close by and got down on his hands and
knees. He crawled around the floor until he found the small black circle that marked the
exact spot over the couch where Frances’ head lay on the prayer cushion, a spot he’d
graphed years ago when she spent more hours on the couch than in their bed. The dot
smeared in front of his bleary eyes. Our Sacred Circle. And then, out of nowhere, he saw
Mama Essie’s eyes, vivid as neon, staring into his past and his future. He could see
something in those eyes that told him she saw a ghost, solid as granite, a ghost to
haunt him forever. The H-Man.

Leon cleared his throat and closed his eyes. When he opened them, the neon eyes
were gone. Drunken imagination. Nothing to worry about. He put the gun to the center of
the spot in the floor. Eight chances that it would go straight through the floor and
Frances’s head. He fired. Even before the sound reverberated inside him, louder than that
twenty-two rifle so many years before, a flash of gunpowder exploded, swift as a
lightning bolt. A phantom wisp of white smoke curled around his head, a mini aura of
orange and yellow. The smell of burnt gunpowder filled his nostrils the same way it had
from cap guns when he and Charlie were kids. The gun fell from his hand.

Leon sat on his haunches. His flaccid penis slipped out through the crack in his
boxers. He felt nothing. He looked at the hole in the floor and felt nothing. He stared at
the gun and felt nothing. He pictured Frances downstairs with a bullet through her head
and felt nothing. Maybe he’d shot himself. Maybe he was dead. He sat on the cot. That
dreadful stillness from the day the baby died hung in the room with him. So long ago, yet
there it was. He tasted its sticky, stale bile. Like that day he and Frances had gone
running to Jonathan and Grace’s and found their daughter huddled at the bottom of the
steps, her Hollerina doll upstairs melted into hot, smelly charred limbs on a cross. Bitter
odor of burned doll hair filling his nostrils and mouth. Sparks and glittery cinders floating
around the doll. Butterflies of flame drifted through the upstairs. God. Grace could have
burned down the whole house. Right now Leon sensed the H-Man nearby. He cradled his
head in his hands. He heard a quiet, desperate sound, a moaning. Frances? “The H-Man,”
his mother whispered in his ear.
He wiped his eyes, told himself whatever was downstairs was downstairs. “It is what it is,” that’s what Frances would say. He looked at his watch. Less than an hour left until he had to meet Mary. He was cleaning the gun. It went off. Accidents happened all the time. If he couldn’t meet Mary because of whatever he was going to find in that living room, he knew she’d understand once she found out the reason.

Leon forced himself from the cot and got the cleaning supplies from the shelf, set them down beside the gun. He erased the black circle. Funny how different the room looked without that Sacred Circle. Empty, bleak, unholy. Or were those his feelings? It didn’t matter. “Black Prayer Circles don’t matter, Mama Essie,” he said aloud, his voice that of a stranger’s. He crept into the inner closet and stashed the magazines. He left the gun on the cot. An accident was an accident, nothing to hide. He blew out the lanterns. Ghosts crept forth, vaporous creatures filling the gunroom.

Outside in the rain, wet gray bathrobe clinging to him, Leon gripped the stair railing, each step painful to his ankles and bare feet. The horizontal spheres of rain exploded against the cottage stairs, against him, with such force they luminasced into a billion pinpoints of light, like fireworks in the tarpaper sky. He nearly fell, but he didn’t notice if his heart sped up as he reached the porch and the front door that would take him to the couch. That’s how he thought of it. The couch. Not Frances. Rain kept coming. Thick, gray globules. A dead bird lay on the porch. Leon poked it with his foot. Water dribbled from its nostrils.

He opened the door. At first he couldn’t see anything. Then he made out a form on the floor beside the couch. Frances. Oh, God, what had he done? He fell twice as he weaved his way to the lump on the floor. After that blast of rain, the moon had slipped
through the ink, shining dully through the windows, casting shadows around the room. She lay face down, arms flung upward. An ugly silence filtered through the nothingness inside him, a silence tasting of vomit. He nudged the body with his foot. It was like trying to move a blob of Jell-O. He didn’t smell the thick acrid odor of blood. He knelt and put his hand to her wrist. She was alive, pulse beating. He pushed her over. It was like rolling over a slug of a rag doll. She flopped. On his knees he put his hand to her forehead. No hole. He got up and looked at the prayer cushion. Bullet hole, dead center. Went clear through the cushion and into the couch. He stared at Frances. She must have rolled off the sofa before he shot the gun. He stared at Jesus on the cross, but shadows blocked out the Lord.

Leon picked up the cushion and set it on the floor. He dug around inside the couch until he found the spent bullet. He shoved it into his bathrobe pocket, then found his way to his knitting bag. Brownish-gold yarn should do the trick. He shoved some inside the couch’s hole, knit it together quickly using a garter stitch, did the same with the cushion, then lay the cushion upside down on top of couch. He lifted Frances gently from the floor and laid her on the sofa. She looked pasty, defenseless. He thought that if Frances wanted secrets between them, she had another one to wake up to. She’d figure it out. She’d see her cushion, that yarn in the couch.

He kissed her. Laid the mohair over her. He placed his hand over hers, and placed hers over his. He touched her breast, ran his finger over the spot where the lump was, thinking maybe it had disappeared. No. There it was. Bigger than before, smooth, and rolling beneath his touch. Out of the nothingness he felt came a fear that pulsed in his ears so loudly it deafened him. He couldn’t even hear his own hum, the hum of Cash
lyrics he hummed to calm himself down—“*A cold wild wind has come. . .there’s someone for me somewhere. . .I still miss someone.*”

Leon made his way down the dark hallway to the bedroom. He felt detached from himself, as if the person struggling into his jogging clothes with a Viella shirt on top painstakingly wrapping his ankles wasn’t him at all. Doppelganger, that was a word he remembered Mama Essie using. But he couldn’t remember the context. The word drummed in his head. He could hear it as clearly as he heard the rain pounding on the cottage. Doubles, something to do with ghostly doubles. The word H-Man kept coming to him.

He stumbled out to the kitchen, trying to get away from whatever was in that bedroom. He grabbed his old green poncho from the closet and pulled it over his head. The rain’s splatter on the roof was harder than ever. He jerked on his Wellies over dry wool socks.

Outside, he traipsed down the path that led to the hidden trail into the mountains. Cold out. That chilling night cold they’d been having for the last couple months. Ice, he’d have to look out for ice. He was drunker than he’d thought. He stopped once and threw up a great splash of liquid. The feeling of being separate from himself stayed with him, two Leons, the one hiking the path and the one watching him. He had the distinct sensation of being followed. Mama Essie’s voice crept into his mind, “It’s the H-Man, sonny, the H-Man.” He put his hands over his ears and kept moving, pushing himself to get one foot in front of the other. His Wellies squished with each step.
He stopped to rest his ankles. Mary’d understand about the money. He wanted her to hold him, tell him he hadn’t made a mess of his life, everything would be okay. He heard a rustling and glanced behind him. Someone or something was on the trail with him. He slipped on an icy patch of leaves and fell hard onto his back. He wasn’t sure he could get up, and a part of him wondered if he even wanted to. It might be easier to lie down and die.

He sat and found himself crying. Sobs that came from somewhere so deep inside him they felt as if they were going to tear out his guts. Get yourself together, he told himself. He couldn’t figure out which Leon he was—which one was crying—the real one or the ghostly watcher. He shivered his Tourette shudder. He heard the echo of another sob, and realized it was his own moan. It’s Grace’s fault. She’s got to straighten up. She can’t just go off and do whatever she feels like doing. He didn’t like the idea of thinking his own daughter owed him, but she did. After all he’d done for her. Keeping the family together, setting an example of churchgoing, no matter the cost to him.

There. He was standing. The hood of his poncho dripped big droplets of rain, and the wet pine trees would have made it seem as if it were raining even if it had stopped. He wished he’d worn more than a sweatshirt and Viella shirt. He shuddered again, and he heard Charlie’s voice, “You got Tourettes like those boys locked up in the asylum.” But it wasn’t Charlie at all. It was the voice of the second Leon. Oh, God, what was happening to him? Another rustle. He looked over his shoulder. He had to get to Mary.

Up the trail, higher and higher. Now a dull and eerie pink gray light of dawn turned to flat gray, metallic, like the new guns he’d seen at the shows. He had less than
half a mile to go to reach their rendezvous spot, a secluded place, surrounded by boulders, a half mile off this already isolated trail.

The rain kept coming. Leon tried to run, but much of the path was slick and frozen. “Mary,” he called, more and more frightened. Who was that behind him?

And there she was. Standing right outside the circle of boulders, the place they’d made love these last months. She had on high red rain boots, a long red raincoat, its hood pulled over her teased hair.

“You’re late,” she said. “Do you have the money?”

Something instead him snapped. The money. What about him? What about all he’d been risking to sneak off and see her? He walked up to her and put his hands on her arms and shook her. She didn’t so much as flinch. “Money?” he said. “I don’t have any more money.”

Mary’s face look pointy to him, pinched and sulky. “What do you mean?”

Leon dropped his hands from her arms. They stood so close he could feel her breath on his face. Gum breath, Frances would have said. Cheap girls chewed gum, that’s what Frances would say. Mary’s mouth moved up and down, chomping.

“Have you seen the car I’m driving?” he said. His voice came from far away. The other Leon?

“You promised me a thousand dollars.”

“I don’t have it.”

“I need a car. You promised. I want a Ford Escape.” She didn’t say hybrid. That’s what Grace would have said. He’d never understood that ridiculous van of hers. She’d never pick out anything like that.
The rain was letting up, the sky lightening to pale gray, the color of Frances’s face when he left her on the couch. Money hung between him and Frances like the scum on his and Charlie’s frog ponds, but at least she didn’t put the topic into poisonous black words.

The boulders encircled Mary and Leon, and he had that feeling of being inside a Sacred Place again, a sinister feeling. It was Mama Essie’s Sacred Séance Circle, not a Prayer Circle, and he was on the outside, with the other Leon hidden away making the tin can moan. He remembered something he’d long ago forgotten. Someone in the séance circle became what he as little boy had thought of as a target—the member the others attacked, the one who didn’t belong, the one the séance circle pushed out as ruining the true communications the others received. Whoever got kicked out was kicked out forever. Evelyn Haskins, Basil Watrous, Maud Stone, Pete Shafer gone from Mama Essie’s circle forever. Funny, how the names came back to him. Through the crack in the closet door, he saw their faces, the shock, the fear, the desolation as they cringed from the house. Leon had the overwhelming feeling that someone didn’t belong inside this Sacred Boulder Circle. He found himself looking at Mary and seeing what Mama Essie would have called a chippy. Ratted hair, short skirt, and truth be told, her nail polish was what Frances would call whore red. And she was tense, pushy, wanting something from him. He heard moans oozing around the boulders’ edges.

Leon looked at her, face red as her coat, redder than his wife’s infernal rosacea, red as her boots, her voice loud, whining around his ears. He kept thinking about that tin can, and the moans started up again.
“You said we’d get married.” Mary’s voice trembled, but her eyes were hard and defiant. She moved even closer to him within the enclosure. “Lee-onne, oh, Lee-onne,” and there was that heavy perfume of hers, that smell of sandalwood, its scent noticeable even here among the wet mountain trees. From some dark place in his mind, it came to him that sandalwood was an Indo-Malaysian parasitic tree.

“You’re drunk,” she said.

“I am at that, my dear. Drunk as a skunk as Frances would say.” He moved so close to her that heir rain slickers sucked together.

Mary took a step back. “You stink of bourbon.” But she didn’t stop talking. “You said since the sale of your business you had more money than you knew what to do with. You said you’d pay for a Ford Escape. You said I could stop working at Wal-Mart.”

The rain started in again, vertically, steady and cold. He thought he smelled snow in the air, that odd chill that’s somewhere beyond rain.

“I’ve got to go,” Leon said. “I think it might snow.” The memory of snow and Grace and the near-drowning in the lake came back to him in a swell of great chunks of ice. He had to get away, fast. An unpleasant soft crackling sound in the woods, looped around the boulders, leaked inside their circle. The H-Man creeping ever closer. Leon had a taste in his mouth that started in his stomach and crawled dark and acrid, up the back of his throat and lay sour on his tongue—the same taste he got when Mama Essie made him hide in the closet.

“Go? We just got here. We’ve got plans to make.”

Her sandalwood smell choked him. Her made-up face was right in front of his. Her mascara-coated lashes clumped together. A crack of lightning streaked across the
sky, and the thunder followed fast as a gunshot. Hunters, Leon thought, but he knew hunters never came to this part of the mountain.

“Shut up.” Leon had to get away. Maybe that rustling wasn’t the H-Man at all. Maybe it was Charlie. The wet boulders felt more and more like Mama Essie’s Séance Circle. A black snake slithered past, its body circling and looping until it disappeared into the rocks.

Mary slapped his face. “Don’t you dare tell me to shut up. You owe me after all these months of sneaking around, making me promise not to tell anyone. And I haven’t. Not one single soul. Not my own mother. No one knows I meet you. No one knows where I am right now.” She slapped him again.

The two continued standing dead center in the circle. Leon pictured his hands around her neck. The other Leon groaned through the tin cup until the sound filled Leon’s ears, swallowed into its intricate labyrinths leading straight to his brain. He imagined her neck damp with rain, his hands wet. She looked at him, and he thought she looked liked Baby Nathan, soft, innocent, but then he saw the sharp pinch of her mouth, the way her nose pointed, the way her eyes held fear but contempt as well. It wouldn’t take much. His doppelganger could tighten his fingers around her neck, press hard, turn her face cherry, then pale, then pasty blue. He wasn’t drunk anymore. The adrenalin kicked in. It was as if yet a third Leon visited the mountain, a zombie Leon who’d become the H-Man. Yes, that’s what had happened. Mama Essie’d been right all along. There was an H-Man, and he was inside Leon. He knew exactly what he had to do. Her eyes would be wide with terror, her pupils red dots. She’d claw at his face, his hands, but it wouldn’t help. He’d crack her windpipe, listen to the horrible gurgling, smash her head against a rock to make
sure. When he let go of her, she’d slither into a pile of wet leaves, a heap of wet red oilskin, eyes fixed and glazed like a dead deer’s.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Mary pressed backward, against a slippery moldy boulder. “You’re scaring me.”

Leon remained where he was, dead center in the circle. “Get rid of the gum,” he said, but she didn’t. He could feel his heart ticking the way he imagined Mama Essie’s did after they put in the pacemaker. He reached out and—there—there was the H-Man putting his hands around her neck.

Mary gave him a violent shove that sent him slipping back against the rocks encircling them. He hit the back of his head against a sharp edge. He put his hand to the place on his head and it came away bloody. He touched the cut again. Thick, red goo. Charlie, he thought. “Charlie’s dead,” his mother’s voice tickled his ear. “Dead. You know that.”

Mary pushed him again. This time he hit the side of his head just above his eye, and he went sliding down into the wet leaves and pinecones. “You bastard,” she said. “You’ll never touch me again.” She opened her coat, her blouse and flung her braless breasts in his face. “You’ll never suck them again. Do you think I slept with you—you wrinkled old man—for any reason but your money? Ha!” She yanked her blouse closed, tied the belt of her rain slicker. “I’ve been cheating on you since day one, grandpa. With Darrell Spence—twenty years younger—fifty times richer. Don’t worry I’ll ever tell anyone about us.” She leaned down and spat on the top of his head. “I’d be embarrassed.” The blood from the gash near his eye blinded him. “Give me two weeks and I’ll have that Ford Escape, and I damn well may have big fucking rock on my ring finger, too.” One
last hurtful remark: “Ta, ta, asshole.” He didn’t even see her walk away. He started to cry and his tears mixed in the blood.

Leon didn’t know how long he sat in the circle in the rain. Didn’t know how long it was before he got on his knees and said the Lord’s Prayer. He sang “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” and recited the Ten Commandments. He tried to think what else Frances would have done. Oh, yes. “Oh, God, the Father of all, whose Son commanded us to love our enemies. . .” And then the Pledge of Allegiance. He left in the under God part. He finished with that hymn “There is a Green Hill Far Away.” He didn’t know if he was praying because of what he’d almost done to Mary or what she’d just done to him. Left him. Or could it be because of what he’d almost done to Frances? What he’d done to Baby Nathan? Maybe Charlie? Leon couldn’t think straight. The head traumas had damaged him. The bleeding had stopped, though, and so had the rain. He looked at the sky. Tree branches laced out across the grayish green in a montage of upended spiders. He looked at his watch. Six-fifteen a.m. He had to get home.

Slowly Leon stood, using a rock ledge for leverage. His ankles hurt. He bent down and tightened his ankle wraps inside the Wellies. He stumbled down the wet hillside to an old road, if you could call it that. Grace used to walk it with him, pinky linked to his. She called it the towpath. Charlie had called it the towpath, too. He passed a big old maple tree like the one he’d hung the swing on for Frances so many years before. He had a swift blurry memory of a day long ago when he’d hung that swing and the two of them had held hands, swinging high into the sky. Maybe the only time he felt his wife let loose and let him know she really loved him. He’d cried about Charlie with her that day. Something he’d never done with anyone else. He remembered the way he and
Charlie goaded the H-Man to come and get them. Charlie gone missing, dead all these years, nothing but long-gone ashes.

Well, the H-Man had nearly got him today.

He remembered how he used to sit in his car on this very towpath, alone in the fall and the fog would move in close to the lake, be there all around him like his warm mackinaw, the jacket he knew Grace pictured him as, and he’d savor the odd freedom he felt being free of Frances, Catherine, yes, Grace, too, and he’d savor the smell of the Catskill air at night. Dry, crisp. The leaves with that autumn odor and they’d turn colors and fall from the trees making it smell almost dusty and when the wind blew. The rattling of the dry leaves always made him think of a giant skeleton blowing in the wind. He’d pull on his flask and feel at peace in the loneliness of it and he’d breathe in the tinge of coolness, the smell of a wood fire off in the distance. He loved the soughing sound of the grass, reeds, weeds, cattails, tree leaves.

Why’d Mary have to go and act the way she did? Pushing at him? Demanding? Then dumping him, of all things. Calling him an old man. Leon kicked the tree trunk. He’d paid for that bitch’s tires. He kicked the tree again. He kicked it until his ankle hurt enough to make him cry out.

He stopped, cleared his throat. The H-Man inside him couldn’t afford to get angry. He was on his way to Frances. He limped now. Rain from the trees dripped. Rain. I hate the rain. I told Frances I hate the rain. Nothing but trouble. I told her we should have moved back to Mitford in September like everyone else. But no, Frances had to have it her way. Well, here was the result. No more Mary loving him, and she’d said such
terrible things. Bully for Frances. He needed Jack straight up when he got back to the cottage.

He glanced over his shoulder. Nobody. Just like the Johnny Cash’s song he found himself humming... *I’m full of nothing but pain*. *Who soothes my thumpin’, bumpin’ brain? Nobody*. . . He was almost to the cottage. The air was full of fog. The dirt path had turned to an earthen slurry from the hillsides turning to mud. He limped to the trees edging the path and threw up a shell casing full of gray vomit. He felt an uneasy shift in the wind. He looked up at the sky, expecting snowflakes—but so far, there weren’t any.

Frances sat in the bleak kitchen, sipping what appeared to be coffee, *nibbling* Saltines, wearing that worn-out bathrobe. She had bobby pinned her hair against her head. She’d creamed her face with that white gook she used. Funny how she still looked pretty to him. Nothing was going to hide that facial bone structure or the fragility of her shoulders, her small frame. She made him Leon again. He’d left the H-Man somewhere on that mountain. She’d even started a fire in the fireplace. Outside on the porch, the wind chimes warbled.

And then he saw it. The prayer cushion resting as a centerpiece on the table. The trail of Saltine crumbs was still visible on the floor. He stood watching her. Just like with Baby Nathan, he wanted to think of words that would make a difference, but there were none in any language he knew that would change a single thing. Without realizing it, he was humming again: *Just a few more weary days and then, I’ll fly away...*

“Fly away, eh? Fine song for you to be humming. Expecting to die, are you?” Frances said, voice strained. “I thought you had something else in mind.”
Leon’s face went slack, pasty. He knew it had that sheen he got in unpleasant situations. He’d brought the smell of the death with him, Charlie’s and Baby Nathan’s long-ago deaths mixed with wet pine needles and his desire to kill Mary. He pulled at his goatee and went outside to the porch.

He shrugged out of his poncho and hung it over the railing. He yanked off his Wellies. When he re-entered the cottage, Frances had a cup of coffee setting out for him. The electricity was back on. He walked to the cupboard and grabbed a fifth of Jack, pulled straight from the bottle.

“Starting kind of early.” Frances didn’t raise her eyes from her coffee mug, the mug that read The World’s Best Grandma. Leon smelled wine. The mug was a ruse. “Must have been quite a run you took this morning out in that storm. What happened to your face? H-Man get you?” She took a good look at him now. He knew she saw the blood on his jacket, too, from the gash in the back of his head.

Leon stared at her. She might as well be Mama Essie. He put a hand to his face, took it away. Touched the back of his head. Same thing. Blood. “I fell,” he said. “Twice. Cracked my head against some rocks.” Nervous sweat ran down his face, his throat. He went to the sink, using a paper towel wiped his face. She joined him at the sink, got a bottle of witch hazel and a cotton puff from under the sink and daubed his wounds. She wrapped a light layer of gauze around his head and taped a gauze patch above his eye. Then they both sat at the table across from each other, Leon with Jack in hand. The aroma of wet, steamy clothes filled the air.
“Better take off that Viella.” Frances left the room and returned with a flannel shirt, a pair of his new jeans, dry underwear and socks. She hung his wet clothes over the fireplace screen.

“Looks pretty bad,” Frances said. “There’s blood all over your clothes.” She didn’t say anything about the bullet hole, the dried yellow cornbread leaking in dribs and drabs onto the table. Guess his knitting job in the dark hadn’t been so good. He felt as if that same darkness of the previous night hung over them. “That was the long-awaited storm,” she said.

Leon cleared his throat. He shuddered. Tourettes, Bro. Charlie’s voice. He shivered at the sound. “No, no, it wasn’t,” he said. “A snow storm is going to follow this cold and rain. Snow, Frances, snow will be the storm.” She herself had a look of snow—white, very white, flaky. He was right. Snow would begin to fall—not one of those light snows that lay light on the ground; it would be a blizzard. Not today, not tomorrow but within the month. Definitely within the month. He knew it as surely as if he were Mama Essie himself.

“We’re moving to Mitford tomorrow, Frances. Here’s one time you’ll do what I say. We’re leaving the lake.”

“Storm blew in the smell from the orchards,” Frances said as if he hadn’t spoken. “Apples. Filling the whole cottage. Crisp apples.” She added, “I’m missing a packet of bobby pins.”

Such an unlikely non sequitur. Leon refused to look up from his Jack. He stared into its depths the way Mama Essie gazed into her crystal ball. The word apples thrummed through his brain, the same way those tin-cup groans had in the mountains.
Apples. Code for Baby Nathan. He heard Frances leave the room. She returned, threw
his knitting on the table. It landed on the prayer cushion. “Knit,” she said. “Fix my

“An accident with my new Colt. I didn’t know it was loaded. Guy what sold it to
me left a bullet in it.” Leon gulped down more Jack. He walked to the sink, dumped out
the coffee Frances had served him, and poured the Jack straight up into the mug. He
brought a bottle of Chardonnay to the table. “That mug’s not fooling me,” he said.
“Cleaning it. I was cleaning the gun.”

“I’m going to the Mitford early service at nine. I have to see Pastor Ginny about
Grace before the service starts. She won’t have time afterward. Pour us another drink
while I get ready,” Frances said. “Listen to me. You need to get a hold of Grace. She’s
got to be stopped.”

“You want me to miss church?”

“I don’t think it’ll make much difference this one time.” Frances looked right into
his eyes.

“It’s the first Sunday in Advent. Teresa’s singing “‘Come Thou Long Expected
Jesus.””

“I don’t care if it’s Easter Sunday, and Jesus Himself is singing ‘Jesus Christ Has
Risen Today,’” Frances rasped.

Frances’ urgency hit him between the eyes with the precision of a bullet, but still
he said, voice harsh and rusty, “I’m starving.” And he was. Famished as if nothing could
ever fill him up again. “Do you have time to cook me up some eggs and bacon?”
Six-thirty a.m. Grace woke and stretched out her arm. No Jonathan. He should be in bed. He’d agreed to baby sit Theo today.

The cloud light of morning slid beneath the window shade. She heard a blast from the air conditioner. Jonathan must have turned it on. It must still be hot despite the rain. For weeks, months now, something in the air wasn’t right—a thick gray moistness that held nothing but misery—arthritis in the old folks, stir-craziness in the kids. And for Grace, there was a creepy-crawly sameness about the days that made her on edge, made her feel closer to slipping away into a bleak emptiness from which there was no return. It made her wonder if Jesus was doing His job. The weather was part of it, wasn’t it? But there had been no rain since April, nothing to break the heat.

Until last night.

Rain straight from hell, that’s what it felt like if rain could fall upward. And it could. Grace and Theo had seen a show on the Discovery channel that explained that the “sink rate” was the rate at which water leaves a cloud, exceeding the supply of moisture arriving from the air and sea below. The moderator had said when that happened the clouds dissipated like “ghosts returning to the afterworld.” Oh, how she loved that expression. She’d grabbed a pen and paper and began to sketch the images that came to
her—three white dresses, artful and lush, each flowing into the other, from an exquisite opening ensemble, a satin, short, egg-shaped dress, to one with hemline embroidery, to a version with a tiny jacket with high armholes. She sketched lace-elevated trousers, too, and jackets blooming with tiers and ruffles. The clothes worked together to paint a single creative picture. Grace visualized how it was possible to see how one garment flowed naturally from the other. Oh, yes—“ghosts returning to the afterworld.” Hurricanes, though, the moderator went on to say, used wind to harvest moisture and deliver it to their centers. Somehow the rain then falls up and down. Or something like that. That was how last night’s torrents seemed. Rain that could do damage. Grace saw last night’s rainstorm as Maleficent’s costume in the Disney films—black, sharp, flowing into taut edges, pointing upward with two Devil’s horns.

She got up and flung open the window. Brrr—it was cold outside. And now the sun was back, not pink, but an odd metallic color like the back of her pleated blouse. She’d liked the shiny charcoaly color at the time, seeing it as noirish, a little daring, but now, looking at this weak sunlight without warmth and the clouds that were low and gray, appearing to be pillowing northward, ugly nappy fluff, she didn’t think she’d ever wear that blouse again. This weather was unsettling. That’s what it was. The freezing nights had only made the hot, glazed days more disturbing. What would this new chilly daytime grayness bring? Grace pictured the Dwayo skulking in the caves. She sensed her Grandma Essie’s presence, her favorite words, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*.

She turned off the air conditioner and walked into the bathroom. No Jonathan. She slid into a silky chemise robe.
Downstairs there was no trace of Jonathan. Not a coffee cup, no Raisin Bran, nothing. She felt as if something frighteningly significant was about to happen. Something that would change her life irrevocably. It caused her heart to lurch the way passing Baby Nathan’s locked bedroom did. She glanced out the sliding glass doors. A dead squirrel floated in the pool. How sad. It looked small, a baby squirrel, perhaps. Part of her, if she let herself admit it, had thought that maybe what she’d see was Jonathan, a bloated body in the now algae-coated pool. That’s how he made her feel. As if she didn’t do what he wanted, it would kill him. She knelt on the floor by the sliding glass doors. “Jesus, please,” she said, head bent, hands clasped. “I have to go. You said it was okay. Help me. Please.” No breeze. Not even a hushed whisper of one.

She got up and stared out the windows again. The sky was dead gray scabbed with green, the sun glittering along its edges. Unshed snow seemed to lurk behind the mountains and the sky’s unsettling green tint left from last night’s rain. She hurried to her studio, fearing now that Jonathan was inside, cutting up her tag-sale clothes, or worse, her blue brocade. Only now she’d decided to call it “bleu”—bleu brocade. She liked the sound of bleu rolling of her tongue—it whooshed like something free, airborne. Bl bl bl eu eu eu. She’d retrieved her sketches from the trash the night before once he’d finally gone to sleep. She knew he’d throw them away. She redid the drawings—only this time she’d made the fabric itself more integral to the overall design of both the dress and the skirt. She’d sketched a robe, too, not like Jesus’s wrinkled robes, but more of a cape along the lines of Theo’s Superhero capes. A Christmas present for Jesus. She had already made herself and Theo long, flowing capes of bleu brocade for Christmas. She’d placed her drawings from the night before inside the professional portfolio she’d hidden beneath
their bed. The capes were spectacular. Jesus’s would have a large red SJ stitched
across the back for Super Jesus. Theo’s had the traditional S in yellow, and hers was
plain. She liked the folds of Lycra and brocade without any additional embroidery.

Darkness enveloped the basement. Her studio door was shut, no one inside. He
must be in his closet. Grace made her way across the shadowy basement, but no light
glowed beneath Jonathan’s closet’s door. The padlock was closed.

The garage. She had to check the garage. Carbon monoxide. Would he do that?
She might envision a drowned body, but she couldn’t see him breathing in enough fumes
to kill himself—not with that crazy breathing thing he did all the time—only enough to
scare her, to make her do what he wanted. Still, she ran.

The Jeep was gone.

She collapsed on the garage step leading into the laundry room, head in her hands.
At least he wasn’t dead, but he’d left. Maybe gone to Carol’s. Run off to her because of
their fight. She didn’t want to believe that, but she could just see them tangled in Carol’s
cheap, vinyl rubbery self doing that ridiculous scuffle dance of hers.

And he’d promised to baby sit. Promised. In a way, his breaking his word on such
an important occasion felt like a partial death to her. As if he’d slowly kill her through
more and more disappointments. Yes, that fit his personality much better than him killing
himself. Snug as the smoothest Lycra. This workshop at Parson’s held out hope for her,
for Grace’s Own. She had to go. She sensed this was her last chance for escape into a
world of her own making. It might mean leaving Jonathan, but it didn’t have to mean
leaving him. If he’d only listen, talk with her, discuss the possibilities, who knows what
they could work out? Why did he have to be so threatened? So threatening? A silk slip of breeze slid past, lifting her hair from her shoulders, a quiver of cozy familiarity.

“Jesus?” Grace called.

Another slivery breeze. She knew it was Jesus—she didn’t have to ask again. A kiss of air across her lips.

“That settles it,” she said aloud. “I’m going to New York today. Someone else will have to watch Theo.”

It was eight o’clock before Grace was ready to awaken Theo. She wore a sleeveless creamy white satin top with a retro-funnel neckline that showed the barest hint of cleavage, a tight cotton and Lycra black bolero jacket, short-sleeved and without lapels, but the glory of the ensemble was the skirt—a black polka-dot lace ostrich feather skirt, the waistband five inches deep, the same black Lycra as the jacket, the polka-dot lace drifting past her knees and the feathers fluttering everywhere, below her knees, above her knees, right up to the waist. Spectacular. It had taken weeks to make. Short boots—a vivid hot pink called “buvard,” the color of French blotting paper—with kiss-me heels, black fishnet stockings, and Grace’s long curly blond hair flying free down her shoulders completed the look. A textured, layered, extravagant, sexy, sumptuous look that announced change and daring. Janelle Chantelle would take notice.

She opened Theo’s door. He was out of bed, dressed in corduroy and a Clarke Tire Store T-shirt. The outfit hurt her feelings, a twinge of her heartstrings, but today she couldn’t afford to care. They had to get going if she were going to stop at Suzanne’s house with Theo.
First words out of Theo’s mouth were, “Has Daddy seen you?”

Grace shook her head, no.

“You look beautiful. Better than Supergirl or Wonder Woman.” He sniffed.

“You smell good.”

She got on her knees, crushing feathers, and hugged her son. “You smell good, too,” she said, and he did. He smelled of her nonnie, safety and softness, that lovely weave of powdery threads that had been making up her identity. She squeezed him and kissed him on top of his head.

“No more kissing. I’m almost seven. Just a few more weeks.” Grace wondered when he’d realize he’d been born “early.” She’d told herself Jesus had to have forgiven her or he wouldn’t have had Theo born on His own birthday. Theo wiped off the kiss with the back of his hand. “Where’s Dad? I’m helping him at the store today.”

Grace sat on his bed, the striped bedspread pulled into perfect straight lines, the Superman pillowcase creased smoothly as if an old-fashioned mangle like Jonathan’s mother’s had done the job. She’d had a wringer washer, too. Humpty lay centered on the pillow. “What are you talking about?”

Theo walked over to his dresser, started waking his super figures, his back to Grace. “I heard you and Dad talking last night. You’re going to New York. Daddy said he was going to baby sit me.” He pulled Wonder Woman from her toilet-paper cylinder.

Grace twirled a strand of hair around her finger. “How could you hear us? The monitor?” She fluffed her feathers.

Theo stood Batman beside Superman and made them clasp hands.

“Were you in the basement?”
Theo nodded yes to his dresser. “I had a strange dream. Daddy was standing on the shore of the lake alone. I couldn’t find you in the dream, Mommy. I kept yelling to Dad. He couldn’t hear me.” A pause. Then, “He had on a kind of floaty dress, and he kept twirling and laughing. Nothing like he is at home.”

“Why didn’t you use your monitor?” Grace’s heart lurched again. Mommy, he’d called her, for the first time in months. What had he heard? Why in heaven’s name would he dream of Jonathan in a dress? At the lake? What had she and Jonathan said?

“I put new batteries in it last night,” she said. The monitor was missing from Theo’s bedside stand where she’d left it. “Theo, look at me. Where is your monitor?”

Theo shuffled his baseball cards, head down. “The dream made me think of Daddy being the evil Riddler again. Having two different outfits. Different selves. You know?”

Grace walked to his wastebasket and retrieved the monitor. Theo’s dream unnerved her. Her skirt’s feathers fluttered. “This is for your safety.” They did not have time for this scene right now. She’d told Minette she’d take an early train. Nervousness made her heart do a little flipping thing, her hands sweat. She feared her face was turning red like her mother’s.

Theo faced her. “All the kids make fun of me. That bruise on my cheek last week? Not from soccer.”

Grace saw him take a deep breath. He tried hard to hold it. She heard the little catch-in-his-throat sound that he made when he was trying not to cry. She started toward him, but he ran over to his bed and buried his face in his pillow, clasped Humpty in his arms. The only way Grace knew he was crying was because his shoulders shook.
She sat beside him, and he let her pull him into her lap. Humpty fell to the floor. Theo laid his head on her chest, and she hated herself because she was worrying that his tears would stain her satin shirt before Parson’s Janelle Chantelle got a glimpse of it. She also knew Theo would never ruin his pillowcase over squabbles at school. He was crying about her and Jonathan fighting and maybe over the dream.

“It’s just a dream, sweetie,” she said.

Theo shrugged, his head still down.

“You’re right about the monitors,” she said. “You and I can find someplace secret to put them away.”

Theo lifted his head. “Like bury them?”

“We can bury them if you want to. There’s a dead squirrel in the pool we’ve got to do something with, too.”

“Let’s throw out the monitors. In the kitchen trash basket.” He climbed off her lap and ran into the hallway. She knew he was in her and Jonathan’s bedroom getting her monitor. She fell to her knees, clasped her hands together. “Help me, Jesus,” she whispered. Without the monitor she had no safety net. She imagined Theo six feet tall, marching off to college, monitor in hand. She leaned over, hand to her heart. If ever she needed her nonnie to enfold her, now was the time. She was about to jump off the cliff against her family’s wishes into the black unknown of Parson’s, put her designs on the line in front of Janelle Chantelle, and her son had to choose the same day to throw away their connection to his babyhood, the very part of him that made her who she was. “Help me,” she whispered again. No familiar whisk of wind, no cuddly warmth. Oh, no. Was her nonnie, its soft threads of Theo, gone forever? Was Jesus?
Silence. And then a hint of a tune, a hymn. “Louder,” she said. “Louder,” but still, she couldn’t hear. Only a vague memory came to her, a word, two words. City wall.

What did they mean? “Jesus?” A hazy hum came to her in a low tenor, “Where my dear Lord was crucified,” followed by silence. The whole hymn was coming to her, she could feel it, she needed a word or two more, then she’d understand what He was telling her.

“Oh, please, Jesus,” she cried out. “More.”

“The monitors are gone,” announced Theo from the doorway. “Get up,” he said. “Daddy says when you kneel it leads to trouble. Plus, you’re going to ruin your feathers.”

At first Grace thought it was Jesus’ voice speaking to her. “What?” she asked.

“What?”

“Mom,” Theo said. “What’s wrong with you? Get off your knees. Dad says you shouldn’t do that. You’re scaring me.”

This time she realized it was Theo, and she heard the tremble in his voice. She stood, moved to Theo’s bedroom window, hoping to see lilacs blossoming into organza and lace or the Bradford pear blooming into lovely lush floral-print tulle gowns, spreading their autumn yellow petals across the lawn, layer upon layer, golden centers shimmering.

Nothing.

Only the dead buckeye tree, gray and thin as one of her mother’s bobby pins.

And then Grace glimpsed a dress, a sheer dress of gray netting, a netting not unlike the lake’s wintertime silver mesh. Her mousseline! Oh, she needed a pencil. Quick. The dress was formfitting and fancy, gauzy, hints of pink glitter and so many ruches running up and
down its length that an entirely new style of hem filled her imagination. She ran to Theo’s desk, scrabbled for a pencil, a pen, paper.

“Don’t mess up my things,” Theo said.

Grace stopped, the mesh web entangling her. She gasped for air, the silvery threads wrapped around her throat.

Her son stared at her. “Where’s Dad?”

She touched her neck. Nothing but warm skin. She ran her index finger up and down her satin top. Twisted a strand of hair. “He’s not home, honey. I think he must have left early for work.”

Theo marched to his bed, yanked hard on the bedspread, smoothed it. He lifted the pillow and held it up by the ends of the pillowcase and shook it. He placed it on the bed and ran his hands over it until it had that ironing-press appearance. “There were stones in my dream, too,” he said. “Big round stones like in a stone wall piling around Daddy in a circle. High and higher like a wall.” He left the room. Grace knew he’d be back with his vacuum cleaner.

When he re-entered, he plugged in the Electric Broom and pulled it across the carpet, his movements quick and jagged. His face was red and so were his eyes.

“Enough,” Grace yelled. “I’ve got to get to New York. Let’s eat breakfast and get you to Brad’s.”

Theo shut off the cleaner and wrapped the cord around his hand and placed it on the Electric Broom’s hook. He put the vacuum in his bedroom closet. Grace said nothing, knew he’d want it close that night when he went to bed. “Wait outside my room, Mom,” Theo said. “Close the door. I’ll be right out.”
Grace grabbed Humpty and walked into the hallway, pulling shut the door behind her. She felt as if she were stepping into some odd Twilight Zone where she’d been before, someplace lonely and bleak, an empty hole. She ran her index finger up and down her satin top until it burned. She’s slipping, sliding, sinking into something black and cold. Grace sank to the floor, yanked her knees up to her chest, wrapped her arms around them, Humpty Dumpty crushed in between.

Theo flung open his door. He was dressed as Superman, from his blue tights to his red high-top Converse. “I need boots, Mom,” he said. “Superman didn’t wear sneakers.”

“Boots,” Grace said, still on the floor.

“Red boots.” He held out his red cape to her, and she snapped it onto his shirt.

“Boots,” she said again.

“Mom. Get up. Superman wears red boots. You know that. I told you this a long time ago. They peak in the front like a triangle.

“I’ll look for them in New York today.”

“You can put Humpty on your bed if you want to.” Theo took Humpty from Grace’s hands and ran into her and Jonathan’s room. He came back empty handed. “He’s on your side of the bed.”

All Grace could think of was the old nursery rhyme: *Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall, All the king’s horses and all the king’s men couldn’t put Humpty together again.*
Grace and Theo stood on the Kost’s front stoop. A little wave of mist spread out across the neighborhoods lawns. Grace had flung a velvet capelet with a velveteen collar over her shoulders and carried her portfolio. Theo held his blue flannel sack that Grace had designed with spaces for each super figure and a heavy zip-up sweater.

Suzanne answered the door, Lisa holding onto her leg, Brad standing close behind them. Suzanne looked more rabbity than ever, pink-eyed, nose pink-tipped and twitchy. She wore a God-awful red-plaid bathrobe that made her skin appear to have a cherry rash.

“Can you look after Theo today?” Grace said. “I promised Minette I’d meet her in New York this morning. Jonathan said he’d baby sit, but he’s left for work.”

Suzanne reached for Lisa and shifted her onto her hip. “I didn’t think you and Minette were speaking.”

Grace tilted her head.

“That’s what Teresa said,” Suzanne said, defensive.

“Teresa doesn’t know everything,” Grace said. “I’m going to a design workshop.” Just saying those words made Grace’s voice grow louder. “One of the newest, hippest designers is going to be there. Janelle Chantelle.” Oh, she loved the way that name rolled off her tongue. JJJJ aaaa NNNN elle SH SH SH an an an TTTT elle elle elle. “She’s somebody who knows how one outfit in a collection will set in motion any concept the designer has.”

“Your mother told the church women’s group that you and Minette had a falling out. It’s not just Teresa.”

Grace flushed. “Can you baby sit or not?”
“How can you not go to church the first Sunday in Advent—the preparation for Christ’s coming? What are you teaching Theo?”

“Why don’t you take him with you to church? I’ve taken Brad and Lisa plenty of times.” Grace shivered. The cool air swayed around her.

“You never made me that outfit you promised. The one with the slit up the side.” She gave Grace a hard look. “Yet you had time to sew on those feathers. How long did that take you? Five, six days? A week? A month?” To Grace’s dismay, Suzanne started crying.

Brad pushed his way passed his mother onto the porch. “Let’s play soccer,” he said to Theo. He made a kicking motion with his left leg.

“No.” Suzanne’s voice was loud. “We’re busy today. Sorry. We’re getting ready for church right now, and we’re not wearing costumes, either.” She pulled Brad hard by the arm until he was inside the house with her. “Mike moved out yesterday,” she said. “But maybe you already know that. Maybe you knew that if you made me some clothes like yours it might have kept him from leaving. Maybe that’s why you never made me one damn thing.” She shut the door in Grace’s face. More of Grace felt dead. It wasn’t that she felt entitled to Jonathan’s or Suzanne’s or her other friends’ help, she just didn’t understand why they weren’t willing. She’d never done anything but help her husband, Suzanne, the towns of Mitford and Hudsondale. Was it so wrong to need something for herself? Her teeth chattered. At the same time sweat gathered in her armpits. She’d ruin her dress. What was she going to do? NNN ew ew Yor Yor KKK NNN ew ew Yor Yor KKK NNN ew ew Yor Yor KKK.
Suzanne flung open the door. “It’s not you, is it? Tell me it’s not you.” Her entire face flamed. “I’ve seen the way he looks at you.”

“How can you even ask me that?” Grace said. “How dare you?”

Lisa and Brad both grabbed onto Suzanne and her bathrobe opened. Even her pubic hair was red. No, not red. Orange. She’s got orange pubic hair. Grace couldn’t think beyond that amazing fact to the accusation, to anything Suzanne had to say. The Bozo the Clown pubic hair silenced her.

“You’re the only one in this neighborhood who parades around like some kind of beauty queen!” Suzanne shouted. “You’re the one with that blond hair, the short skirts, the cleavage!”

Theo stepped in front of Grace. “You leave my mother alone,” he said. “Don’t yell at her.” He used both hands to flutter his cape. “You shouldn’t be naked under your bathrobe,” he said. “Mothers aren’t supposed to be naked.”

Brad and Lisa stood silent, shocked, unrealizing. Suzanne slammed the door.

Grace stood motionless on the porch. She felt as if someone had punched her and it wasn’t just Suzanne’s ridiculous attack, it was Jonathan, her parents, New York, Minette, Janelle Chantelle. She’d baby sat for Suzanne a million times. For Betsy two doors down and Michele’s beautiful adopted Chinese little girl and Cari’s dogs and Debbie’s twins—why, everyone in the cul-de-sac. She faced the neighborhood houses. All was unnaturally still. No leaves rustling. No squirrels chattering. No birds singing. The fluttering of curtains, the slide of shades coming down, the gentle whistle of doors filled the ugly silence. They all thought what? That she was Mike’s girlfriend? That he’d
left Suzanne for her? Why? Because she liked clothes and makeup? Because Mike couldn’t keep away from her at ballgames? Because Jonathan was never home?

Theo tugged on her hand. “I’ll go to New York with you.” He fluffed his cape and jumped the four steps to the concrete sidewalk leading to the driveway. He faced her.

“C’mon. Jump.”

Theo pointed to the front window. Brad and Lisa’s faces pressed against the glass. Both appeared miserable. Theo lifted his hand in a wave. Brad stuck out his tongue at Theo. Theo returned the gesture.

“Don’t do that,” Grace said. “If Brad’s an idiot, you don’t have be one. Superman’s a bigger person than that.” She pulled her capelet tighter around her.

Theo repeated, “Jump.”

Grace teetered at the edge of the porch. Four steps. Not so far. Through the awkward scared tumbling of her heart she heard only the vaguest squeak of Theo:

“C’mon, Mom! You can do it.”

She closed her eyes, put out her arms, wanting desperately to jump. She opened her eyes. “I can’t,” she said.

“You’ve jumped one step before,” Theo said. “Try two.”

Grace walked down one step, then another.


Grace realized her feathers had begun to flutter. A mere whispery flutter but a flutter all the same. She would wing her way to the sidewalk. That’s what she’d do. She closed her eyes again and jumped. She landed on both feet without so much as scuffing
her pink boots. Something inside her quivered, as if it might soar with life. “I did it,”
she said, amazed.

Theo clapped.

“Okay, then.” She grabbed Theo by the hand. “We’re going to try Debbie. You
know I’ve watched those monstrous twins, Trevor and Nate, like a hundred times.”

They marched to the house at the right corner of the cul-de-sac, Grace’s boots’
miniature high heels making a steady click-clack. She knocked on the door. It swung
open before she could pull away my hand.

“You want me to baby sit, don’t you?” Men’s flannel pajamas hung on Debbie.
Tony, her husband, hovered behind her. “Suzanne called and said you’re going to New
York.” She didn’t invite them inside. She patted Grace’s shoulder, a pat that conveyed
horror by its tentative touch and by the odd paleness of her face. She saw Debbie take in
her skirt’s feathers, her tight bodice, her fishnet stockings and pink boots in a quick,
downward sweep of her eyes. “I can’t,” she said.

“You mean you won’t.” It came to Grace with a slight slivery sweep of air that
her ambitions, her flight to New York for an afternoon, her wanting more than a husband
who provided, threatened the infrastructure that held the neighborhood together,
frightening the whole culture that made up suburbia. She looked at Debbie’s
apprehensive expression and knew that Suzanne had made her think she, Grace, was the
reason Mike had left and that she, Debbie, was now wondering if her hold on Tony was
as strong as she thought.

Tony stepped up beside Debbie, putting his arm around her waist. “We’re getting
ready for church,” he said. “Maybe that’s what you should be doing,” but his pompous
words didn’t keep him from taking a peek at the sliver of Grace’s cleavage. She
looked straight at him. Aha! He thought she was a bad influence. She might lead Debbie
astray. Pretty strange coming from a guy who’d tried to kiss her at the neighborhood
Thanksgiving party, a guy who’d whispered to her, “You are the most beautiful woman
I’ve ever seen,” and even as she’d held herself back from him, something inside her
wanted to fall into his arms, let him love her with words and body, show him how
desperately she needed that validation. The rest of the evening, she’d positively glittered
from his compliment. Other men’s eyes followed her about as she sipped champagne, bit
into patè-slathered crackers, and she’d loved the sense of power their admiration gave
her. It didn’t matter that Jonathan hadn’t made it to the party, that he had to work.

Tony shut the door, leaving Grace, her face a bare inch from the wood, feeling as
if she were coming undone. Male admiration wasn’t power. Grace’s Own—now that was
power.

Grace turned around on the stoop and took Theo’s hand once again. “We’re both
going to jump one step,” she said. “That’s all I can manage.” She didn’t wait for a waft of
wind or a hum of a hymn, she held fast to Theo’s hand, said, “One, two, three, jump!”
and the two of them leaped one step to the walkway, Theo’s cape flapping behind him,
Grace’s feathers trembling. She twisted her ankle and started to cry. On the sidewalk,
Theo tapped the top of Grace’s hand three times. “Don’t cry, Mommy.” Theo’s voice
shook more than her feathers. She ran her finger up and down the creamy satin of her
bodice. At last she tapped back.

“It doesn’t matter, Mom. I’ll go with you.”
“No, we’re going to drive to Pastor Ginny’s. She’ll help me. I know she will.”

She looked at her watch. “It’s already after nine-thirty. We’ve got to hurry. I want to catch her between services.” She almost ran down the street to their own garage, Theo flying along at her side. They jumped into the van and fastened their seatbelts, Grace in the driver’s seat, Theo in the back, his pouch with his super figures tucked close beside him.

“We’re off!” Theo cried. “VVrrrooom.”

“VVV RRRR OOO MMMM,” Grace yelled.

In less than forty-five minutes Grace and Theo reached Mitford’s St. Paul’s Church. “We’re like the Batmobile,” Theo said. ”VVrrrooom.!” He climbed out of the van. “There’s Grammy!” he shouted, and raced through the parking lot.

Grace stared. Theo was right. Her mother was climbing into the old Pontiac. She slumped down in the car and held out her arms to Theo, who ran right into them and hugged her. “Where’s Grampy Lion?” he said. Grace trudged across the lot, feeling the eyes of the entire early-service congregation staring at her. Teresa in her pregnant state, waddled over to Grace and said, “Jesus is your personal savior. He’ll be so glad you’re here to prepare for His birth. God bless.” Frank remained by their car, the three kids already inside.

Jimmy Summers came over and said, “Jonathan sure is lucky.”

“What are you talking about?” Grace said.

Jimmy turned bright red. Instead of answering, he knelt down and opened his trumpet case. Right in the parking lot he turned the instrument toward the green-gray sky
and the utter stillness of the black line of mountains and trumpeted the “Ava Maria.”
Everyone remained motionless. The notes hung in the air long after he played them.
Grace saw them forming a shroud, a bloody, stained shroud with the word Turin embossed across it. When Jimmy stopped playing, trumpet still in hand, he stepped close to her and whispered, “You’re my Ava Maria.” He blushed so furiously that he left before Grace could respond. And what was there to say to that, anyway? By now people were edging their cars away from the church. Grace walked over to her mother. The smell of wine wafted from the car.

“You can’t drive if you’ve been drinking,” Grace said.

“Where on earth do you think you’re going dressed like that?”

“Let me get someone to drive you to the lake,” Grace said. “Where’s Dad?”

“He’s packing. He says we’re moving back to Mitford today.” Frances spoke in the loud voice of someone who’s drunk. “We could use your help. Especially since his ankles are acting up again.”

“Mom’s going to New York,” Theo chirped. “She needs somebody to baby sit me. Can I come with you, Grammy?”

“No.” The word was out of Grace’s mouth so fast, she barely realized she’d said it. Theo was not climbing inside that car with her mother three sheets to the wind.

“Mother, someone needs to drive you back to the lake. Let me go see who Pastor Ginny can find.”

Grace’s mother’s spit out: “Of course I smell like wine. I took Holy Communion like a good Christian. I wasn’t driving from Hudsondale to Mitford in search of baby
sitters so I could go off and leave my husband and child and parade my ridiculous
clothes around in front of a bunch of other idiots.”

Grace grabbed Theo from the car.

“I’ve got to get to your Grampy Lion and help pack.” Her mother shook her
finger in Grace’s face. “What goes around, comes around,” she said, pulling shut the door
and taking off in a fishtail of Pontiac Catalina. Black smoke curled from the exhaust pipe
in a crazy swirl of brooding gray doilies. Grace watched the car weave its way down
Route 39 toward the lake.

Theo and Grace were the only ones left in the church parking lot. Theo took hold
of his mother’s hand and tapped three times. It took all her willpower to tap back. She’s
slipping again, slipping, sliding, sinking into the black cold of nothingness. A place she’s
been and never wants to go again. A place of nightmares. A place that tried to drown her.
A place that was the ultimate Fortress of Solitude. She plucked a feather off her dress,
threw it on the ground and stomped on it. Her mother could wreck the car and die. A
small part of Grace rose up and said, “Good,” but she immediately asked for God’s
forgiveness. She didn’t go through Jesus. She knew what He’d think of such an ugly
thought. Her mother was her mother. She would reach the cottage safely. She always did.
Grace plucked another feather and another.

Theo grabbed at her, putting his arms around her. “Don’t, Mommy. Your feathers
are beautiful. Like four and twenty blackbirds before they got baked in a pie.” Grace
could feel him holding his breath, hear that little catch in his throat. She bent down to
him. “It’s okay,” she said. “My mother hurt my feelings, that’s all.” Theo and she looked
at each other. “Moms make mistakes sometimes,” he said.
Grace straightened, and she and Theo held hands without moving. The menacing quiet was nearly unbearable. No crackling of the dried and rumpled leaves, no squawking of the geese from the nearby pond, no sound at all. Far off in the distance, Grace saw what seemed to be a low, gray cloud. Again, all she could think of was a covering for the dead. The Tuttle Funeral Home in Mitford had actually asked her to create shrouds for bodies waiting for embalming. She made them, too. Ten. For free, of course. She hadn’t used mousseline but a pale gray linen fabric that she’d lined with charcoal gray nylon. The idea of her creations covering the dead made her sick. Why had she done it? To please, to keep her mother happy, to satisfy Jonathan, who wanted the Tuttle’s hearses’ and limosenes’ tire business. He got it, too.

Grace wanted to run inside the church and have Pastor Ginny hold her, tell her all would be okay, that fulfilling her own dreams had meaning. That the barren nothingness would go away.

She looked at Theo. “Let’s go talk to Pastor Ginny,” she said. “I bet she’ll babysit for you. I’ve certainly cared for the nursery and Sunday school for enough years.”

“Why can’t I go with you?” Theo kept his eyes on the sack of super figures that he had slung over one shoulder. He pulled out Superman and held him in the palm of his hand.

“It’s something I have to do on my own,” Grace said.

“Like when Superman goes to his Fortress of Solitude?”

“Sort of—but they’ll be other grown ups who design clothes.”

“I’d like a Krypto dog.” Theo looked at Grace. “Superman wants one, too.”
“A live one?” One more thing to tie me down, Grace thought, and then quickly tapped Theo’s hand three times.

“No, a super figure one. Krypto keeps Superman company. One time he helped Superman carry out a plan that kept an ex-con from uncovering his real identity.”

“Ex-con?”

“Yeah, like a guy who’s been in prison.”

Grace laughed and at the same time wondered how it was that she could laugh when it was she who was the shroud, not the cloud. She saw herself as the costume Jeanne Moreau wore in the movie The Bride Wore Black—an amazing Prada concoction of black on black, the actress disappearing into the blackness as if she, like Grace, had fallen into a black hole. But there was something so alive about Theo, his dear little face, his earnestness, that’s how she could laugh. “I know that’s what an ex-con is,” she said.

“How do you know that?”

Theo laughed, a wonderfully giggly chuckle as if he were so relieved to hear her laugh, he couldn’t contain his joy. He fluffed his cape. He wrapped his sweatshirt around his waist and tied it in a knot. “I know from the comics. You read them to me, silly.” He laughed again. “The ex-con’s name is Hal Colby. You read that to me a couple nights ago.”

“Silly me,” Grace said.

The two hurried around to the church’s back door, the only sound the CL III CK CK CK of Grace’s kiss-me heels, a noise that came across as a threatening CL AT AT TER TER TER in the flat day. Especially as it was a day that should be full of the
thrilling ecstasy of getting ready for Jesus’s impending birth. Pastor Ginny would be in her office, touching up her sermon or adjusting her alb. She’d have another service soon.

Grace knocked on Ginny’s door.


“Thayer-Clarke,” Grace said.

“Superman,” Theo said.

Pastor Ginny’s office smelled musty, old, the furnishings dating from at least Grandma Essie’s day—not that she’d ever gone to church. Ginny sat behind the large desk, motioning Grace and Theo to the chairs facing her. In the dim lighting fighting its way in through stained-glass windows, Grace saw dust moats floating between Ginny’s chair and hers and Theo’s. A distasteful sweet odor flirted around her like an unwanted suitor—like Mike Kost or Tony Miller. Grace and Theo sat.

“We’ve missed you,” Pastor Ginny said. “A lot of people here feel let down when you don’t pitch in.” She shook her head. Not one gray hair moved. It appeared shellacked into place. “Not a single costume for our Thanksgiving play this year. You weren’t even here. You haven’t washed and starched collars or washed and ironed my albs or the choir robes. You’ve left St. Paul’s in a bind. Not a word about costumes for the Christmas pageant. Teresa’s mother has had to do the nursery. First commandment: ‘I am the Lord, Thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage: Thou shalt have no other gods before Me.’”

She looked Grace up and down from behind her desk. “Stand,” she said, and Grace did. “Certainly fashion isn’t a god,” Pastor Ginny said.
Theo pulled Wonder Woman out of his bag. “Look at the silver cuffs my mom made for her. Like the real Wonder Woman. Red stars stitched on them, too. They deflect bullets.” He set Wonder Woman to walking across the edge of Pastor Ginny’s desk. “She fixed the Spiderman watch my dad got me. Used Velcro so it would fit me.”

“I don’t see you wearing it,” Pastor Ginny said.

An awkward silence hovered in the musty room. Grace continued to stand. She had done so much for this church. Wasn’t it time for somebody to help her? Theo gently wiggled a cluster of her feathers, and Grace sat.

“Our mother says you haven’t been visiting them regularly, Grace.” Ginny tugged at her clerical collar again as if to underline how wrinkled it was. “She visited me this morning. She said Jonathan’s really worried about you.”

“My mother.” Grace looked at Ginny’s face as she talked, looking across at her as though she were pleading some case that was already lost but one that she couldn’t let go of. Tears filled Grace’s eyes.

“Fifth commandment: ‘Honor thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.’”

Grace had that same creepy sensation of the Twilight Zone she’d had earlier outside Theo’s bedroom. As if she had fallen into the eerie emptiness of her childhood bad dreams. A piercing loneliness settled in her heart, sharp as a needle. She looked at the picture of Jesus hanging on Pastor Ginny’s wall. The painting was all wrong. It turned her stomach. Jesus had mouse-brown hair and eyes, and he wore a dirty gray robe. Grace twisted one of her curls around her index finger.
“His hair is gold,” Grace said. “His eyes are blue and match his robe. His robe is a wild-blue-yonder blue cotton. Whoever drew your picture didn’t know the first thing about Jesus.”

“I painted that picture of Christ,” Pastor Ginny said. “I’ve sold over one hundred prints of it.”

Grace felt sick. She had a feeling she remembered from long ago, a feeling that had become part of her—she was one of those graying T-shirts her dad had, thin cotton the washing machine has agitated into a threadbare shadow of itself. Like the vile robe Pastor Ginny had put on Jesus. Pastor Ginny was wrong, so wrong that Grace’s whole world felt as if it were coming apart at the seams. Pastor Ginny was supposed to be a woman of God. That’s what her mother always said, her tone low and reverent.

“Look,” Grace said, “I want to leave Theo in Sunday school right now so I can go to New York for an important dress-designing workshop, and then I want you to keep him this afternoon for me or maybe see if one of the other moms would. Or drive him to the lake. My dad is a good babysitter.”

Pastor Ginny rolled back her chair so far from her desk that she and the chair hit the wall.

Theo giggled. Grace wanted to, too, in fact feared she might start laughing until she cried and couldn’t stop, but she swallowed hard and put a finger to her lips. She tapped Theo hand three times. He took hold of her hand and held it. So often, it was she who reached for his hand.

“Jonathan telephoned me this morning.” Pastor Ginny moved her chair back to her desk and pulled at her collar.
“What on earth?” Grace let go of Theo’s hand and leaned her elbows on Ginny’s desk.

“That shirt’s cut pretty low,” Pastor Ginny said.

Grace had measured Ginny enough times that she was tempted to say, “Well, at last there’s something to look at if it is,” but she refrained. She sat back. “What did he want?”

“‘Remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy,’” Pastor Ginny said. “‘Six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work; But the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD thy God; in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, nor thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle. . .’”

Theo laughed. “You don’t need to worry about our cattle or servants. That’s silly.”

“‘Nor thy stranger that is within thy gates.’” Pastor Ginny continued as if a six-year-old boy hadn’t made a damn good point. Grace flushed. She rubbed her velveteen collar. “‘For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.’”

“Wonder Woman fought the Nazis on a Sunday,” Theo said.

Ginny ignored Theo. Pastor Ginny’s voice grated against Grace’s soft feathers, against her ears, her heart. She stood, leaned over and pressed her hands against Ginny’s desk, dust sweeping her velvet capelet. “Jonathan hasn’t been to church since either one of us can remember. Now I need to miss for a while. Why not ask me why? Why not ask
me if I’m in spiritual need? Why act as if Jonathan has more validity than I do?”

Grace’s voice had gotten loud. Theo stood, too. Superman stood balanced in his right hand.

Pastor Ginny remained in her chair. Her pinched face had thin lips. “My dear Grace,” she said. “I only want to help you. Jonathan has a business that supports many families. That is the Lord’s work. He says you’re seeing Jesus again. He says you’re talking with Him. You know what happened last time. We all do. Please, please sit. Come to the service. Let’s pray together.”

“Wonder Woman came from Paradise Island, and I don’t think God made that,” Theo said. “He made the Garden of Eden, and it had a serpent in it.”

“Jonathan says, Jonathan says.” Grace stood tall and straight.

“Honey, your father called, too.”

“My father?”

“Plus, Cain killed Abel,” Theo said.

“Your mother was on the extension.” Pastor Ginny slid her finger inside her clerical collar, adjusted her alb. “And then she made the trip here to talk with me. They’re all worried about you. About this trip to New York. Parson’s.” She looked hard at Grace and said, “‘Thou shalt not take unto thyself any graven image, nor any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. . . .’”

Grace cut her off. “Minette and I have made up. She’s my best friend. She’s making something of her dreams. I can, too.”
Grace felt Theo’s taps again. She tapped back. She leaned down and kissed the top of his head, and he didn’t wipe it off.

Pastor Ginny stood. “‘Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s house.’” Pastor Ginny stopped reciting God’s words to Moses. “You know those commandments by heart.” She came around to Grace and Theo’s side of the desk, put her arms around Grace. “Minette’s choices aren’t necessarily the right ones for you, my dear. Her mother and father attend services about half the time, but they allowed her to live in sin with that boy. Temptation, Grace. Christ faced it three times, but in the end He followed His Father’s wishes.”

Grace dropped Theo’s hand. She pulled back from Ginny and put her own arms on Pastor Ginny’s. She came close to shaking her. “Maybe God’s wishes were Jesus’s wishes. Maybe He wanted to save the world. Maybe He’s still saving it. Maybe He’s helping me save myself. Maybe that’s how He works.”


“My mom didn’t do anything wrong,” Theo said. “Let’s go, Mom. I don’t want to stay here. It smells bad. Like mouse droppings or dead mice in the walls like at the cottage.”

Grace’s flush spread from her neck to her forehead. Her first instinct was to make Theo apologize, but he was right. She hadn’t done anything wrong and neither had he. The place did smell. “What did my father want?” she said.

“He wanted me to make a house call to you. Bring you to your senses. Bring you Holy Communion. He wanted me to talk sense into you.” Pastor Ginny got up from her knees. “It isn’t any use, is it?”
“I don’t think Jesus would think it wrong for me to take a chance on my own dreams,” Grace said.

Pastor Ginny faced her now, and Grace saw how small her eyes were. She’d never noticed before that they were teeny-tiny Victorian button loops. She straightened Ginny’s collar, gave the alb a shake so it would lie in smooth folds. Pastor Ginny’s body was so rigid, Grace realized she wasn’t a flowing alb at all, much less a loose-lying tippet. She wasn’t even a piece of clothing but a tightly woven cattail chair. She had unboiled tamarack sewn through her, too. Grace had seen her father work with the wood enough to know that if you didn’t strip the roots of their bark and boil them, that they were useless—no flexibility at all.

“Your mother was crying,” Pastor Ginny said. “After all she’s been through, to honor her doesn’t seem too much to ask.”

And there he was again. Baby Nathan. Grace could smell nonexistent apples.

“This is me. My life,” Grace said.

“‘Honor thy father and thy mother,’” Pastor Ginny repeated.

Kay Breckinridge, the organist, hurried into the room, choir robe swishing violently. “It’s time, Pastor Ginny. I’ve already played the processional. Your favorite.

“There is a Green Hill Far Away.”

The green hill again.

“The choir’s been down the aisle, it’s settled in the loft. You’ve got to get into the church and do the Prayer for Peace.” Kay turned to Grace. “You’ve made a lot of trouble around here by not helping out. And now you’re ruining our service.” She rushed from
the room, the choir robe Grace had made to her exact specifications, swinging out behind her.

“We’ll add you to the prayer list,” Pastor Ginny said, and ushered Grace and Theo from her office. She entered the church through the door to the altar, closing it in their faces. Grace and Theo plodded out to the parking lot. Grace had a palpable sensation of falling through space into her vast emptiness. She stared at the sky. An odd darkness hung there. As if instead of a God or a Jesus, there was a vacancy. No sign of a blue sky or bleu brocade.

Theo put on his sweatshirt. “It’s cold, Mom,” he said. “Really cold.”

Moving more slow-mo than her father ever had, Grace traipsed to the van and drove toward the cottage. An eerie song hummed around the speeding van. What was that tune? And then she realized what it was: “Were you there when they crucified my Lord? 

. . . Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, TR TR EM BBBB LE.”

“We may as well go home.” Grace pulled over to the side of the road to turn around.

“No way. Daddy needs my help at the store. I know he does.”

Grace looked at her little boy in his cape, shivering in the chilly van, and said, “We’ll go to Grampy Lion. You can help him pack.” The words came out of her mouth sluggishly. She feared taking Theo to the tire store. Jonathan might not be there. She’d have to make up a lie to tell Theo and herself. Theo said nothing at first, but then he said her driving to the cottage was like a real live trip in the Batmobile. He pointed to the front of the van. “Look, there are the fins.”

“Fins?” Both Grace’s hand clutched the wheel.
“You know, the Lincoln Furtura, like the one I have at home. With the fins and the front lights that stick out.”

Grace saw that he was right. The fins were black, the lights protruded. The vehicle sped faster and faster without any help from her.

“This is like Superman. Faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive,” but his voice shook and in the rearview mirror, she saw him clutching his bag of super figures and the door handle, his knuckles white.

Grace heard another tremble now—the one in her son’s voice. She tried slowing down. She didn’t want an accident or a ticket or anything at all that could hurt her precious Theo. Underneath that thought thrummed or prevent her getting to the train station. And then a sudden wind picked up and tossed her vanmobile all the way to the cottage, setting it under the branches of the big, old evergreen tree. She turned to look at Theo in the backseat. He shrugged and grinned at her.

“We flew,” Theo said. “Wow! Magic.”

Magic. You just had to believe in it. The wind was the sign, that’s what it was. There hadn’t been any wind at St. Paul’s. Only cold that climbed into one’s bones. And Grace wasn’t ready to forgo having Janelle Chantelle in her creamy satin and black polka-dot lace ostrich feather skirt, a strong standout statement piece, a design to make everyone crave high-impact. Yes. Her father would have to baby sit, that’s all there was to it. Her collection was going to change fashion outlooks with one swift stroke through focus of vision. She was a visionary, that’s what she was. One whose work encouraged personal voice and personal choice. Grace put her hand to her fluttering heart. What was
it about those words that made her want to sink to the floor and sob as if she’d never stop?

“That was something, huh?” Theo said. “Do you think anyone would believe us?”

“What?” Grace said.

“We flew, Mom, we flew. Like the Batmobile. Like Magic.” Theo’s voice shook in a warbly high little boy way. He needed her to take charge.

“We believe it,” Grace said, her tone firm, strong. “That’s good enough.” She helped Theo unbuckle his seatbelt. She stood outside the van staring at the cottage. Not a hint of wind in the air. Just cold. “The cottage looks haunted sitting up on that hill by itself,” she said. Dark shingles hung from the rafters. A brick suddenly swooped down from the roof. Another one toppled. One of the chimneys was nearly gone. Thick inky smoke curled itself onto the roof and filtered into the air and hung, veil-like. The mountainside looked black with pine. The air was wet and heavy. The lake appeared motionless, yet Grace pictured the raft set loose from its dock, wandering through the faint skim of ice on the lake, adrift, lost, abandoned—nothing to anchor it.

Grace’s father limped out onto the porch, gauze wrapped around his head. Her mother had parked the Pontiac on the hill beside the house and left open the trunk. It appeared sinister. It made Grace think of television shows she’d watched about cold case files. She half-expected to see legs protruding from the open hatch.

“My lungs are burning from this cold.” Theo didn’t run to the swing for their routine. The swing hung dead beneath the gray maple. He shivered in the sharp, misty mountain cold.

“C’mon, Theo.” Grace ran up the path to the front porch.
“My cape is making me fly,” he said.

Grace turned to look and to her amazement, he was flying. As soon as her father saw them, Theo’s feet dropped to the ground. “Grampy Lion!” he called, racing ahead of Grace to grab onto his grandfather’s leg. “What happened to you?”

“What are you doing here, Grace?” her father said. “Why aren’t you and Theo at church? Your mother and I always took you to church. I called Pastor Ginny.”

Grace stared up at him on the step. “You don’t look good,” she said. “What’s wrong? What happened to your head?” His ashy complexion riddled with red veins scared her. Deep black circles beneath his eyes startled her. At the same time he had that pasty sheen, and he’d shaved off his goatee. She thought he might be heading for a stroke.

“I slipped on my jog this morning. Hit my head on a rock.”

Grace touched the pad over his eye.

“I fell twice.” He slapped away her hand. “Your mother wrapped me up like a mummy. It’s no big deal.”

“Why would you jog in this weather?” Grace did not want to feel sorry for him or have to take care of him. It was ridiculous to have gone out on the slick mountain paths today. Still, she said, “Don’t load the car, Dad. Let it wait. You don’t need to move today. Wait until tomorrow or the next day. You need to rest.” Grace linked her her pinky with his. His hand was pale and wrinkled with cold, his pinky limp. “It’s not just your fall, is it? It’s Mom. I know it.”

“What’s wrong with Grammy?” Theo asked. “We saw her at church.”
Grace looked at her watch. Already ten minutes after ten. She didn’t think her ostrich feathers were up to all this tension. If they were wilting or half were missing, the whole effect would be ruined. She looked at the sky. “Please, Jesus,” she prayed silently, “Help me out. Get me to Parson’s like you got me to the cottage. Please.”

“Your lips are moving.” Her father’s words slurred together, his voice strained, tired. He leaned toward her and hissed, “*Something Wicked This Way Comes*.”

Grace let go of his floppy pinky, horrified. The smell of bourbon twirled into the air, a show-stopping dress, its train cascading all around her, a porch-sweeping swell of ballgown. “So that’s why you didn’t kiss me,” she said.

Her dad leaned down and kissed her forehead once and each cheek twice.

“Gracie, your mom and I are moving back to Mitford today. I need your help.” He jerked his thumb toward the cottage door. “She’s sleeping on the couch. The smell on my breath is from last night. Long night.”

Theo pulled on his grandfather. “Let’s go to the lake.” He still had his super figure case slung over his shoulder. “I want to show everybody the lake.” He patted his case and added, “Let’s get some warm jackets first.”

“Are you sure you haven’t had anything to drink this morning?” Grace demanded.

Her father shook his head. “Taking care of her. Kept me up half the night. You know what I’m talking about.” He staggered, catching himself with the porch railing. “Now you want me to be responsible for Theo.”

“Dad, it looks to me like you’ve had more than one drink.”

“Well, we all know what an imagination you have.” Her father cleared his throat. “I’m tired, that’s all. There’s nothing wrong with my head. Your mother overreacted. I
want to get away from this cottage. I want to go home. The rain last night was awful. We lost electricity for while.”

Grace tilted her head.

“Give it a rest, Gracie. I’m fine. You know that. You’ve never seen me drink too much.”

“How didn’t you keep Mom from driving this morning?”

“Did you want me to tie her up? Cross-stitch her to that crucifix of hers? You know what she’s like as well as I do. She’s got bottles hidden everywhere. I bet she took one to church.”

Grace touched her velveteen collar. She twisted a long curl around her index finger. “Look after Theo,” she said. “I’ll check on Mom and carry a few boxes to the car. I need you to baby sit for me. Then I’ve got to go. Minette’s waiting for me.”

“Jonathan’s not going to like this.”

“This has to do with me, not him.”

The three of them stood on the porch. The firewood, stacked against the cottage, splitting from the damp. Newspapers lay in a soggy heap. Theo held one of his grandfather’s hands and one of his mother’s. If he’d had his vacuum cleaner, he’d be rushing it over the porch floorboards as fast as he could. No doubt he’d have the cottage Hoover running in no time.

“You have no business going to New York,” her father said. “I’m not going to baby sit.”

Humming. Grace heard humming. “Jesus?” she whispered, her voice a soft silk cami she doubted her slightly deaf father could hear. “Jesus?”
Theo said, “Mommy, don’t.”

No answer. The tune continued. And then she realized. Johnny Cash. “San Quentin.” You’ve been living hell to me... Her father hummed. *I hate every inch of you.*

Grace said, “I don’t suppose Jonathan told you how he lied to me. He was supposed to stay home today so I could go to Minette’s and then the Parson’s workshop.”

She paused. “Dad, look at me. Stop humming. This is important. Please baby sit.”

Theo went inside the house. The roar of the vacuum cleaner started.

“What about the nine-month program?”

“What about it? Who knows if I’ll get in? Or apply? I need your support today. I need you to stop believing everything Jonathan says.” Grace linked their pinkies again.

She watched her father’s gray skin crumple. Fine lines she’d never noticed before edged out from his eyes, down his cheeks. Broken capillaries crinkled across his nose.

*And your stone walls turn my blood a little cold*

Her father was humming, hiding his anger, but Grace knew the words to all the Johnny Cash songs.

“I’m your daughter,” she said. “Jonathan’s not your son.”

“Jonathan doesn’t always tell the truth,” her father said. “You’re right about that. He lied to me about something important.” The lines fanned out across his face, making it a crepe paper Halloween paper costume. “But he did catch you talking to Jesus, didn’t he? That happened, didn’t it?”

Grace let go of her father’s finger. She pressed her hands to his ashen face. “My spirituality is my business. Looking inward, that’s all it is. Listening to what’s there. That
trip to the hospital was years ago, and I don’t think I ever belonged in that place, but none of you would listen to me.”

Grace’s father’s whole body sagged. He whispered, his lips gone white, “First, talking to Jesus isn’t spirituality. It’s instability. Second, that place was full of loonies.” Again, bourbon leaked into the air between them. “Third, I never thought that Dr. Balentine knew what he was talking about.”

“I liked Dr. Balentine. It wasn’t about him.”

And may all the world regret you did no good

Theo ran outside, the vacuum temporarily abandoned. “C’mon, Grampy.” He skipped around his grandfather. His grampy’s mackinaw covered his superfigure costume, but his superfigure backpack bounced on his back over his orange life jacket. “Something smells funny,” Grace said. “Is it that old mackinaw of yours? Maybe it’s time to dry clean it.”

Her father took a deep breath, a breath that shuddered through him. “Leave my jacket alone, Grace.”

“Please?” Theo’s voice had that slight catch in it. He reached for his grandfather’s hand. “I’ll be good. You know that. Maybe the superfigures can float. We could put them on one of your cattail mats and see what happens.”

One of those empty silences filled the air, the kind that was worse than screaming and yelling. The hush of dead-looking trees standing around the desolate lake.

“Please, Grampy Lion?”

Another long pause and then Grace’s father said, “Bring me a tumbler of bourbon, will you, Grace?” He and Theo still held hands. “And my knitting. I’ll take Theo down to
the lake for a bit. Then we’ll head up to the gunroom. He’s old enough to learn about BB guns. I’ve got yours from when you were a little girl.” Her father grinned at her.

“No drinking, Dad. Not with Theo here. You’re in charge, not Mom. I don’t want him touching a single gun. Not a rifle, not a BB gun. And I don’t want you touching a single drink.” She hurried into the cottage and found his knitting bag, black yarn falling out, resting on the kitchen table. She ran outside. “What’s with all the black?”

“Batman,” her father said. “I’m making a Batman sweater. I’ve got a good idea on how to bind-off the sleeves and edge the bottom. This is one sweater that won’t unravel.” He paused. “Look, I’ll watch after Theo, but before you leave, run in and check on your mother. Make sure she didn’t roll off the couch.”

Grace closed her eyes, twisted her hair around her finger.

“Make sure she didn’t roll off the couch,” he repeated. “And carry at least three boxes to the car. We’re clearing out today. You’ll have to pick up Theo at the ranch house.”

Grace ran her finger up and down the soft, lush satin of her top. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I have to do this.”

“When did I ever get to do what I wanted to do?” Spittle formed at the sides of her father’s mouth. “How many choices do you think I’ve had in this life?”

She couldn’t bring herself to look at him. He sounded like a little boy who wasn’t getting his own way. A bully. He was no comforting mackinaw or even a billowy jacket pushing her away. He was a snap-up terrycloth suit hanging in Baby Nathan’s closet all these years waiting for him to grow into them. What kind of parent didn’t want his child to go after her dreams? Why didn’t he keep her mother from drinking so much? Why
couldn’t he take responsibility for Theo? She remembered the numerous times her mother complained that he hadn’t come in to work at their company, the number of nights he came home late from God knows where. The thoughts startled Grace. She’d never questioned her father or held her father accountable. He was childish, that’s what he was.

“You better take a good look at how you’re acting,” her father said. “There’s no one around here that doesn’t think you need to come to your senses.” He turned his back on her and set off down the path, half-limping, half-walking, slow-mo to the lake. Theo walked beside him. The only sound on the hill was a faint thud from their feet hitting the ground. No wind sent crumpled leaves to soughing or the wind chimes to ringing. No animals bustled about, sniffing beneath the pines. Eerie silence. And a smell like decay. Her eyes filled with tears. The cottage, her family—decaying.

Her father looked up the hill at her. He called out, “You’re the glue to this family thanks to me. First, thanks to me. Second, thanks to me. Third, thanks to me you exist. You’re the one choice I had. Don’t you forget it. Don’t you forget all I’ve done for you. Don’t you forget you owe me. You could have turned out like Baby Nathan.” One last time he faced her. “This is the last time I baby sit,” he yelled at her. “That’s your job.” His words ran together into one bundle of tangled yarn, not black, but mui, mui white, whiter than paste, white as a corpse. Theo kept moving down the path to the lake, head down. There was no way she could see how these words affected him.

Nausea overwhelmed her, coming from a sickening pain deep within.

A slow-mo drifting of clouds was turning into a thick cover.
“I can’t possibly go to New York.” She waited, and there it was—that faint hum of a hymn—a hymn where she couldn’t quite catch the words. “Louder,” she said. She made out a few words, *We may not know, we cannot tell, What pains He had to bear.*

Pain. She was feeling pain, too. Didn’t He know that? Giving up her dreams. Jesus was making her sick. She bent over and spit up a thimbleful of yellow bile. She kneeled on the hard, cold ground for what felt like a long time, but was probably no more than two minutes. No more hymn.

She walked inside the cottage. Absolute stillness except for the sounds of her own movements. Dust moats floated the way they had in Pastor Ginny’s office. She could feel the dust settling on the tabletop, the counters, the milk turning sour in the refrigerator. This curdled smell and dustiness were so unlike her mother. A vague odor of vomit lingered in the air. The biting odor of fresh lime leaked upward from the crawlspace. She noticed a dirty plate in the sink, greasy bacon tracks, yellow egg yolk stuck to it. Two greasy pans. They had to be her father’s. Her mother didn’t eat bacon and eggs. He couldn’t even clean his own dishes.

She moved into the living room. Her mother lay flat on her back on the couch, prayer cushion beneath her head. At the open neck of her grayish-pink bathrobe a hint of crumpliy pale skin showed. Her breathing was more like snorting than breathing. The fingers of her right hand trailed on the floor. Grace’s father must have put the lavender quilt over her, and he’d built a fire, despite the damp wood. Grace’s eyes teared again from the acrid odor. Smoked seeped out of the fireplace, thick and dark, and noiseless,
but the fire itself hissed in a low menacing hum. The cottage gave Grace the creeps. The tangy odor of wine laced through the smoke, a dull lavender antimacassar.

Her mother was a drunk.

It was that simple and that, too, seemed childlike to Grace. She realized she’d been older than her parents her whole life, and she knew the futility of thinking they’d change. Had she always been the caretaker of their feelings? Their relationship had demanded her presence, but she saw, too, that the bottom line with her mother was that she wanted her father and only her father, and her father wanted her, Grace, to hold the marriage together, and she, Grace, would have to find some way to forgive them both.

Grace looked at the crucified Jesus her mother had hung on the wall over the fireplace. “Aren’t you ever angry that your parents hung you out to dry?” Grace twisted more hair around her finger. She’d never been able to understand the Virgin Mary. She’d let God make every decision. Her own mother gave a drunken snort. Jesus climbed down from the cross and sat cross-legged on the floor in front of her. Grace sat, too. His face wore an odd stunned expression, as if He’d returned to the chaos of earth after a long retreat. His magnificent near nakedness did not disconcert her. His pallor and slumped shoulders did. She needed him to be strong, to be the parent she didn’t have. He took off His crown of thorns, holding it in His hands, twisting it this way and that, as if He’d never seen it before. “Of course I was angry. Angry and terrified. Don’t you remember I called out, ‘My God, my God. Why hast thou forsaken me?’”

Jesus stood, paced the smoke-filled room. He coughed. Frances groaned, rolled over, and toppled to the floor, the quilt wrapping around her. Jesus seemed unaware that He wore no robes, only a tattered gray sheet around his middle. He stepped over Grace’s
mother so that He stood right in front of Grace. She didn’t take in His slender, muscular chest or his powerful thighs. Only His face. Life had returned and He glowed brighter than any picture she’d ever seen, even the ones with the golden haze encircling Him. She dropped to her knees. Her heart had traveled somewhere far beyond her parents’ cottage.

Jesus knelt and faced her. “I know what being torn apart feels like, Grace.” His blue eyes so close in color to hers filled. “My father forsaking me on the cross was nothing if not being torn apart.” She reached out her hands to Him, and He took hold. Something greater than awe passed between them. “But, Amazing Grace,”—and with those words Grace’s heart took flight—“I needed him to force me to my destiny.” A tear, then another trickled down his cheek, his chest, puddled in the worn sheet covering his midsection. To Grace’s amazement, the sheet became white, creamy white, matching her satin bodice.

The two held hands for a moment, or two, or five, and an electricity of desire for Grace’s Own overflowed within Grace’s wounded heart. Jesus coughed again. “Not used to smoke,” He said.

“I love you,” Grace said.

“Ah, Grace, how sweet the sound,” Jesus said, and moved his hand to her dress. “Such a magical dress.” He touched a wilted feather, and, flowerlike, it bloomed with life. “Spirituality is ineffable. Remember that. Private and unprovable.”

Grace tilted her head.

Jesus put His hand to her cheek.

“Grace?” It was her mother’s hungover, ratchety voice.
“I’m right here,” Grace said.

“Stay with me,” her mother croaked. “You promised me you’d never leave me, my precious silly baby,”

Grace felt a whisper of a breezy kiss brush her cheek. She looked at the wall. Jesus hung still as death on His crucifix.

“I want to go to New York for the afternoon. Theo’s here with you and Daddy.” Grace’s voice was hesitant.

“You can’t leave. Your father tried to kill me.”

A sudden swift breeze swept through the room, and fireplace ashes floated onto the hearth, a dull smattering of gray-white dust, the color of her mother’s hair and skin. They floated all around the room dusting everything but Grace. Her black and cream ensemble showed stark and clear in the haze. Her feathers thickened and fluttered as if to wing her away.

A sign. This was one sign she didn’t hesitate over.

She helped her mother to sit on the couch. Her mother pointed at the prayer cushion. “See?” she said. “See?”

All Grace saw on the cushion was some long overdue darning. She gently laid down her mother, pushed the cushion under her head, and draped the lavender quilt and fluffy lavender scarf over her. “Go back to sleep, Mama.”

Grace watched her put her hand inside the bathrobe over her heart. She started to say something but it came out garbled, and Grace pressed her finger to her mother’s lips. She looked like a mannequin, pallid and lifeless. “Sleep, Mama. Sleep.” Her mother’s eyes closed. Snoring began. Grace went into the bathroom and got a Kleenex. She wiped
spit and what might have been vomit from her mother’s lips. She took two wine bottles from the end table and threw them into the recycling bin, the Kleenex into the trash.

In the sticky, wet silence of moist air, Grace carried five cardboard boxes to the Catalina and climbed into her vanmobile. Its black fins stuck out sharply, protruding lights beamed without me turning them on. She closed the door and flew off in a flurry of feathers above the silent mountains toward the train station. Below her, she saw her father running and waving, shouting, “Your mother, your mother has, your mother has a. . .”

Grace heard nothing after that. Her father would have to handle the problem. Act like the grown up he was supposed to be.

Thick clouds boiled in dead silence around the van as she flew south. It was definitely going to snow—Grace had lived in the Catskills long enough to know that. It was a matter of time—could be two days, could be three weeks, no telling, but she was going to make it to the train on time. She would see Minette. Janelle Chantelle would see her, she would critique *Grace’s Own*.

The vanmobile plummeted downward through the slow drifting of crinoline cloud cover coming up from the south.
CHAPTER ELEVEN

JONATHAN

Grace has gone to hell in a handcart. That’s what Frances says. She says Grace doesn’t have the sense God gave a chicken.

Grace has shit on every member of the family. Me. Frances. Leon. Theo. Suzanne, too, and Pastor Ginny. Everyone from the church and the neighborhood.

December now. Late December. A week until Christmas. Grace put up a tree. She and Theo decorated it. Paper superfigures clinging to pine needles. Christ on the tiptop. Blue brocade robe. She made Jesus out of cattails and tamarack, then papier-mâché'd over the frame. Put makeup on him. Rosy cheeks. Hair dye. Gold locks to his shoulders. Jesus as a drag queen. Just what I want my son to learn. She and Theo made a voice box for Him. You pull the string and He sings. Not even a Christmas carol. Hymn about a green hill far away without a city wall where he died to save us all.

Thank God for Frances. She means everything to me. Never told Grace, but Frances loaned me money to get my tire store started. Paid her back within eleven months. She never said a word to Leon.

Pastor Ginny told me Grace isn’t creating the nativity scene at the church. That the only thing she’ll do is make the costumes. Selfish, selfish, selfish. I know what she’s up to. She thinks that she’ll get into the Parons’s nine-month program. She’s working on
her own designs. She thinks she can go off and live with Minette for nine months. Pull Theo out of his school. Plop him into another. Leave me all alone. I spend half my days with my hands pressed to my aching head. I don’t know what to do. I can’t outrun the Invisible Boy. His phantom is present. I feel him. And it’s Grace’s fault.

Weather has changed from heat and rain, humidity into another stage of what the weathermen are calling a possible snowstorm “the likes of which the Catskills have never seen.” The stage Grace’s Grandma Essie would have prophesized as some particular phase. Names for the phases, she had. Leon told me all about it. This one came with cold. Achy cold. The kind that used to climb inside my mother’s joints. Giving them a constant dull pain. I’d have to massage them with this liniment smelling of spoiled eggs. Hairy legs. Popping veins. Made me sick. Nothing like Grace’s smooth, shapely legs.

Snow began falling this afternoon. Gently. Almost as if it were an afterthought. Drifting from the sky. Light. Papery. Deceptive. Full of the hush that empties the town. Sends everyone home. Scares me. Bad. Like that night on the front stoop when I smelled far off snow. The hush that leaves space for you to think about yourself.

Frank gone. Carol gone. You heard me. Yep. Off to Chuck Harp’s Automotive Industrial Shop. Said he offered better health benefits for her mother. Yeah, sure, Carol. I believe you. Fucking Frank and his big mouth. And do you think Grace will help me out in the store? Hell, no. I don’t know what to do. My life is crumbling. Can’t tell Grace. Ashamed to tell Frances.

Mary Sanfilipo took off, too. Barry said she would. Her mother’s all cut up about it. Went to Sheriff Anderson. “Grown woman,” he said. “She told your husband she was leaving. She meant business. Some guy in picture, I imagine.” Patted her shoulder.
“You’ll hear from her sooner or later. Probably later.” Word around town was that she had something going with Darrell Spence. They’d set up a love nest somewhere. Mrs. Sanfilipo hasn’t left the house since that trip to the sheriff’s. I couldn’t tell her and Barry Mary left on account of Leon breaking up with her. Leon told me he dumped Mary same day he told me Frances had a lump in her breast. The day Grace took off for that December workshop, leaving Theo with his grandparents and not bothering to tell me.

Frances. A lump in her breast.

No. Survived my own mother’s long death. Not Frances. Not cancer. I turn to her for everything. She’s the one person I can count on. The one person who can talk sense into Grace. She’d had the lump since April, Leon told me. Nine months. Why hasn’t Grace done anything? When I confronted her, what does she say? “You were supposed to baby sit Theo. You promised.” She doesn’t even get I’m talking about her mother. That her mother has a lump in her breast and she, her only daughter, has let it go for months. Her mother could die. No, all Grace is worried about is that I went to work instead of looking after Theo. Does she stop and think that if I don’t work at the store the whole damn house of cards is going to come tumbling down? No, all she cares about is her collection, which she insists on calling Grace’s Own with its bleu brocade and feathers and metallics and Jesus only knows what else.

Found out later Leon told Grace about her mother when she got back from New York that day. Spilled the news to her at the ranch house. Told me he tried to tell her before she left the cottage for the city. Said she took off driving so fast she disappeared into the fog within seconds. Said Frances didn’t want her to know. But he told her. Wanted help. The guy deserved help. Jesus.
You want to know what Grace did? Called her doctor’s answering service from the ranch house that night. Demanded the doctor return her call immediately. Set up an appointment for Frances the next day. Forced her father to promise to take her mother. That’s it. That’s all she did. Didn’t accompany her own mother. Made her father do it.

Frances had the mammogram. Looked good. A cyst, the doctor said. Everybody happy. Let’s get it aspirated to make sure, Grace suggested, and got the doctor to agree. “If that’s just not hunky-dory,” Frances said. “Grace is a real eager beaver to get a needle into me, isn’t she?” Aspiration. Scheduled a month later. First week in January. Jesus. It had to be serious if they were aspirating it, didn’t it? Frances could be dying. What does Grace do? Send in her Parson’s application for the nine-month course. Twenty-one days ago.

I telephoned out to the cottage that day Grace went to New York. Good thing, too. Found out Frances and Leon are moving into the ranch house that day. Grace doesn’t help. I do. I make sure all my Miss Johanna gear—from the ranch house and Grace’s hope chest in my Hudsondale closet, too—is safely stowed in my Jeep—yellow taffeta in a special garment bag—before they ever arrive at the Mitford ranch house. Catalina packed with leftover food, books, wine and Jack Daniels from the cottage. Fifty knitted sweaters for the Afghans. Enough for six, seven families. That’s Leon for you. Back seat piled so high, Leon can’t see through the Catalina’s rearview mirror. Theo sitting on Frances’ lap. No seatbelt. I unpacked everything. Got Frances a glass of wine. Leon his bourbon. Theo kept telling me to quit running my hand through my hair, to stop folding everything. He might as well be his mother. Sat in the kitchen to take a break. What does Theo have to say? Quit crossing your legs, Daddy. This from a kid Grace dressed in
tights and a cape. Late, this was all late at night. Didn’t get home to Hudsondale with Theo until ten o’clock. Gear still hidden my Jeep.

Where’s Grace? Not home. Cloud cover growing closer, darker, matting and falling into other clouds, piling up across the sky into an opaque low-slung night. South wind picking up fast. Cold air spiking through the window panes. She doesn’t pull into the garage until after midnight. You hear me? Midnight. She’s busy with her designs, her this, her that. Bragging about the workshop. How Janelle Chantelle singled her out. All this is thanks to Goddamn fucking Minette who took her out for Margaritas afterward. Tribeca—to a place where they put them in goblets big as the hole in the center of a tire. Doesn’t call her parents to check on Theo. He hasn’t acted like himself since that day he spent with his grandparents. Grace shows up at the ranch house at eleven-fifteen. That’s when Leon told her about Frances’s lump. Barely speaking, those two. Theo doesn’t want to visit Frances or Leon, either. Don’t understand. He’s always loved them.

Minette calls Grace every day. Encourages her. That woman Janelle Chantelle has called, too. I listened in on one call. Talent, Janelle oozed. Unique way of looking at material, at the human form. Yeah, that’s our Grace, all right. She thinks Jesus is in human form.

I’ve ended up at the secluded cottage relieving pressure four, five, six, ten times a week. I’m losing it. I spend more time as Miss Johanna than as myself. The habit of dressing up that I’ve been fighting for years is slipping out of control. Slipping into that sense that Miss Johanna stands outside time. “Sunshine-on-My-Shoulders-Makes-Me-Happy- Yellow.” Yes. “Sunshine in low doses brings good health and happiness.” And it makes me want Grace. Ah, Grace. Vanilla bean. She hasn’t so much as kissed me. How
can a man want a woman so much? Sometimes I wish I’d bought the more mellow
organza dress, beaded bodice, low waist, an old-fashioned number whose tag quoted
Donovan’s song, “Yellow is the Color of My True Love’s Hair, In the Morning When
We Rise.” The back read. “A Blond Will Always Love You.”

We haven’t had sunshine in twenty-one days.

My life is falling apart. Grace and her hallucinations and dreams and selfishness
are to blame.

She’s getting worse.

Here’s what happened today:

Christmas Eve. Christmas fucking Eve. A Saturday. First time the sky has been
clear in three weeks. Too clear. Walked out onto the patio. Air moist. Sun a deep red ball.
Grandma Essie’d say the snowstorm had started. By afternoon the clouds would be low
and gray and drifting northward. Snow falling fast and furious. “Don’t go out,” I said to
Grace. “The snow storm is coming in today. You don’t have chains on the van. They’re
with the spare tire. Red sun in the morning means trouble.”

She’s in this little camisole number, all satin and ruching, bits of peek-a-boo lace.
Kisses me. Little nips of kisses. That’s all. She’s busy with her designs. And all I want is
to be inside her. Used to be what she wanted. Begged for. Theo slumps into our bedroom.
Listless. It’s only a little after six. Lies down on my side of the bed. Doesn’t say
anything. He’s quit sleeping with Humpty or the super figures. He pulled the blond hair
out of Humpty’s head. Threw it away. “Will you make me macaroni and cheese for
breakfast?” he asks Grace.
I get to the Mitford store. Storm brewing. Store could be busy. Chains and the like. It’s just me and the Summers boys. Part time. No one asking questions as to why I’m running the rotation and balancing on a cash-and-carry basis. More cash in my pocket. Won’t show up in the inventory. I need it for New York. Who can blame me? Jesus. With Frances and Leon back at the ranch house, I have the cottage all to myself. Isolation. My mother’s black coffin shoes and her blue flower sit on the couch as if they’re on display at Fashions for His Lady—that’s what Toddette likes to do—set up an outfit on loveseats—accessorize it—different scene every time I go in. Me, I set out the accessories, but keep the clothes in Frances and Leon’s closet. It can snow from now to eternity. Won’t make any difference to me. I’ll still get to the cottage. Four-wheel drive. Chains in the back cargo area if I need them. Grace forces me to take the cash, shop for accessories and makeup, go to the cottage. It’s not like I’d have do it, if she’d come to her senses. She shuts me out. Like I’m not there. Ever since that Wal-Mart fight over Parson’s. Minette’s fault. All of it.

Jimmy Summers told me Darrell’s never around, and Frank’s not making any money. He’ll come crawling back. Bastard called me December first. “Made things right with the bank yet?”

I said, “December first. Thirty days to go.” Hung up.

Today I pull up to the store, early, seven-fifteen, planning on some time to myself, maybe relax with a little makeup. Storm’s got me wound tighter than a drum, as Frances would say.

Gordie Couper’s parked outside the shop. Fucking-A. It’s Saturday. Christmas Eve. There sits his Bonneville. Black. Two years old. No snow yet. But I know these
mountains. They scare me. Leon always told me the H-Man got his brother, Charlie.

Got his brother and Baby Nathan, too. Soon the snow would come driving down. Soon
the north wind would blow. South winds scuttling back into the mountains. But not yet.
Now it was still. Eerily silent. Absolute stillness except for the wavering lines of gray
exhaust coming from our cars and the dull hum of their engines, absolute quiet except for
the rattle of gray branches from the strong winds whistling in from the mountainside.

We sat in our vehicles, engines running. Wait-and-see game. I shove in a Dale
Carnegie CD. Repeat the words with him: Use the customer’s name. Take a breath.

Clarify the objection. Ten minutes. Fifteen. Jesus. I shut off the Jeep. Headed toward the
store door. Hands trembling. Tough getting the locks open. Gordie comes up beside me.

“We need to talk, son.”

I jerked the key. Motioned him inside.

“Why don’t you get this month’s records, and we’ll take a look at them?”

Gordie’s voice flat.

Said, “Sure.” All hearty. “I’ll just get some things straightened out here and meet
you down at the bank in say,” here I looked at my watch, “half an hour?”

Gordie took off his suede gloves. Black coat. Unwound his muted plaid scarf.

Laid them on one of the chairs I’d set out for customers.

My eyes hurt. Eyelids twitched. What did he want? What had Frank told him? I
knew I hadn’t returned Gordie’s phone calls after I gave him that box of records. Hadn’t
had a chance. No Frank. No Carol. When was I supposed to have time?

Said, “Let’s go to the bank.”
“No.” Gordie’s voice had an undercurrent like my father’s when you weren’t sure which way the liquor’d take him. “We’re going to do a spot inventory. Audit the current accounts receivable.”

“We?”

“Melissa Eaton and Paul Miklitsch are on their way here.”

“No need for that.” In my throbbing ears my voice sounded thin and faint. Reminding me of something. My mother’s whimpers in those days before she died. Jesus. I did not need this. A muffled buzzing filled my brain. “Look, I need some time here to get the store opened. Jimmy Summers is due in at eight-thirty. I’ll come to the bank when he gets here.”

“Call Jimmy and tell him to take the day off.”

The store without its lights was gray. The tire racks, row after row, black.

Gordie put his hand on my back. “You look as if you need to sit. Go ahead. We’ll sit right here.” He shoved his coat, gloves, scarf to another chair. Sat. Patted the seat beside him. “Sit down, Jonathan.” His voice was my father’s at his drunkest. Low. Raspy. Seductive. Reeling in my mother, and snap, he’d be bashing her within seconds of a cooed, “I love you.”

I sat. Legs crossed the way I remembered my mother had crossed hers when she was scared of my dad. Back and forth. Back and forth. One leg over the other. If only I had on those black pumps I’d bought her, her blue flower behind my ear, I’d feel in charge, safer.
I pulled off the scarf Leon had knitted me. Folded it into a long rectangle. Folded the rectangle into a square. Kept folding. “What brings you out on a Saturday?” I heard my voice say. “Christmas Eve, at that.”

“I’ve been hearing talk.” Gordie’s voice a steady din in my brain. “That you’re doing things under the table for cash.”

Frank didn’t know that, did he?

“Look, I’ve known you a long time.” There was that low, seductive voice again. “I knew your mother. Hardworking woman. I know Frances and Leon and Grace. I don’t want to make this any harder than it has to be, but here’s the deal. We’re going to check the actual inventory against the perpetual inventory. We’re going to examine the accounts receivable. See if they’re valid and collectible. You’re going to print out the most recent inventory listing and a current accounts receivable aging report.”

Gordie waved to someone outside the window. Melissa and Paul. He put his hand on my leg. Said, “Stop. No need for all that motion.” Took his hand away, fast. Didn’t want me to get the wrong idea, I bet. Who knows what secrets he’s hiding?

Melissa and Paul tramped into the store. Took off their coats. Gordie saying, “I want the current financial statement and general ledger. I want the company copies of customer invoices and your sales journal for November.”

I used my cell to call Jimmy. Told him to stay home. Left the CLOSED sign on the door. Saw that Melissa had the most recent statement from the box Frank had given me, the one I’d turned over to the bank.

“I need the most recent inventory listing,” she said. Thin. Chestless. Uptight gray suit. Polyester. Run in one of her stockings. What could only be Payless plastic black

I stood at the counter. Turned on lights. Cranked on computer. Open and closed the door beneath the counter. Grabbed at the box of Kleenex I kept on the counter. Tore a sheet in two. Folded each one into tiny squares. Unfolded.

“Let’s get to the inventory, Jonathan.” Gordie flung the Kleenex into the trash.
Three breaths in. Three out. I needed to get to my office, to the bottom drawer. No chance.

One hour later. Eight-thirty.
Melissa’s lipstick worn thin. I could have told her to buy Trish McEnvoy’s Essential pencils. Detailing of liplining with the creamy finish of lipstick. Mascara beneath her eyes. She should use Lancome’s Flex Waterproof. Paul and Gordie sat side-by-side in two customer chairs.

I had retreated to my office while they invaded me. Watched them from my office window. Saw Melissa and Paul leave. Put my hand on the bottom drawer for the tenth time. Opened it. Stuck my hand in deep, behind the Kleenex to the makeup. Jesus. The lipstick tube nearly made me come. That’s how nervous I was. Without taking my eyes off Gordie, I opened my eye-shadow case. Ran a finger over the powdery finish. I’d been buying a lot of makeup, too. Clementine can’t keep her fingers off my face. Maybelline New York Moisture Extreme in Plum Crazy lipstick. Chanel Ruban Perle creamy powder. Luminous sheen, Clementine says. Shu Umera Water-in-cake foundation. A lot of moisture and gives me a nice, even finish. I know I’m rambling. Can’t help it. I


He stood in the doorway. Gestured as if to ask if he could come in. I pointed to the chair in front of my desk. WATCHED him sit. Listened to him clear his throat. I breathed in three times. Out three times.

I sat in my chair behind the desk. Reached into the desk drawer again. Pulled out the Kleenex box. Yanked one from the box. Tore apart the two layers. Began folding. Over once. Twice. Three times. One more until the thin layer I had was no more than a tiny square. Unfolded it. Did the same process with the other layer.

“IT’S THIS SIMPLE,” Gordie said, and there was his voice, that nasty low buzz inside my head. The smell of flowery-scented Kleenex in the air, mixed with the rubbery odor of tires, the dust that went with a shop. Sweet decay coming from somewhere, too. A mouse in the walls? “THE SALES DON’T JIVE,” he said. “YOU’RE OVERSTATING SALES, INVENTORY, RECEIVABLES.”

I jerked out another Kleenex. Gordie lay the financial statement I had printed out on my desk. “THIS DOESN’T MAKE ANY SENSE WITH THE NUMBERS YOU’VE BEEN GIVING US.”

Jesus. I’d printed out the wrong statement. Not the special one I kept secret from everyone but myself. I took hold of it. Hand shook so hard, the paper fluttered as if it had wings.
Gordie stood. Pressed both hands down on my desk. Face so close to mine I smelled the Listerine on his breath. Citrus. “We are going to pursue you to get back our money. Right now, you and I are going to decide on a payment plan. One slip up, and I’m calling the loan and coming after the corporate assets.”

Put my hand on the desk drawer. Clutched the handle. Ran my finger up and down its gray metal. Saw through the glass pane to the outside. Gray sky. Snowflakes coming lightly down. All I could think of was lines of that Johnny Cash song Leon was always humming—“...there’s something in a Sunday that makes a body feel alone...and something like “there’s nothing short of dying as the sound of Sunday morning coming down...”

Gordie sat.

Sunday morning was coming down hard despite the fact that it was Saturday. Curious sensation that from now every day would come down hard.

“I have to use the bathroom.” I pushed some of the makeup into a paper cup in the drawer. Carried the cup to the bathroom. Left Gordie sitting in my office. Locked the bathroom door. My hands were so slick my Berry Intense lipstick slipped from my fingers to the cement floor. Rolled behind the toilet. Scrabbled onto my hands and knees. Got it. Spread it on my lips. Grabbed my Dior Blush in Precious Pink. Brushed it across my cheekbones. Turned on the water. Flushed the toilet. Jesus. Bent forward and kissed those lips, those seductive satin lips. Oh, Grace. It had been so long since we’d had sex. Since we’d cuddled. Since we’d kissed. Really kissed. She slept far over on her side of the bed these days. Sometimes stayed in that fucking studio all night. The idea of losing
Grace was so frightening, I pushed it away. No Grace and I’d be invisible the rest of my life. No reality. Nothing. We’d work it out. We always had.

A knock. Loud. Inside my head.

“Let’s get to work on the payment plan.” Gordie’s voice was otherworldly just the way Leon had once told me his own was when Mama Essie made him hide in a secret wall and moan through a tin can. As terrifying, too.


“Sit,” Gordie said. “You’re not going anywhere until we work out a payment schedule. Then I’ll take it to the bank. It’s going to need more than my approval. Chipper Hayes, Bob Mda, Josie Bloomfield—they’ll all be checking this over today even if it is Christmas Eve. If it’s okayed, we’ll send you a payment book. Payment due the first of the month. Not a day later. No grace period.”

Gordie stood again. Pushed his face toward mine. Said, “I don’t care about customers. I don’t care whether or not you stay in business. If you have to shut down, so be it. Ausherland Construction is out of the picture. It’s you and the bank.” Gordie shook his head. “Your mother would be rolling in her grave. You’ve let down everybody
starting with Grace, Theo, Frances, and Leon.” He stared hard at me. “And me. You’ve made me look like a fool. Get it straightened out.”

Took us four hours to get the books in order, work out a payment plan. One p.m. My head aching with that vast emptiness. A spacious emptiness now. Snow falling lightly. That thick wet kind. We’d have a white Christmas. Pressed my hands to my head.

Once Gordie left, I locked the store. Bastard. How dare he tell me what I could and couldn’t do? This was my store. If the warehouse got built, the bank would have gotten back every cent. How dare Gordie Couper come in here and tell me how to run my business? How dare he? A dull vast emptiness slashed my head. I felt as if my father had returned only to tell me how disappointed in me he was. Loser. Sissy.


From the counter beneath the sink behind the comet, extra toilet paper and paper towels, found the Vanilla Bean Extra Special Spray Mist from Bath and Body Works. Spritzed the bathroom. Ah.

She sat on the edge of the toilet. Three deep breaths. In and out. She stood. Walked to the mirror. Smiled. Gave a little laugh. Moved away from the mirror. Took out more shoplifted lipsticks. Tried them all. Chantecaille Lip Modern in Boysenberry. Dior
Addict ultra-Shine. Shiseido The Makeup Perfecting Lipstick in Nuance Rose.

Scrubbed them all off and settled on Guerlain Kisskiss in Reve D’Or. Lipstick that felt cushiony but was a polished maquillage. She sat on the toilet. Kept breathing in and out. Slow-mo. Breathed in that faint mist of Graceness. Thought this is her grace period and laughed. She stood and walked to the mirror and looked at her face full in the mirror. Traced her reflected lips with her finger. Laughed again. Oh God. So alive. Hurried back to the warehouse. Tenth tire. Fifteenth row. Clutched a tiny patch of blue brocade folded inside. Touched it to her face. Nubby. Stretchy. Heard the whisper of a car cruising through the snow. Her own breathing.


“You silly thing, Miss Johanna.” She smiled, pleased and happy. She knew that no matter what Jonathan told himself, no matter how many habits he repeated, only she could fill the lonely desolation he felt most of the time. “You silly, silly thing,” she said.

And then she heard something. A door opening? A car? She swirled around. Faced the closed door. Heart a painful thump. She took a step backward. Pressed herself against the far wall. Door remained closed. She eased herself onto the toilet seat one more time. Breathed deeply. No shame, please no shame. No way anyone could get into the locked store. Or the locked bathroom. Pictured the person as my father, the same sickened look on his face as when he’d discovered me dressed up in my mother’s sewing room.
I got up. Pressed my hands to my aching head. Vomited into the toilet. Washed my face. Stared into the mirror. Hated who I saw. Almost went for the knife in my office. Put an end this. Damn Gordie Couper to hell. Damn Frank. Carol. Everyone who’d let me down. Leon. Couldn’t take much more. Despite it being her fault, Grace would never love Miss Johanna, I knew that as surely as I knew Frank was no friend, and I had to have Grace. Had to. She helped fill me up. Her thrift basket, her Vanilla Bean, her very essence rolled into the vast emptiness that was my headache. A patch sewn securely. Made me feel like someone who mattered. Grace. I reached for a garbage bag from beneath the sink cabinet and threw all my makeup into it. Ran to the dumpster and tossed it inside. Watched thick, wet snow drizzle down from the gray skies and cover up the bag. Remembered my thoughts from the last day of November: *Thick, wet snow, bearing something horrible toward me, some change, subtle and terrible.*

The storm had started.

Back inside the store, I snatched all the money from the cash register and stuffed it into my jacket pocket. Nothing like my father. I’d earned this money. Not Grace. When had she earned any money? Payment plan. Knew that wasn’t going to happen. I’d declare bankruptcy. I’d show Gordie who was in charge. Chapter Eleven. I’d get back on track. Restructure. Frank would return. And Carol. I’d be doing the right thing. That’s what mattered.

And now?

Had to get home to Grace. Make love to her. Christmas Eve.

would. Knew I would have to transfigure to keep Grace. More than transfigure. I’d have to transcend our current every day banal world through sex to take us with a wild impossible roll back to seven years ago when she loved me. When she quivered when I touched her. Every day she was slipping, sliding farther away from me, sinking into her own space and time. Especially if she went off to Parson’s for nine months.

But she wouldn’t. I wouldn’t let her. I’d make her want to work for me again. She loved me. Of course she still loved me. She’d see the wisdom of our working together. I’d let her have an office in the store if that’s what she wanted. I would go that far. Pissed me off to have to crawl to her. Jesus.

I’d win her back. Stay home more often. Touch her designs and clothes to get aroused. I could do that, couldn’t I? An occasional swipe or two of her makeup. That would work. She wouldn’t have to know the store was bankrupt. I could take time off to be with her before the restructuring began. She’d think it was a vacation. A grace period. Yes. Even as these thoughts ran through my mind, anger rubbed hard against them. How dare she make me leave Miss Johanna? How dare she? Miss Johanna loved me unconditionally. But not Grace. Grace had conditions. Fuck Grace.

Oh, Jesus. Why was I thinking like this? I loved Grace. I did. Who was I? throbbed through my aching head. Grace was forcing me to destroy Sunshine-on-My-Shoulders-Makes-Me-Happy—but it was Gordie, too. And Frank, Carol, Ausherland Construction. Anger filled my head. A vast desperate anger that was somehow worse than emptiness. My father’s voice reverberated agonizingly throughout my whole being: Stand your fucking ground. No way to explain to him. Make him understand the ground had turned to a slurry of slush beneath my feet. Had to change. Or fall off the earth, into
Theo’s outer world of superfigures. But I didn’t have Jor-El to rocket me from
disaster to safety.

I didn’t have anyone.

I stepped outside into the gray, wet day. Pulled my chains from the Jeep’s storage
unit and put them on. Ruts gouged the dirt roads surrounding the cottage and the lake. A
thick white layer of snow lay across the parking lot, the road, the fields beyond, dusted
the black mountains. Three, four, slushy inches. Snowflakes still drifting. Looked at the
sky. Heavy gray clouds bubbled around the mountains to the south. The real storm had
stalled. I didn’t need Grandma Essie to tell me it was still there. I knew that sooner or
later the snowflakes would stop. A calm would settle. The eye of the storm. Waiting,
waiting for what Grandma Essie called the witch wind, cold and sterile, to come slicing
across the mountains, making a weird, eerily pitched sound, ripping the snow from the
ridges and rolling it down into the valleys to make impassable drifts. How long this
process would take was anyone’s guess. Later rather than sooner. That was my guess.

I was chilled to the bone. Oh, yes, the violent storm was still there. Waiting. The
H-Man was on the prowl. That’s what Leon would have said.

I closed out the hard reality of highway, trees, snow-dribbled mountains with
Dale Carnegie. My hands clutched the wheel so tightly, my knuckles turned red as
Frances’ face. Then white. Road rage. Ha! Snowflakes falling like the fairy-dust Grace
had created for the Christmas pageant angels. Oh, yes. Pastor Ginny had seen to it that
she did those costumes. Ginny and Frances. Still had time to fill out her Goddamn
application.

Ran down the hall to Frances and Leon’s bedroom. Grabbed my dress as if it were already burning hot. Put it in the Jeep’s front seat. Seat-buckled it in. Brought a stack of old newspapers Leon and Frances had left in the kitchen and the matches and dry wood from beside their living room fireplace. Depleted half their stack from tinder to the bigger pieces. Planned to burn the dress. Scorch Miss Johanna right out of me.

I went weaving across the hillside. In every direction lines and curves of a network of back roads. Stopped on a path that ended near the lake. I was sweating behind the wheel of the Jeep, snowflakes dripping onto the windshield. Sweating through my undershirt, my Clarke Tire Store shirt. I’m not someone who sweats normally. Sour odor. Hands aching. A steady thump of rage inside my head. How dare they force me to do this? How dare they? Stared at myself in the rearview mirror. Invisible Boy. Invented my own game of Invisible Boy, a phantom Jonathan who stood outside time. You turned off your mind. Thinking was dangerous. By not thinking, I attained an inner invisibility. Hard to do as an adult. Even with Dale’s sale’s pitch near top volume, I could hear those long-ago story words inside my brain: “No hand, just an empty sleeve. . . Nothing down it, right to the joint. I could see right down to the elbow, and there was a glimmer of light shining through a tear in the cloth.” Long ago I had pictured the cloth as an ugly shadow. Flat desolate sky before a storm. But now the storm was here. The cloth no longer a shadow, but a glowing flame of glittering yellow taffeta. I laid my head on the steering
wheel and cried as if my heart would break. Something I’d seen on TV or maybe I’d dreamed it—a story about the heartbroken. An unending line of men in gray suits walking past the screen. When they were full center, they faced the audience and whispered one of six words: loss, abandonment, death, disappointment, terror, rage, loss, abandonment, death, disappointment, terror, rage.

I belonged in that line. My watch buzzed. No time to spare. Wiped my face with the back of my hand. Got out of the Jeep. Air warming. Snow turning to mush. A stage before the real storm hit. A trick of nature. Headed into the white woods, clutching my beloved Sunshine-on-My-Shoulders-Makes-Me-Happy-Yellow, the wood and newspapers in a tarp carryall on my back that Leon had gotten from L.L. Bean. Flush of adrenaline sent me jogging deep into the wet woods. Climbed until I came to a circle of boulders. Perfect. Secluded. Clear of debris for the most part. Collected smaller rocks and made a circle out of them inside the bigger circle to build the fire in. I smelled the lake. Fire could get out of control, but I doubted it. Not in this slush. Snow floated around the boulders.


Maneuvered the stick and kept it turning so the taffeta would burn completely.
The feel of desolate desperation came slowly, but it came. Tears rolled down my face.

This wasn’t a dress. This was Miss Johanna. Acrd smell of plastic. Day-old road kill.


The glorious sunshine yellow dress had gone up in the same flames as Grace’s Hollerina. High. Higher. Sunshine blotting out gray sky. The blue-black trees. Blotting out me. Sent me hurtling away into that sense of standing outside time and out of sight. The Invisible Boy. Felt myself falling into a rapid breathing pattern. Three in. Three out. My whole body hurt. I smelled a sticky smoke all around me, on me. Hair. Skin. Clothes. My tears could have put out the fire, but I threw wet leaves and snow and anything else I could find on it. To put it out. Save what I could.

Too late.


All that was left of my beloved was a mishmash of snow and char. Taffeta blackened beyond recognition. Felt myself slipping far away into that sense where I stood outside time and out of sight.

Jesus. Was I dead?

The temperature was dropping.

I pulled into the Hudsondale driveway. Snow turning to ice. Skies clear and calm. Not for long, that’s what I knew. Snow covered the Jeep. Snapped the button to the

Four-thirty. Walked into the house through the laundry room. Kitchen dark. No smells of dinner. Only the heady odor of pine. Made me think of the evergreens at the lake. The way their strong woodsy odor pushed other smells away. Of course. Grace had gotten a tree without me. Wouldn’t make life easy and get a fake tree. Not Grace. Had to have the real thing.

Called out, “Grace!”

No answer. Nobody waiting for me.

Hung my wet coat on the back of my kitchen chair. Pulled off my boots and set them on the mat. Hurried into the family room. Christmas tree lights shining. The Jesus doll burning blue. She must have put a blue light bulb inside that papier-mâché Jesus. A nativity scene in front of it. Looked inside the cradle. Baby dressed as Superboy. Complete with cape and pointed red rubber boots. I swear he stared right at me. Cape blue. Not red. Blue brocade.

Fire glowed in the hearth. Grace had promised never to build a fire after the Psych Institute. What was going on here? All I could see was my precious Sunshine—gone up in flames. A surge of anger rattled me.

Theo lay on the sofa. Arms wrapped around his Electric Broom. Superfigures sitting in straight lines on the couch arms. I shouted, “Who started this fire? Where’s your mother?”

No answer.
Sat on the couch. Theo was crying. I touched his forehead. Smoothed his hair. Wanted to smack him at the same time. “Don’t cry. Don’t be a sissy.”

Theo jumped up, clasping the Electric Broom. Plugged it in. Pressed a button. Ran the machine up and down the carpet in straight lines. Noise throbbed inside my ears, my head. Wanted to pick up the cleaner and smash it. I jerked the plug from the socket.

“Don’t you do that!” Theo yelled. He ran over to me and burrowed his head in my stomach. Punched my legs. “It’s mine. Grammy gave it to me. I can do what I want with it.”


Theo sat on the couch in that shadowy room. “Maybe Jesus was Superboy. You don’t know.” He stared at the fire’s glow. “I built that fire,” he said. “I know all about building fires from Brad’s dad. He showed me before he left. I’m no sissy. I can build fires outdoors, too. Even if it’s wet.” Now Theo turned tearstained up eyes to me. “Do moms leave their families?”

“What are you talking about?” Swallowed loss. Swallowed abandonment. Death. Disappointment. Choked on terror and rage. Jesus. I was that little boy again. That little boy in his mother’s bakery watching his father walk out the door fearing, oh, yes, now I admit, fearing my mother would, too. What was to keep her? Me? She didn’t even like me. I thought of her blue plastic flower, the black high heels I’d found at Good Will for her that the funeral director tossed right back at me. I thought about the faint chemical
smell of her embalmed body and the way I had snuck into the viewing room and
dusted her with L’Air du Temps. How she’d look waxy like a mannequin, her mouth a
garish red. I thought about how much I had loved her. How much I had needed her to
love me. Didn’t even acknowledge such thoughts at the funeral. Well, a storm of feelings
were here now. Threatening to destroy me. Grace’s fault.


“She’s in her studio.”

Got still closer to him. Hissed, “Take off those tights. Take off that cape. Take off
those sneakers. Take off that whole costume. Get dressed like a normal boy. Now.”

Didn’t wait for his response. I ran down the steps. Saw the open studio door.
Grace twirling in front of the mirror in a blue brocade dress—the one whose design I’d
tossed into the trash. Her Divine inspiration. Had to be. Yes. A wasp waist, trailing
material evoking both gay Paree and the ecclesiastical. Wound tight around her body so
that every curve showed. Cut low, her breasts gleaming beneath the fluorescent studio
lights. A split up one side, showing off her beautiful long leg. Her curly blond hair
bubbling across her shoulders, down her back. Barefoot. Dancing a slow, sensual waltz.
Singing the same hymn Jesus’s voice box sang, ”There is a green hill far away, Without a
city wall. . .” Such joy in her voice. Joy in her every sensual sway.

This was a Grace I hadn’t seen since high school. The Grace before pregnancy.
The Grace who danced naked on the reservoir wall up by the Dwayo Caves. The Grace
who sang “Amazing Grace” accappella with such clarity during tryouts for a church play
called The Virgin Mary it was as if Jesus Himself channeled it through her to the rest of
us. A Grace who never stopped paying me attention. She made my Bibbendum
costume—designed and created it so that it would be comfortable. Bibby, she called me. Bibby.

Grace didn’t see me in the doorway. Too wrapped up in her own world to make space for me. I moved into the shadows. She stopped her slow-mo swirling and singing and grabbed a doughnut from her drafting table, slowly licking off the glaze. “Oh,” she said. Smiled at herself in the mirror. A wink. Another lick. Oh, oh. Grace’s tongue slid out and licked off more glaze. It had been so long since I’d seen this Grace—the Grace who loved eating her precious doughnuts, the Grace who laughed and smiled. Wanted to cry, to hold her, to beg her to stay this way—but I wanted to kill her, too. Put my hands around that delicate neck and crush her windpipe. How dare she be so happy? She’d just cost me my store and the most important possession in my life, and here she was lazily licking glaze off doughnuts.

I stepped into the studio. Grace tossed the doughnut onto the drafting table. I could smell her over the sugary glaze. Vanilla bean. Yes. I touched her skirt. “Nice fabric,” I said. “So flexible, yet firm.” I wanted to make her touch the soft space between my collarbone, stroke me with the tip of her finger. I took hold of her index finger. Put it against my skin. A thrill tingled through me. I knew I’d gotten off all the makeup this time. Knew I smelled of sour sweat and rubber. Knew she liked that smell. She always had. Ever since I worked at Al’s. Wondered how you could love and hate someone at the same time.

“You smell like smoke,” she said.

“That’s fire,” I told her. “He’s too young to be building fires. What’s wrong with you?”
“Mike Kost taught him how. I helped him build it. It’s not as if I haven’t been building fires at the cottage since I was younger than he is. There’s a screen around our fireplace. He’s fine. He’ll be seven tomorrow.” Looked at me—surprised—as if acknowledging he was getting older without coming apart at the seams was something new.

“He’s growing up,” I said. Hoped to hurt her.

She said, “I got into Parson’s.”

Said the first thing I thought of: “Have you told your mother?” My heart a rolling tire inside my ears, my chest, my whole body.

Grace shook her head, no. Tears welled in her eyes. Joy? Sadness?

I leaned forward, touched my finger to her cheek. She flinched. Did she think I would hit her? Said, “Don’t cry, Gracie.”

“It’s more than just the weekend workshops.”

“What are you saying?”

“I got into the nine-month program.”

Jesus. After all that had gone down with Frank and Carol. After what had gone down with Gordie today. The false bookkeeping I’d been willing to do to help her love me. Jesus. What did she think? And Sunshine. My beloved Sunshine. All for her. How much did she think I could take? Our family’s livelihood was on the line. My integrity in Mitford. The way I thought of myself.

I yelled, “What about your mother’s aspiration? What about Theo? What about the church?” And then, “What about me?” The studio became oddly silent—like the silence in the eye of a storm—a silence so thick and deep it feels like death—a silence
that ends in a maelstrom of violent winds and snow. In the stillness, I heard my heart pulsing in my ears. A fear that had crept into my mind and heart every now and again over the past years, was palpable this time—a toad, a dying trout, a dolphin rolled up dead on the beach. Grace might leave me. My head ached. Back of my neck felt as though twenty of Grace’s sewing needles were biting into it. Bottomless rage.

“It’s Christmas Eve.” Grace snatched another doughnut and ran her tongue around its edges. She looked at me over the gooey doughnut. “The night before Jesus’s birth. Before Theo’s birthday. Let me celebrate.”

“Celebrate what? Your selfishness?” I moved closer to her. “Let me see this acceptance letter.” Providence. I remembered Providence. Maybe it’s a sign, she’d said. I remembered. Fucking her in those Dwayo caves. Oh my God. That’s what I needed to do now. So hot from getting made up today. For me. For her. We needed to make love. I’d get her pregnant. I would. It had worked the first time. I could live through it again. Even put up with Annalee. Yes. Knew Grace had been longing for me. Knew it had been a problem these last months. The last thing I needed was another child to support, but she needed to stay home. I had to get Theo over to Brad’s. Get the mayonnaise. Oh, yes, that’s what she loved, Me fucking her cunt and her ass. Fingers pushing her breasts together. Tongue darting back and forth between nipples. Jesus. I wanted to bury my face in her breasts. Put her hands on my cock. My balls. Oh, Grace. I wanted to lay my penis between her breasts. It was time. I wanted to fuck her.

I took three breaths in, then out. Anger flared in and out. I put my arms around her, slid one under her butt, trying to put her down on the floor, atop all the clothes. Sex. Yes. She’d been wanting it. Begging me for it. Leaned close and whispered, “I want to
fuck you, Gracie. I want to fuck and suck and lick you.” Jesus. I could still taste the Juicy Tubes on my lips

“Put me down. This is important.” Grace pushed me hard. My foot skidded on some of the material lying on the floor. I fell. She didn’t put out a hand to help me up.

She shuffled material around. Blue brocade. Piles of it. Sketches. The doughnut box. “It’s not here.” Grace turned to face me. “It was here. It came in the mail today. An early Christmas present.”

“Sure you didn’t imagine it?”

“It had the acceptance forms and financial sheets. The date school starts.”

“Sure Jesus didn’t tell you about it?”

For a minute the stricken look on Grace’s face made me want to take back my words. But why should I? I’d had one of the worst days of my life. I needed comfort, support. I needed my Sunshine. Jesus. What was I going to do? Grace and her imagination. Maybe I’d commit her to the Psych Institute. Maybe we’d all be a lot better off.

Said, “Maybe I should give Dr. Balentine a call. Tell him about that happy day in the kitchen with Jesus. Tell him about the invisible letter. About Jesus as Superboy.”

“How dare you talk to me that way?” This wasn’t the Grace I knew and loved. The Grace who would have tried to convince me she was fine. The Grace who would have been grateful I wanted to make love. The Grace who would have gotten Theo to Suzanne’s quicker than I did despite the fact Suzanne wasn’t speaking to her. The Grace who would have held out a jar of mayonnaise to me as she ran a finger across that soft spot between my collarbone.
“I got the letter,” she said. “I got accepted. A full-tuition fellowship. I can stay with Minette. It’s only nine months. January through May. August through October. That’s it. I’d be home all summer, and it’s only an hour or so away, anyhow.”

“Commute? Ever hear the word?”

“I don’t want to commute. I want to be immersed in New York, in Parson’s, in my designs.”

“What about your mother? Our son? What did plan to do with Theo? Leave him with your parents while your mother dies? That the plan?”

Only when I saw Grace look over my shoulder did I realize Theo stood in the studio doorway. Wearing his faggy little Superman suit. Holding his Electric Broom. Grace had no sense at all. None. Letting him dress up like that. A sissy.

I faced him. “Your mother tell you about this? About leaving us? Going off to New York? Maybe she told you what she has in mind for you. She hasn’t told me. She hasn’t told me one fucking thing.” Couldn’t stop myself. Pushed her. Shoved her hard. Her hip slammed into the drafting table. Theo ran between us. Knocked him out of the way. Pushed her again. Kept at it. Felt Theo punching me in the stomach. She fell down and got back up. She didn’t so much as shed one tear. She motioned to Theo to get out of the studio. He didn’t.

“Grammy’s dying?”

I said, “You’re crazy. You didn’t get any letter. No Providence this time. That letter would be right here if you did, and you know it. It’s a sign, Grace, a sign. A sign that you’re crazy, Grace. Crazy. Unstable. Time for the Insane Asylum.” My voice was
so loud it echoed in my own ears, hit the walls as if Randy Johnson had thrown a ball.

Bounced off the sewing machine, a Michelin run amuck.


Theo plugged in the vacuum cleaner. Round and round. Hurricane Carter. Its hum filled the room with the roar of a storm. I couldn’t look out the windows in the basement, but maybe the lull had quit. The south winds hurrying off into the mountains. A witch wind ripping the snow off the ridges heading our way. The storm filling our house. How had we reached this point? Chaos. Out of control. That’s it. Grace was out of control. She did need help. She thought she could do whatever she wanted. Her designs, her dreams, all important. Going away to school. Never stopped to think about what might have happened to me today. What I was going through. I swear I felt Miss Johanna inside me, crying out, voice thin, wavery, pleading, “Save me, save me.”

Made me angrier yet.

Hollered, “You’re lying about Parson’s. I’m calling your mother. You’re going to the Asylum.”

She moved back from me. Shouted, “Don’t you dare call my mother. Don’t you have faith in me? You’re just like her. Silly Grace. Crazy Grace. Well, fuck you. FFF uhuhuh KKK UUU. I did get a letter. I did get accepted. I am moving in with Minette, and Theo’s going with me.”
“You crazy bitch. There’s no letter. If Theo goes with you, you’ll have him tricked out in dresses by the time you get back. What about your mother’s aspiration? Who’s going to look after her?”

Theo ran from the room. Heard him thud up the steps.

“She has a husband. Do you hear me?” Grace yelled. “She has a husband. Maybe it’s time for him to do his share. And an aspiration is nothing. She has a cyst. A cyst. Not a tumor. You drain a cyst. It’s nothing. My father could have taken her to the doctor months ago and saved her months of worry. Maybe her drinking wouldn’t be so bad.”

Jesus. She’d never said anything bad about Leon before. Maybe now was the time to tell her about him and Mary Sanfilipo. Let her get good and riled at him. He’d always been her crutch. Not anymore. Not if I told her the truth. She’d be left without anybody. Minette. Sure. Like rooming with her was going to last. Jesus. Minette dumped Keith like a bag of trash.

The two of us looked at each other. A look as if each of us was staring Leon’s H-Man straight in the eye. Fear. And at the same time we’re seeing the truth of each other, a dead-on clarity in our eyes. No. This can’t be. No.

Stomping on the stairs.

Theo, cape flapping, stumbling into the studio in his high-top Converse, gripping a large box with both hands, long golden heavy velvet ribbon twisted to look like a rope wrapped around it. He set down the big blue box, large red velveteen letters reading Fortress of Solitude across its sides and on top, too. Swirled the rope around me, the gold wrapping one leg. “This means you have to tell the truth,” Theo said.
“What’s he talking about?” I said to Grace.

“That’s Wonder Woman’s magic lasso. It makes people tell the truth.” Grace tilted her head to the side. “Don’t you pay any attention to Theo? To his interests?” her voice was thin.

“Is Grammy dying?” Theo yanked on the lasso.

I looked at Grace. Said, “She’s your mother.”

“He’s asking you.” Again that tilt of the head as she looked at me. What was it she saw that I didn’t?

“Well, is she?” Theo’s voice cracked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t think so. She’s had some tests, and so far the doctors can’t say for sure.”

“What’s wrong with her?”

I breathed in three times and out. Grabbed hold of a piece of material from Grace’s basket. Folded it. Once. Again. Unfolded.

“What?” Felt the ribbon on my leg tighten.

“She might have cancer,” I said. “But if she does, we’ll get her the best care possible.”

“Brad’s grandpa and uncle died from cancer.” Theo started crying. Hard. “I think that’s why his dad left.” Tears ran down his cheeks. He got on his knees and yanked the lasso tighter and tighter as if that would change my answer.

I glanced at Grace. What was I supposed to do? I saw her lift her face, look toward the ceiling. Saw her hair move as if a breeze were moving through the studio. She put out her hand. Spread her fingers. Her lips moved as if she were talking with

Theo dropped the lasso. Wrapped his arms around his mother’s neck.

This ridiculousness set something off in me. Got down on the floor beside them.

“What do you think you are? Some fucking psychic?” Put my face close to hers. “FFF uhuhuh KKK INN GGG PSY KKK ICCCC?” Put my hands around her throat and shook her.

“Think you’re Grandma Essie come back from the dead?”

Theo jumped up and tugged on my hands. “Let go of her,” he shrieked. “I’ll call 911.” He ran from the room, that fucking red cape with its big yellow S flapping.

Dropped my hands from Grace’s throat. Ran to get Theo. Caught him on the bottom step. Wonder Woman’s lasso fell from my leg and lay in a heap at my feet. I snatched it up.

“Why don’t you ask her a question? Make her tell the truth?”

Theo’s face bright red. Splotchy. The whole damn Thayer family flushed. Nudged him toward the studio. “Your mother’s fine,” I said. “I didn’t hurt her.” Shoved the lasso into his hands. Gave him a push toward Grace. “Go ahead, make her tell the truth.”


All of a sudden, I got it. “Jesus told you, didn’t he? That’s it. That’s your answer, Theo. Jesus.”

“That’s right.” Grace’s voice was a whisper. Again, I saw her hair sway as if a light wind had touched it with a wand.

“You’re going to the Lunatic Asylum,” I said.
“What do you want to know from me, Theo?” Grace kept her voice low and soft.

Theo got up, twirled the lasso, and it swirled around her wrist, once, twice, three times. “Are you going to leave the family?” Theo said. “Are you leaving us to go to New York?”

I jumped in. “She’s not going anywhere. There is no New York. She didn’t get into Parson’s. That’s all crazy. It’s all up here.” Tapped my head.


“My mousseline,” Grace cried.


Grace stared.

A crisp white minister’s collar. One spent bullet. A newspaper article. Grace picked it up. Headline: Missing boy does not belong to the people claiming to be his parents. A thick business-sized envelope. Parson’s School of Design printed in the left corner. We all gazed, stunned at Theo’s hoard. Theo, too.

The silence made me choke out, “We’re in the eye of the storm.”

Theo stared at me. Grace, Theo, and I were Kandor. Brainiac winning. Glass bottle splintering. Slivers of glass all over the studio. No one spoke. Theo looked at his private collection, face reddening like Frances’s. He grabbed the letter. Tucked it beneath his Superman T-shirt. Held his arms over his heart. Said, “Are you leaving us to go to New York?” Put down one arm and with the other lassoed Grace around the waist with Wonder Woman’s braided velveteen rope. “You have to tell the truth.”

She knelt and put her arms around Theo. Said, “You and I are moving to New York to live with Minette for a few months. You can see Daddy whenever you want.”

“What about school?”

“There’s a wonderful school one block from Parson’s. And Parson’s is not far from Minette’s apartment.” Her voice was tentative. Trembly.

“So you’re not leaving us?”

“I’m not leaving you, Theo. I would never, ever leave you.” The only words she spoke in a firm voice.
I stared at this homey little scene. The stuff Theo had collected in his Fortress. Listened to Grace’s bullshit. Said, “That’s it. I’m going out for awhile. Can’t stay in this mad house.”

Grace stood. Dropped her arms from around Theo. Took hold of his hand. Said, “Gordie Couper called me today.” She looked me dead in the eye. “I know what you did.”

The fire? My beautiful dress? Oh, no. No. I was falling.

“The records inaccurate. A payment plan. He told me he thought it was only fair that I know.” She tilted her head to the side. “Is there anything else you haven’t told me?” How dare Gordie tell Grace? How dare he? Had to be breaking the law. He had no right. I grabbed the rocket Jor-El built for Superboy’s safety and crushed it in my hands. Theo cried out, “How could you? Jor-El made that for his son’s protection. So he would survive.” He picked up his Electric Broom. Slammed it across the room. Shattered.

Grace put up her hand.

Pressed my hands to my pounding head. Kept falling into a dizzying and depthless dream. A retread run amuck. Sliding into a frigid lake the way Grace always claimed she did. No more rage. Nothing. The numbness would pass. And then? And then?

Don’t know what made me say, “I’m leaving. I’m going to someone who loves me.” Deep inside I knew I spoke the truth. I knew exactly what I was going to do. Exactly. The only answer. I’d have to hurry to New York and blaze my blurry way to the cottage to beat the full blast of the storm.
I ran from the room. Bolted up the steps. Heard Grace and Theo thumping after me. Hit the electric door button. Charged into the garage. Buzzed open its door. Leaped into the Jeep. Snow and ice sent me skidding slow-mo into a three-sixty in the middle of the cul-de-sac. Chains catching gravel. Outside the now lead-gray afternoon slipped toward twilight. Spun out of the neighborhood in the thick, wet, snow. Snow that stuck this time. Still the big flakes, but they’d grow smaller and smaller until you could barely see through your windshield as the storm progressed. Had to get a move on. Pressed harder on the pedal. Sped out onto the slab of snowy highway. The pulse of Leon’s H-Man pushing me. Hard. Harder. Wind hummed its eerie, unearthly song.

CHAPTER 12

THE DIVINE AND MISS JOHANNA

1

Theo and Grace stood in the snow-covered driveway, shivering. Snow dusted their faces, shoulders, big loops of white picot. The temperature was dropping. Jonathan’s words, I’m leaving. I’m going to someone who loves me, could only mean Carol. Grace hadn’t imagined his distraction, his lack of interest in sex, the way he avoided her—Silly Grace—using work as an excuse, her mother encouraging his so-called long working hours each day, leaving her and Theo to be a family of two.

His departure into the cold, stormy evening left her with a peculiar sensation. She felt the same soaring of ice-skating on the lake as a little girl free of her mother, and yet she was sliding into the frigid black lake water, the two feelings woven into a material that wouldn’t hold together. Basted. Her body felt peculiar, airy, like loose wool, not the tight itchy wool that was her mother, but the loose wool of her father’s knitting when he wasn’t paying attention. She would unravel and disappear.

“Where’s Grace?” everyone would say.

Gone missing, gone missing, gone missing.

She’d been missing for a long time. Longer than her memory reached, longer than Baby Nathan, Uncle Charlie, Grandma Essie. Missing from outside of time.
She has never been alone. She has never carved her own path.

If only the snow would stop, this silver netting stretching out in front of her, a shadowy smear, veils that kept her from seeing clearly, she would chase after Jonathan. She would find out the truth once and for all. Gordie’s phone call had left her in a sickly haze. Did she in her heart believe that he was on his way to see Carol? Yes. Maybe. She knew from Gordie that he was a liar. She knew from her heart that he had someone, somewhere that had been keeping him from her for a long, long time.

Grace trembled. Her teeth chattered. Snow blanketed her hair, arms, brocade dress. She stood in the slushy driveway, uncertain what to do. The slush would turn to ice before long. She didn’t notice Theo shuddering in the chill beside her. She glanced at the sky, and suddenly the snow became a cuddly blanket, fluffy and soft, one she’d felt before—angora?—enfolding her, making her safe and warm. She was slip sliding into one of her secret spaces. Slipping, sliding down a dangling silken slide into fluffy familiar warmth. She pulled the cuddly angora blanket closer around her shoulders, but no, it was her old nonnie, its lovely baby-powdery smell floating through the air, shining on her long hair, a sheen of Theo’s babyhood, not freezing snow at all. She hadn’t lost Theo.

“I’m here,” she said.

And then came His voice. She knew it would. She expected to hear, “Amazing Grace?”, but she didn’t. He said, You know what to do.

“Yes,” she said, running out to the end the driveway, snow embroidering her feet.

“Yes.”

Theo called out to her. “I’m cold. Let’s go inside. Daddy’s left us.”
The snow was falling faster and faster. *She sticks out her tongue. No snow. A sign, a sign, a sign.*

Yes, a sign. She had to find out. Now. That’s what she had to do first. The weather didn’t matter. What mattered was what Jonathan was up to—either they needed to put an end to their synthetic marriage or go to counseling, pray for guidance, something. She had to get on with *her* life. She was going to Parson’s no matter what Jonathan said. *Grace’s Own.* Unique. She thought of the last dress she’d made—snowy chiffon inspired by nuns’ habits and clergymen’s robes. Gathered pleats, fluffs and puffs of them spilling throughout the material. The dress made her think about spirituality, how Jesus said it was ineffable—such a glorious word. In EFFFFF FA FA FA BBBBB LLLL. At Parson’s she’d create a gown of ineffability, one that would make every other designer sit up and take notice. A gown of spirituality. Yes.

“Mommy, Mommy, Mommy,” Theo cried out.

Grace swirled to face him, hair flying out around her face, snow sprinkling her hair, a glaze of confectioner sugar. A sign.

Theo ran down the driveway and grabbed his mother’s hand. He didn’t tap it. He pulled on it. She tapped three times, but he refused to tap back. She tapped him three times again. Nothing. He’d never, ever not tapped back. Had she lost him, after all?

“Mom.” Theo tugged on her. “We’ve got to follow Daddy. He said we’re in the eye of the storm. If we don’t move at the same speed and direction he does, we’ll all be caught in the of winds. Unless Daddy drives into the storm’s eye and stays in that perimeter of safety.”
Now he had her attention. She pulled him to her. He was soaked through with the snow. She knelt in front of him, put a hand on each arm. “How on earth do you know such things?” Her son was turning into a superfigure. That’s how they talked in the comics. “How do you know words like perimeter?”

Theo pushed Grace’s hands off his arms. “In one of the Superman comics, he does just that and he saves the world from a hurricane that The Riddler set into motion.”

Grace continued to kneel in the cold and snow. Lights around the cul-de-sac brightened the neighborhood and showed the snow tinkling down from the heavens fast and furiously. Thick, wet snow. Big flakes. She trembled in the chill. And there it was again—so soon—that familiar warmth—like someone had slung a quilt over her shoulders. She immediately clasped her hands in prayer, not thinking of Theo, not thinking of anything but Jonathan and Carol and all that had once been between her and Jonathan but had vanished into the hole of a tire. Should she follow him? Yes, yes, yes, She didn’t allow herself to ask, How much do you really care? She bowed her head: “Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love Thee, and worthily magnify Thy holy name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

Grace heard the slam of the door into the laundry room. Theo had gone inside, but Grace heard a sweet fragment of hymn, the same hymn she’d been hearing for months: 

*There is a green hill far away, Without a city wall, Where the dear Lord was crucified, He died to save us all.* Another verse she’d never heard before came to her: *O dearly,
dearly has He loved, And we must love Him, too, and trust in His redeeming blood,
And try His works to do.

She was trying. Oh, yes. She was. So hard. And then she smelled Him. The sunshine. It had to be Jesus. She lay down in the snow, the slit in her bleu brocade spreading wide. He was on top of her, filling her with hot sun, and then came the whisper, tickling her ear, “Amazing Grace.” To her surprise He didn’t sing the old hymn she’d just heard. No, what came to Grace was Jesus singing in Johnny Cash’s baritone, tumbling out the words: “Well, some glad mornin’ when this life is o’er, I’ll fly away. . .”

“Dead? You’re going to die?” Grace cried. “You can’t!”

“I already did.”

“Me?” Grace cried. “I’m going to die?”

“You already did,” Jesus said.

“Get up, Mommy, get up. You’ll catch cold.” Theo had pulled on a snowsuit she’d made him, a blue and red snowsuit with a big yellow S on the back, and he’d tugged on his snow boots all by himself. She could see that beneath he wore warm, dry brown corduroy pants and a long-sleeved beige shirt.

Grace glanced once at the sky from where she lay in the driveway. She wasn’t sure, but in the light from Suzanne’s lamp at the end of her driveway she thought she saw a figure wave to her through the veil of snow. She saw a cape, a blue cape, she was sure, His wrinkly cotton one—not the one she’d made for Him. Something inside her fell to pieces. Didn’t He know about the bleu brocade robe? He was supposed to know everything, wasn’t He? Why hadn’t He gotten it from her studio? It was Christmas Eve, His birthday tomorrow, same as Theo’s.
“C’mon, Mom.” Theo paused, then added in a low quavering voice, “He’s gone to Grammy’s. That’s who he thinks loves him.”

Grace forced herself to stop listening to the distant baritone drifting with the snow into the night, “To a home on God’s celestial shore, I’ll fly away. . .”

She stared at Theo. “Jesus is going to Grammy’s?”

“Daddy, Mom, Daddy. What’s wrong with you?”

Grace scrambled to her feet. “I knew you meant Daddy. Sorry. You’re probably right.” Of course Jonathan was headed to her parents’. That’s what Jesus was telling her with that hymn. Her father loved that song—it was on Johnny Cash’s My Mother’s Hymnbook CD—he hummed it all the time until her mother told him to shut up. Deep inside, though, she knew better than to believe Jonathan was headed to her parents’. She thought Jesus did, too. Only Theo didn’t.

Once inside the house, Grace planned to hang her bleu brocade dress near a heater to dry. To her amazement, it was dry. So was her hair. So were her feet. She hurried to the laundry room to look for Theo’s Superman suit—he’d laid it on top of the dryer—sopping wet. He’d spread the cape across the top of the washer. Neither were dry. Only she was, she and her bleu brocade.

In the kitchen Grace set out a plate of glazed doughnuts. She clapped her hands. “Let’s go, Theo. We’ll see if Daddy’s at Grammy’s. If he’s not, I’m leaving you there while I go looking.”

Theo ran into the room, pieces of his Electric Broom in his hand. “You’re a Riddler, too.”

“What do you mean?”
“You’re two people all mixed up together just like The Riddler and Daddy. Sometimes you act like a mom and know what moms are supposed to know, and other times you’re somebody else. You’re somebody who lies in the snowy driveway.”

Grace put down the glazed doughnut she was licking. She knelt and held out her arms to Theo. “I didn’t mean to scare you,” she said.

Theo threw the already shattered bits of vacuum cleaner across the room. “You never got me the boots you promised. You forgot all about them.” He ran out of the room and came back with Jor-El’s broken rocket. He set it on the table as a centerpiece. “We don’t have any protection now,” he said.

“Maybe we need to create our own safety,” Grace said. “You and me. From here on out.” She lowered her voice. “You haven’t forgotten all those Sunday school lessons, have you, sweetie?”

“That doesn’t change that you forgot my boots.” Grace understood that so much hung on those words, so much that wasn’t said, just unspoken thoughts hanging in the kitchen like dirty laundry on an old clothesline.

Theo was right. She’d gone to New York to Minette and Janelle Chantelle and never once thought about Theo’s boots. Or Theo. Once she was home again, she didn’t even remember he wanted them. She was too busy working with her bleu brocade.

“I’m sorry,” Grace said, still on her knees, arms still outstretched. “Will you forgive me?”

Theo nodded, but she saw his lower lip trembling. He didn’t step into her arms.

She thought how distant Theo had been these last weeks, how quiet, spending all his time in his room. “The boots,” she said, “is that why you’ve been so quiet?”
Theo flushed a bright red. He stamped his foot. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Tell you what, honey? About Parson’s?” She’d planned to take him out on one of their drives, park in a favorite space and tell him about her plans for New York and Parson’s. Jonathan had ruined her chances for that. And she hadn’t counted on Theo seeing the letter. “I wanted to tell you in my own way, in our own time, privately.”

Tears spilled down Theo’s face. “About Grampy Lion.”

“What do you mean?” Grace dropped her arms, but she stayed on her knees. Her loose wool trailed down her back, her front, everywhere, limp and sagging.

“You know. You have to know.” Theo kept crying, but he didn’t move toward his mother. “You and Daddy are Riddlers. Grampy Lion’s a Riddler, too. Grammy, too. I hate this family.”

“Tell me.”

“You left me at the cottage with Grampy Lion drunk,” Theo said with that catch in his voice. “I know because all afternoon he drank out of a bottle. Grammy lay on the couch. Whenever she woke up, she got another bottle of wine. That’s when I got the three corks. I thought keeping them in my Fortress of Solitude might make her safe.”

Grace felt a catch in her own throat, a billowy bubble skirt of dismay that she’d done that to her son. She’d never known her father to get drunk before, and so she pretended to herself that he wasn’t that afternoon so that she could go to New York. She’d told herself he’d sober up. He had Theo and her mother to look after. “I’m so sorry, sorry. . . .”

Before Grace finished her sentence, Theo said, “Grampy Lion took me upstairs to the gun room. He showed me a secret tunnel. He pulled out a jug. Inside were magazines.
He showed me pictures of naked girls.” Again, that awful little catch in his throat.

“After he spread out the magazines on the floor in front of us, he started knitting. He told me to pay attention, he’d show me a reverse stockinette stitch. He put the yarn in my lap.”

Naked girls? Her father showed her son pictures of naked girls? Sewing needles pinned themselves to her heart. “You didn’t stay upstairs with him, did you? Did you tell Grammy?”

Theo crumpled to the floor. “I left him upstairs alone and ran down to Grammy. She was lying on the floor. I thought she was dead but then she snorted.” His tears and anger became the violent storm that was surely on its way to the Catskills. “I hate you,” he said.

Grace felt herself on the edge of her existence as she’d known it, her nonnie, sweet-smelling and safe gone, her sweatshirt, cozy and familiar gone, even the enticing naughty feel of liquor and pot, gone, the woodsy smell and safety of her mackinaw gone. All gone. Even the sense of her mother as itchy wool didn’t exist anymore. She had no feeling of having a mother at all.

“I’ll go to Suzanne’s,” Theo said. “You find Daddy.” He stood and wiped his eyes.

“I’m so sorry. I’ll never leave you alone with them again. Never. I’m so sorry. He can’t do that to you. Do you understand that? It’s wrong. Anyone in his right mind knows that’s wrong. Sick. Against the law.” She put her head in her hands. “He’s my father.” Her mouth felt sticky and gross as if she’d vomited out those three words. She said them again in a whisper. “He’s my father.”
“Daddy’s my father.” Theo’s voice held no inflection. He pulled mittens out of his snowsuit pocket. He looked at Grace on her knees, his face splotchy with tears. “Why couldn’t I have gone with you?”

He ran out of the kitchen, and Grace heard the thump of his snow boots on the stairs leading to the second floor. She had barely managed to pull herself up from her knees when Theo ran through the kitchen, his bag full of superfigures on his back. He disappeared out the laundry room door.

Grace’s heart filled with love for her superboy, despair for herself. She hurried into the garage and watched out the window. She thought it better to let him go to Brad’s right now than to stop him. He needed his friend. That much was clear. Suzanne would be good to Theo. Grace saw her son on Suzanne’s front porch. In the glow of the light, he was a shadow boy behind the snow. She saw the door swing open and Theo vanish inside. She picked up the telephone.

“Suzanne? It’s Grace,” she said. “Theo needs you and Brad and Lisa right now. If it’s any consolation to you, Jonathan’s left me, said he was going to the person who loves him.” Grace couldn’t speak for the tears. She choked out, “Theo needs Brad more than me right now. Keep him warm and safe.”

She didn’t wait for Suzanne’s response. She replaced the receiver and put her hand to her pincushion heart of pain. Hands damp, she searched the phonebook for Sheriff Anderson’s number. When it came to a choice between her father or Theo, there was no contest. She was Theo’s mother. Her job was to protect him. Grace called the sheriff at home, uncaring. Blurted out what Theo had told her about her father.
“Calm down, Grace. Don’t go off the deep end over a little indiscretion,” he said. “It’s a family matter. It’s Christmas Eve. He’d probably had a bit to drink.” He cleared his throat before adding, “Theo’s got quite an imagination. Like you.”

Grace tilted her head. She heard loud and clear what wasn’t being said: “You’re crazy, Grace. Everybody knows that. Everybody knows you were locked up in the Lunatic Asylum.”

“You bastard.”

“Look, if it’s that big a deal, come in after the holidays and file a report. I’ll have a talk with Leon. It’s probably a misunderstanding.”

Grace hung up the phone. She sat on the floor and sagged against the island. Her bleu brocade held its shape, smooth and snug around her. She touched her dress, running her finger up and down the length of it. She twisted a strand of hair around the index finger on her other hand. She pulled her knees up against her chest, her arms holding them. Her whole body trembled with fear. All she had left of her life as she’d known it was the terror of the unknown and its slick danger—the Dwayo caves, dark slippery cracks in the rocks where she might disappear and never be found again. Gone missing, gone missing, gone missing.

How could her father have done such a thing? She never wanted to see him again. Him or her mother. Caretaking them exhausted her. It had consumed her life to this point. There was nothing left of her to fulfill their needs. And look at how they’d treated her son. Her precious Christmas child. She’d left Theo with them. She did know her father was drunk. Of course she knew. She had a sick ache in her stomach. Her mouth had gone dry. The steel bars of her Fortress of Solitude crashed down on her, choking the life out
of her the way a high, tight Victorian collar would. Her life was the experience of
meaninglessness itself.

Jesus was right. She had already died. Maybe Theo had, too. There were so many
ways of dying.

By the time I reached New York, the snow hadn’t yet switched from the thick,
wet flakes to a flurry of smaller flakes. Temperature still falling—not warming—but it
would before the blizzard set in. Christopher Street aflush with queens bustling in their
Christmas finery. Couldn’t wait to get inside Fashions for His Lady. See Toddette. Have
her point me to the exact dress for the occasion. Knew she’d be open Christmas Eve. Kiss
Kiss would be open, too.

“Oh, my God!” Toddette did an umbrella step just like we all used to do as kids
when we played Mother, May I? She did another. Hugged me. “Miss Johanna. I have just
the dress for you. Came in yesterday. Oh, my God, it is the living end.”

Glanced around the store. Two or three couples shifting through racks of sale
items. A stray customer in and out, touching materials. Toddette had brought in a piano
and set it on a dais in the middle of the store. Gorgeously clad queen playing and singing
“Silver Bells.” Gown silver from top to bottom. Velvet. Soft store lighting played on its
silvery sheen. Fingernails’ silver speckled. Hair, silver netting over a silver bouffant
fifties’ hairdo. It’s Christmas time in the city. . .

Toddette, dressed as Glinda, the Good Witch of the North in The Wizard of Oz,
was ablaze with sparkles and layers upon layers of creamy taffeta. An amazing sparkling
tiara sat atop a golden wig. Curls cascading down her back. She had an odd odor—pleasant. Soothing. Didn’t recognize it. Herbal tea?

“Let me go get the dress.” She rushed from the room. Vanished behind a black satiny velvet curtain in the back of the store. Swish. Her taffeta rustled. Reappeared. Apple-red dress in her arms. Said, “It’s a riding habit designed from a photograph in La Halte. Oh, it’s the latest thing. Crop. Knee-high boots. Hat. All set for side-saddle riding.” Swooshed the dress across my face. “This is so you.” Lowered her voice, “Haven’t shown this to anyone else. A must have. Side-by-side in your closet against that Sunshine-on-My-Shoulder-Makes-Me-Happy-Yellow—the warmth of those two colors together.” Twinkled at me. Set the dress across the top of the piano. Tapped me with her wand. Once. Twice. Three times. Said, “Three, the magic number. It’s yours for the having, Miss Johanna.” Within seconds, the green Victorian loveseat had the dress, hat, crop, shining black boots sitting on it. Toddette pulled a milk-colored mink cape from one of the racks. “Just the thing.” Beckoning me. From the dais came, *Here comes Santa Claus, here comes Santa Claus.* . . .

Toddette sat on the loveseat. Swept her arm around the dress and cape like a lover. Said, “What is it? What’s holding you back, Miss J? It’s not like you not to be touching the clothes, sniffing the air.” She sniffed. Swept out her other arm. “You smell it? The pine? I’ve got a tree in back—a live one—to give the store a wintery ambiance. So unlike you not to notice.” Said, “Smell me. Do you like it? The poppie smell? So sweet. So soothing.” Dimpled at me. “Just a hint of opium to keep the *Wizard of Oz* motif working. Fashion’s all illusions, anyway, my pet.”

* Dashing through the snow, In a one-horse open sleigh
I stood not far inside the doorway. Smelled my own odor again. Sour sweat. Fear of what the night would bring. Two couples came in dressed to kill—murmured something to the piano player who jerked her head toward the back room, never missing a beat. . . . *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, Had a very shiny nose.* . . . The people slipped through the black satin curtain. Before long, two more couples slunk behind the curtain, too. A third couple.

Toddette jumped up from the loveseat. “Accessories, is that it? More accessories?” She dashed behind the large glass counter. Saw her long painted fingernails in what had to be Chanel Le Vernie in Bikini Rose tip-tap-toe over rings and necklaces and bracelets, gathering a handful. Pulled me by the arm to the loveseat. Pushed me against the dress. Placed a ruby ring in my lap. Wrapped a ruby bracelet around my wrist. Placed a ruby pendant around my neck. All decorated with black rather than gold or silver, jet-black to match the riding boots and crop.

Clementine, the clerk from Kiss Kiss, ran inside the store. Dressed head-to-toe as an elf. Tight green leggings. Tiny red panties to show off her package. Pointed black velvet shoes. Matching black hat. *Oh my darling, oh, my darling,* she trilled the moment she saw me.

From the piano, *Frosty the Snowman was a jolly, happy soul.* . . .

“I closed up my shop,” Clementine said. “Look outside. The snow is stopping. Only sprinkles of dazzling white. The storm is over. The night begins tra-la!”

I ran to the door and opened it. Giant thick, wet flakes gone. Flurries now. Light. Papery. Clementine couldn’t be more wrong. The storm had stalled. But it was on its way. Flurries a warning. The temperature would be rising. Jesus. Had to get the right
dress. Had to be at the cottage, ready, at midnight. Sour sweat smell filling my nostrils.

Said, “No, no, no. Wrong dress. Has to be lavender.”

“No,” Clementine cried. “Frothy pastels are so, so out of fashion.” She exchanged glances with Toddette. “What this girl need is a bath, a full-body massage, a wax, full makeup treatment and that fabulous hairpiece you’ve got in the back.”

Toddette nodded. “No lavender for you, Miss J. Sequins? The metallics are all the rage.” She pulled a dress off a nearby rack. Sequin tulle. Bright floral-print cardigan. Gold sash. Clementine pulled out Chalcedony earrings from behind the counter. Laid them in my hand. “Must haves.” From the row of shoes on one side of the store, she grabbed a pair of open-toe metallic leather pumps. Put them next to my feet. “Yes, yes, yes,” she said.

*Deck the halls with boughs of holly, Fa lalala la la la*

Store emptied. Only me and Clementine and Toddette. Toddette must have seen my face. She whirled around three times and tapped me on each shoulder with her wand. “We can go with a deep, plush purple,” she said. “Yes?”

Shook my head, no.

Clementine nodded yes. This time it was she pulling the dresses from the racks. “We’re going for the nostalgic,” she said. “The mysterious. That’s your mood tonight. Chiffon and velvet. Crushed velveteen. Tiered ruffles. The bell shape. We’ll bring back the sartorial past, *oh my darling,*” and she chucked me under the chin.

Tears dribbled down my face.

*Have yourself a merry little Christmas, Make the Yule-tide gay*
Dropped my head into my hands and wept. No Merry Christmas for me.

Clementine shoved aside the clothes on the loveseat. Sat me down. Hurried to the racks.

Rustled through the gowns. Swish, swoosh.

*Chestnuts roasting on an open fire, Jack Frost nipping at your nose*

Shuddered. Tears kept coming.

Toddette ran to the piano player. Whispered something in her ear. She nodded and gathered up her belongings. She made a swift trip into the back room. Returned and blew kisses to all three of us and hurried out the door into the snow flurries.

Clementine said, “There’s people in the back.”

Toddette rolled her eyes. Vanished behind the velvety curtain.

Clementine kept her arm around me. Said, “Plus purple velvet. It’s a must. No other fabric plays with light in quite the same way. And there’s that almost undetectable sound—a faint breeze off the ocean through sea grass freshly dried at sunrise, it pricks your ear and pulls you toward wherever you’re going.” She leaned close to me. “It whispers romance.” She stood and went to the rack against the far wall. Pulled out a dress—low in front, tight waist, long, flowing skirt. “Eggplant,” she said. “A deliciously dark shade of eggplant. All the rage.” Swept it across my face. Had to touch the velvet, So soft. Oh. To wrap up in this. Heaven.

Shook my head. “No, too dark. I need lavender.”

The people emerged from the back, grinning. The smell of a delightful sweetish scent mixed with cinnamon and honey swelled from behind the curtain. Toddette danced the two couples to the door. Against the backdrop of the streetlamps, I could see snowflakes sailing from the sky. There’d be no stopping them.
Toddette blew the couples kisses and turned smiling to us. “Shoes,” she cried out. “I have just the shoes.” Behind the curtain. Swept into the room. “Furbelows!” she cried. “Look!” She held out a pair of satin platform sandals with mink and Swarovski crystals. Trimmed with pale braiding and a slight hint of metallics. My hand reached out. Touched the mink. Every part of the shoe was muted. Subtle. Colorless in a way. Yes. This was what I was looking for. Never worn anything but my mother’s plain black funeral pumps, but for this occasion I would wear these shoes. Deserved that much, didn’t I?

Said, “Passementerie. Love it. I’ll take these.”

Now it was Clementine’s turn to hustle behind the velvet curtain. Waves of the sweet odor drifted out. Hollered, “Brewing your own perfume, Toddette?” She squealed with laughter. A smoky odor drifted into the storefront. Pungent, but sweet.

“A dress now.” Toddette tapped me once on each shoulder with her wand. Tiara glittered. Grabbed the dark purple. Tossed it onto the counter. “Lavender, lavender, lavender.” Twirled three times in an umbrella step. Smiling, Grinned. Snatched a dress on a rack no more than two feet from my place on the loveseat. “Lilac,” she trilled. “The fragrance of a lush lilac bush.” Hung the dress so I could look at it. I glanced outside. I had to get to the cottage before the blizzard set in. That lilac smell of cloves and Bay Rum and vetiver all mixed with sandalwood filled my nose. No, I didn’t want lilac. Needed more subtlety. I knew that the temperature would first warm, then drop and keep dropping. Light fluffy snowflakes would begin to stick. Start coming in a fury so hard and fast, you wouldn’t be able to see a house or a car. Back roads to the lake. Impossible.

Lilac. No. The front of the pink heart-shaped tag read from an old ballad: “Green

Shoved the dress onto the rack. Faced Toddette. Heard Clementine’s giggles from behind the curtain. Said, “Have to have lavender. It’s a special one-and-only occasion.”

Another tap from Toddette’s wand. Whiff of that odd, sweet pungent odor.


“The music,” she said. “I must put on the music.” She rushed laughing behind the jewelry display and the next thing I knew Gordon Lightfoot was singing, If you’d like to spend the afternoon approaching lavender. You’ll feel just fine but one thing’s sure, You’ll never be the same. . . His soft, husky voice was everywhere inside Fashions for His Lady wavering on the smoky haze.

Toddette locked the front door. Took me by the hand. Pulled me behind the curtain. Clementine was brewing an eye-watering concoction on a small stove. A Stanley blade sat on the counter. Clementine giggling. “Some tea?” she said. Put a mug in my hand. “Remember, Miss J, this is all in the spirit of The Wizard of Oz. Very safe. Drink up.”

Said, “Cinnamon?”
“That’s right,” Toddette smiled. “Opium, honey, cinnamon.” Turned to look at Clementine. “Silly girl, She’s been smoking opium and pot, too. Smell it? Look at her.”

Clementine was nodding. Rocking. Nodding. Her eyes half-closed. Deep contentment on her face. Toddette led her to a deep, cushiony chair. Pushed her in. A glass bong sat next to the stove. Poster of Persian white and Hungarian Blue poppies taped to the wall. Three photos of Dorothy in the field of colorful poppies.

You’ll soon be on a one night tour, Forgetting your own name

“I’ve been saving this dress for a very special person and occasion.” Toddette took a deep breath and twirled her umbrella step. Her bouffant dress swirled around with her. She moved to the bong. Re-lit it. “Lighter has to be at its hottest.” She moved behind Clementine’s chair. Opened a closet. Stared at me. Eyes glazed. Said, “For this dress to work, you have to carry a sense of dignity. That is the only accessory you’ll need.”

Sat in a chair across from her. Drank my tea fast. Didn’t care about the opium. One night. What difference would it make?

Clementine giggled.

If you’d like to spend the afternoon approaching lavender, Don’t try to get the best of her

Toddette spread the dress across my lap. Moved to the stove, leaving me alone. Another hit off the bong. Breathed it in slow-mo.

Dress coming to life. Draped aged gentry. Asked, “How old is this?”

“That, my dear Miss Johanna,” Toddette said, facing me, “was my grandfather’s going-away dress after my grandmother discovered him in it. Pure vintage. True lavender is taste, culture, breeding. He was a lady, believe me. Lived on Park and Sixty-eighth.”

Turned back to the stove. Replenished her tea. Held up the kettle.

Shook my head, no. “I’ve got to get going. The storm’s going to get worse. Those flakes after the thick, wet ones are the warning sign of a blizzard.”

Toddette laughed. “Silly, girl. Those are snowflakes dancing.” Drank more tea. Offered me the bong. “Mixed with marajuana, my dear. Delightful.” She took a hit.

Not me. Dress made me giddy enough. Lifted it to my face. The perfume rushed to my brain—a lush aroma, thick with minty sweetness. Heart pounded like a Michelin hitting gravel as the lavender scent took me over. Slightly dizzy. Gasping, choking with laughter, too. Wild and sweet. Brain bursting with excitement infused with violet and fuchsia. Melting, This was the dress I’d been waiting for my whole life. Checked the pink tag. Read: “You won’t need a reason just to be alone with lavender, for that light so warm and pure, Will draw you like a flame.”

Flame. Oh, my poor Sunshine. The back of my neck grew cold and damp. Had the slippery feeling you get when the phone rings at two in the morning. Hands trembled.

Back read: “Warning by Claire Powell: ‘In the Victorian language of flowers, this herb
represents distrust. The allusion is based on the old belief that the asp, the small, venomous, hooded snake, which killed Cleopatra. . .habitually lurked under a lavender plant, and it was highly advisable to approach a lavender clump with caution.’” Attached to the heart was a small vial with another heart-shaped tag reading, *A La Lavender Mist, An Eau de Toilette pour His Lady.*

Perfect for this occasion. The dress. The opium. The tag.


Toddette floated over to me in a mist of smoke. “Let’s give you a quick shower. Burn those smelly clothes.”


Toddette opened a dresser drawer. Pulled out lingerie pieces that gave me a hard on. She laughed. Said, “That’s what it’s for, silly girl.” Smoke swirled around us as she slipped a “Lavender Lust” silk chemise over my head. Bra stuffed with delicate silk, satin, and lace looked wonderful. “No panties for you, Miss J,” she said. Reached for the dress and together we got me into it.

Toddette shaped my eyebrows. Painted my toenails in the subtle Sarah Smile from the Lippmann Collection. Quick-drying. Same for my fingernails. “No stockings,” Toddette said. “Too, too much. The platform sandals are the statement. No jewelry.”

As she made up my face, she said, “You, my dear, Miss J, have got to be the star in your very own fable, transmogrify into the queen you are inside.” My tongue pulsed
inside my mouth at the word inside. Confusing. All I could think of was The Invisible Boy—the phantom Jonathan who stood outside time. Toddette was saying I was on the inside in my lavender gown.

I moved to the counter. Picked up the Stanley blade. Ran my finger up and down it. Turned to Toddette. Said, “I will take a hit.” The smoke was nowhere near as bad as the tea. Took a second hit. Level of contentment rose. High. Higher. Sensation that deep inside me gates were closing. One by one. Locking up a vital area I couldn’t afford to lose all at once. A private darkness. Stomach nauseous. Tears welled again. Butterflies of fear fluttered hard inside my chest.

“Naughty, naughty.” Toddette grinned. “We can’t have you ruining your makeup job. You are transforming into who you really are. However fantastic.”

Gordon Lightfoot sang. . . The colors that surround you there will be the shade of lavender, Shadows dancing everywhere. . .

He was right. Where I was going that’s what there would be. Shadows.

Giggles from Clementine.


“Subtle for my lavender queen.” Toddette put a plastic skullcap over my hair. “A wig. You must have a wig, but it mustn’t look like a wig. I’ve got just the thing.” Pranced into the closet again. Clementine semi-conscious in her chair.
Toddette reappeared with a short, straight blond wig in one hand and a ponytail of the exact same shade in the other. “Now don’t run your hand through your hair. You’ll mess everything up.” She glued the wig to my cap, then wrapped a piece of the wig around the ponytail to attach it. Showed me an elastic made of human hair. Said, “It’s a Tonytail. It’ll keep the ponytail secure. Chic. Very chic.”

She inspected me from all angles. “‘Oh, my darling, oh, my darling’, as Clementine would say,” she said. “No jewelry, not with this elegant ensemble, but we must spritz you with just the right perfume.” She darted into the front of the store. Returned with a white bottle. Lovely, it read.

“It’s perfect,” Toddette said. “Blend of bergamot, lavender, patchouli, and musk.”

“What about A La Lavender Mist, An Eau de Toilette pour His Lady?”

“You take that home with you. Pleasure yourself.” She powdered me with Lovely. “You have become your inner queen, Miss Johanna,” she said. “This is you. Far more so than your Sunshine dress. Elegant. To the manor born. Perfect for Christmas—a new beginning.” She turned to Clementine. “What do you think, darling?”


I stood in front of the mirror. Didn’t move. Couldn’t believe the lovely creature in front of me. Miss Johanna. Me. Traced her reflected lips with my finger. Collapsed onto her chair and laughed. Jesus. Clutched the lavender dress. Folded herself into the sweep
of material. Heard the whisper of cars cruising down the snowy street. Her own breathing.

She stood again. In front of the mirror. Ran her finger up and down her sleek ponytail. Smiled. Sighed. Giggled. Relaxed. So relaxed. A kiss? She pressed her lips against the glass. Ah. Another kiss. A waggle of fingers. A coy smile. Leaned toward the glass. Another kiss. Tears trickling down her face. What was happening to her? She never cried until tonight. Grabbed a towel near the teakettle. Gently pressed to her face. Makeup had to stay on.

She had never looked so beautiful. So polished. So much herself. She put her index finger atop her head the way she had as a child playing Mother, May I? and spun around. Her legs were soft and satiny slipping against each other beneath the dress’s flowing fabric, and she spun again.

Toddette and Clementine had fallen from the chair to the floor. Rolling around together. Grinning. Laughing. As if she were invisible. No. She didn’t want to be outside time. She wanted to be inside. Not a phantom. A person.

She ran from the back room and searched the storefront for a coat. The milky mink still lay on the loveseat. Why not take it? Toddette would get it back at some point. No point in paying. Miss Johanna glanced into the back room. Both Clementine and Toddette seemed to be inside a silver ball of a Christmas tree ornament. A giant bubble of smoky ornament.

To the cottage.

She had to get to the cottage. A flush of adrenaline filled her belly. Out into the snowy street she teetered on her platforms. Revelers everywhere. No one paying attention
to the Lady in Lavender. Night had fallen with a light snow. Temperature had risen.
Snow that had fallen had turned to slush. She found the Jeep on Washington Place.
Turned on heat. Flew out of the city toward the lake. She knew that the snow would start
in earnest and once again the temperature would drop. In an hour or two, the road up the
slope to the cottage would be a sheet of cold, gritty ice and snow.

Racing down the highway toward the mountains. Snow started up again. Silent,
yet palpable, that stillness like sound being drained from the city. Creating space for her
to create who she was. Yes.

Snowflakes thick and furious. Chains starting biting into loose pebbles through
the snow. Wind picked up. Colder. Snatched at her as if to tear her away from the earth
and bear her and the Jeep off into the void of a vast well of empty headache.

And then a lull.

Pushed in Dale Carnegie. *People rarely succeed unless they have fun in what
they’re doing*. Saving Gordon Lightfoot’s CD until she got to the lake house.

No colored lights around any cottages. All empty. Leon and Frances’s house
Stopped the Jeep. Pressed her hands to her head. Started the engine again. Sped up the
winding dirt road. Chains digging deep. Traction increasing.

Miss Johanna arrived.

Parked beneath the snow-slick evergreen. Branches would soon break off from
the weight of ice. Cottage dark. Chimneys toppling. Porch askew. A light trembling in
her hands. She felt fragile as her Vintage dress. One wrong move and it would tear. She
wrapped the folds of subdued lavender silk and dull draping shirred chiffon close around
her. Ran her finger up and down the mink. Stepped out of the Jeep. Touched beneath her high Victorian collar that soft space between her collarbone. Clutched her vial of *A La Lavender Mist, An Eau de Toilette pour His Lady*.

Sudden shift of winds. Desolate winds that drape around tree trunks. That climb the leafless limbs. That whistle through the pine boughs. That rustle the leaves on the ground. That blow the drifting snow. That permeate anything in their path. That go down the back of her dress. Leave her with goose pimples and shivering. Not just from the cold. Piercing loneliness. A spacious hollowness. Soon no one would be able to drive anywhere. The blizzard snow would fly up and down and blind anyone who tried. Good. Weeks before anyone would think to look for her at the lake.

Two hours later she was still awake. Outside the window snow clouds had thickened over the lake. Pillowing ball gowns across the dark sky. But Miss Johanna was inside. By the keening fire. Soft, eerie, hissing hum. Sitting on the couch beneath Christ on the cross. She’d set scented candles all around. Cottage smelling of dead apples, lingering lime, gun residue, eye-watering smoke from the fire, cinnamon from the candles. She’d placed a bottle of wine and one of Frances’s favorite goblets on the table beside her. Drunk one glass. Maybe more. Carving knife honed to a sheen on Leon’s whetstone in her lap on top of a thick red towel. Lacy Victorian sleeves unbuttoned. Rolled up.

Outside of time the wind whining and crying in the higher branches of the old maple tree.
The phone rang. Grace stayed hunched on the floor. The answering machine picked up the message. Suzanne’s voice said: “Find Jonathan with her. Do it, Grace. I’ll take good care of Theo. You can get your father to put on your chains. The storm’s almost over, anyway. You might not need them. But catch him. You’ll get a much better divorce settlement.” A pause. Then: “Just do it if you have the guts. Face the truth. I didn’t.” Click.

Grace continued to rest her back against the island, hold her knees close to her chest. She touched her dress, running her finger up and down the length of it. She twisted a strand of hair around the index finger on her other hand. Her whole body trembled. She had been so sure she felt fear, but maybe it was anger, too. Why did she have to look out for everyone? And now go in search of her own husband? She could no longer call her father to help her. Had Jesus felt that way about his father? Where was He, anyway? She needed Him to help her get up, to call Keith or Jimmy Summers—one of them would put on her tire chains. Something inside her died when Theo told her that her father had shown him dirty pictures. Maybe hurting her even worse than Jonathan’s neglect. Maybe worse than his running to Carol. She thought of the little girl who had linked her pinky with her dad’s her whole life. The two of them protecting each other against her mother’s sharp tongue. The man who could ease her pain by kissing her forehead once and each cheek twice. She remembered the times when he thought she was sleeping and he had put his hands in his head and sobbed, a desperate choked wailing that filled her ears so that they ached with an unnamed feeling.
She thought a warm breeze would float past, hold out a warm hand to help her stand up. Nothing. One of her father’s favorite Johnny Cash songs droned in her head. *When life seems full Of clouds and rain And I’m full Of nothing; but pain Who soothes my thumpin’, bumpin’ brain? Nobody.*

The phone rang again. Grace let the answering machine get it. “Look, I know you’re in there, Grace Thayer,” Suzanne shouted. “Theo’s watching out the window to see if you leave in what he calls the vanmobile. You pull yourself together and go find that man. The snow has practically stopped.” Click.

Nobody was going to help her. She stood. Her blue brocade wasn’t wrinkled at all. It was in complete alignment with her. She would find Jonathan. It was time. Suzanne was right. Still barefoot, Grace called Minette’s old phone number. Keith answered. He lived in his and Minette’s old Mitford apartment now with one of the hairstylists from Candace and Sherrie’s Salon. They called it CherSalon—all one word.

“I need to go to my parents,” Grace told Keith. “Could you get to Hudsondale and help me put chains on the van?”

“A van is the worst thing in the world in a blizzard, and this, my dear Grace, is going to turn into a blizzard.” He paused. Grace knew he was drinking a bottle of Genesee. He could put back a six-pack a night, easy. “No help for you, honey. Stay home. Where’s the tire man?” He laughed. “Getting his parts lubricated?”

Grace hung up. She felt a splitting pressure as if her ribs might separate and push into her lungs, swarming and splitting and the pressure colliding into a vast, plush rage. For an instant she was breathless and dizzy. She thought of Jonathan’s deep breathing
and tried it. Better, she was better. She would find him. If Jesus wasn’t going to show up and guide her, fine.

She snapped off the kitchen lights, turned on the outside light. She moved to the sliding glass doors. Not that much more snow had fallen, but she knew, like her father, like Jonathan, like Keith, that that this current lack of snow was no more than a stall in the storm. Suzanne hadn’t lived in the Catskills long enough to know. It would start snowing again. Hard and fast. She ran down to her studio, gathered up her new bleu brocade cape, and pulled it across her shoulders, fastening it in the front with its Chinese hooks. In the kitchen, she grabbed her vanmobile keys and headed to the garage. She didn’t stop to think about a scarf or mittens or hat or shoes. She had to get to Mitford, drive by her parents’ house to see if the Jeep was there. Theo could be right. The way her mother and Jonathan fawned all over each other, there was no telling. If he wasn’t there, she’d drive to Carol’s place. What she would do if his Jeep was there, she didn’t know.

As she pulled out of the driveway, she realized the change in weather was already happening. She drove from the cul-de-sac toward Mitford, a two-way road, a straight shot for the most part, only a few twists and turns. The weather change appeared to be coming about almost gently, a foam of cloud billowing, a ball gown, across the sky. The stars blinked out one by one. Snowflakes drifted downward from the cloud, frozen rain, too, both almost invisible in the hazy mist on the dark road. Only the moon shone any light. Grace turned on the radio to hear Bing Crosby singing, *I’m dreaming of a white Christmas* . . . She made the volume louder. His voice reverberated around the van. Every three miles or so, she’d go into a slide from black ice. Her headlights reached out like
wings and fluttered against the snow, sending back golden sparkles that added to the silver thrown out by the moonlight.

At last she reached Mitford, the snow getting heavier, thick flurries stinging the air. The temperature was dropping. Her defroster wasn’t working. Condensation drifted across her windshield, but she still had to adjust her eyes to all the Christmas lights sprinkled across trees and bushes. Some yards had reindeer outlined with bright-red lights, and others had the nativity with huge outdoor lamps shining down on the baby Jesus. Grace thought of the lovely Superboy in the cradle at her own home, her Jesus atop the tree in flowing bleu brocade. At St. Paul’s a giant balloon Jesus filled the entire front yard. People had anchored him with ropes. Somehow, that seemed all wrong to her. Tying Jesus down—how could that possibly be right? You couldn’t pin down spirituality. What she really wanted to know was where He was now. She yearned for Him—His touch, His warmth, His knowingness. But the only warmth she had was her van heater.

The closer she got to her parents’ house on the outskirts of town the more snow streaked toward the windshield, making it seem as if the vanmobile glided through space every time it came to ice. She turned the radio louder. This time Mel Torme sang, It’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas, Soon the bells will ring. . ., but inside the van was an odd hush that the radio blast couldn’t fill, a stillness that made Grace feel shaken loose from the world as she floated along the road to her parents’.

The Sanfilipo’s house was dark. Not one candle lit its windows. Her own parents’ car was in the carport, and her father had laced bright blue and yellow and green and orange lights all through the landscaping, up the sides of the house, along the roofline, and across the far side of the carport. The front window blinds had been pulled up. A tall
fake Christmas tree decorated exactly as it had been last year and the year before and the year before and the year before sat right in the window for all Mitford to admire. She hated that tree. A plastic Jesus sat on the top, a Jesus with mouse-brown hair wearing a dirty gray robe.

Jonathan’s Jeep was not in the driveway. Silver smoke ribboned its way out of the chimney, vanishing in the leaden sky.

Grace sat in her van, engine running. The heat vents sent hot air across her bare feet, the pedals rubbery beneath her toes. She wanted to get out of the car, walk into the house, get a skein of her father’s black yarn and wrap it around her mother’s neck. She’d be lying on the couch, her head on that old prayer cushion. Her father would be sitting in the living room across from her mother. Grace wanted to take all the pins from her pincushion heart and stick them in his. She wanted to hurt them the way they had hurt her. It was bad enough their taking her life, but to spoil Theo’s—never. Grace’s heart beat so fast it was as if her sewing machine had run completely out-of-control.

She opened her car door, and the bitter wind swept her cape high, carrying her to the front porch. She thought of the gifts for her parents piled high beneath her and Theo’s Christmas tree. She thought of her son calling her a Riddler. The porch had no awning and snowflakes coated her face, her hair, her arms and feet, her bleu brocade. She felt them land on her eyebrows and lashes. It was then that a warm breeze glided past Grace, a gentle brush of air. She lifted her face. An odd fluff of warm fog wafted around her. She stuck out her hand. No snow. A sign? She felt as if someone had placed a downy angora blanket over her shoulders, her bare feet, around her head and ears. She touched her wet skin, and her fingertips came away dry.
She tilted her head. Now the sky appeared crystal clear, starry, snow-white petticoat gone. “I know,” she said. And what she knew was that she didn’t really wish to harm her parents. She wanted to walk inside that front door, feel the warmth of the fire, and tell her parents how very much she wanted to forgive them. Again, she tilted her head. “I need more time,” she said.

The same warm breeze that enveloped her on the porch carried her swiftly to her van. Inside her vehicle, she realized she was completely dry. Not a speck of snow or dampness. Jesus must understand how she felt. “I will forgive them, You know,” she said. A silky whisper against her ear—“I know.” A pause. “And Theo will forgive you.”

Now the snow was coming down harder. She had to get to Carol’s house, a house on this same road but farther out of town—closer to the cottage. Snow kept falling, a brutal bevy of bridal veils. When she reached Carol’s home, no Jeep sat in the driveway.

It came to her then.

They would be at the cottage. Isolated. Romantic. Snowed-in. She shivered in fear at the thought of driving in this weather out the winding roads to the cottage. But she had no choice. Christmas Eve. The eve of the birth of her son and of Jesus. The eve of discovering the truth. The faintest hint of a hymn wafted through the van—that same one—*There is a green hill far away without a city wall, Where our dear Lord was crucified, He died to save us all.* . . .It wasn’t coming from the radio. Some pop group was belting out, *Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow.* . . .No, the hymn was a sign to get to the cottage on its green hill. At last she understood. A sign, a sign, a sign.
Grace skidded a one-eighty turn and slowly straightened out the van the way her dad had long ago taught her and began rolling along toward the cottage, watching the powdery snow drift across the surface under the headlights.

She had been driving the labyrinth of mountain roads for what felt like hours. Mitford was long in the distance. Nothing but snow and ice and blackness. The smaller flakes came down in a fury, so hard and fast she couldn’t see a house or car. The snow made the van claustrophobic. Darkness echoed in its stillness. She had the radio turned on full blast, but all she heard was the weird pulsing of the ice-laden wipers. Chunk, chunk. Ch un un kk ch ch ch un un k k k. Her limited vision frightened her. Her father’s H-Man story came to her, and she trembled. The unworldly silence of driving in this snowstorm made her feel the H-Man was all around her, that if she had to stop, if the van broke down, the H-Man would get her. He’d been haunting the mountains, the cottages for years. She remembered that everyone said it was the men with families he was after, his own killed in the fire that blazed his H. Look at her own family. Everyone falling to pieces. Snow swirled around her, seeming to fall up as well as down and she was back at the lake as a little girl and she’s slipping, sliding, sinking into the black cold of nothingness but now her parents are no longer beside her. She’s on her own. She’s carving her own path in this nightmare of fear, terror and just plain being afraid. Despite the radio, the snow is creating this supernatural baffle against noise that is unlike anything she’s ever known. It’s creepy. Every now and again she hits a ch ch ch un un k k k of something that is probably only buildup from her own van wheels, but it puts her even more on edge. In the dim gray glow of her headlights, no animals appear. They’re in hiding. She thinks of Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* in the dark forest when the trees start
to move and talk. She plays with the heat, turns the defroster on high, keeps the radio blaring. So odd no Christmas hymns, just Christmas songs—Rudolph, Frosty, Merry Little Christmas, Santa Claus is Coming to Town, even the Three Chipmunks are chattering some jingle—as if commercialism has stripped Jesus of His spiritual meaning.

Her gloveless hands are white from gripping the wheel, and she realizes that she can’t use her high beams because the glare is too bright to see. She sits forward in her seat, her cape close about her shoulders, more crouched, the tension burning in her neck and shoulders, her fingernails pressing into her palms. The quiet is uncanny, beyond stillness, and she’s alone in the mountains. What if someone stops her? What if the van slides off the road? Oh, Jesus, help me. I’m afraid of a Fortress of Solitude. I’m afraid of the H-Man. I’m afraid of what I’ll find at the cottage. She tilts her head and hears her own unvoiced fear: I’m afraid I won’t care, CC AIR, AIR.

And then her van slips off the road into a ditch. She hears the cr cr a ck ck ck of ice breaking beneath the wheels. The front of the vanmobile hits a rock. The engine quits running. The radio stops, the heat stops. She sits shaking for a long time, safe inside her seatbelt. Has she already lost her path? Please, no.

She climbs out of the vanmobile, unhurt. Her cape spreads out wide behind her. She looks upward and the snow, too, has stopped. It’s like stepping outside time. She listens carefully and can hear the area of where the calm is beginning. A sudden shiny sheet of sleet falls from the sky. The tiny frozen particles of water sound like BBs pelting the surface of the ground. The slight ice covering already on the road makes the BBs sharp as rifle blasts. A muffled rustle, taffeta run wild, fills her brain. Fear. Wonder. Cold. The wind has died down, but still sharp gusts blow the snow on the ground into
swollen puffs of gala bridal gowns. The wind is ever present and moving in constant changing directions—whirling dervishes—ballet dancers in their tutus spinning around. Oh, Jesus, Where are You? It’s the H-Man she feels nearby. She knows it. Out to destroy the family she’s tried so hard to build. Her fast-paced breathing is so loud it echoes. And her frozen breaths come out like the balloons the superfigures talk inside in Theo’s comics. Her heartbeat is in her ears, her neck, her head. She’s listening for the clomp of the H-Man and realizes he’s haunted her family all her life. H-Man, H-Man, H-MMMMMAN AN AN AN.

She stands barefoot beside the van, her cape whipping like a taffeta cocktail dress around her. A sudden snap makes her jump. A tree branch lies at her feet. It’s the H-Man coming ccc ommm in in ing ing ing. Cold as it is, she wipes sweat from her face, feels it gathering between her breasts. A branch snaps under the weight of the snow on the pine tree in front of her, then springs back upright to its original position. It’s like a thousand feather dusters snapping upright from a downward angle in the black of darkness.

She looks to the heavens. She can see that the blizzard is fading, subsiding, and the sky is changing colors. The area where the storm is heading is still black and dark and the area where it is becoming clear—the area right above her—has a halo to it from the moonlight reflecting on the snow. It’s an aura of lightness that is almost grayish yellow but so much lighter than where the storm is blowing. “Jesus?” she calls.

No answer.

Her headlights suddenly flash on, and her pincushion heart feels every throbbing pinprick. The headlights create a path of light but at the same time angular scary shadows, which are more frightening than the black pools of darkness. H-Man, H-Man,
HHHH-MMMM AN AN AN—he’s finally here. Grace’s pulse beats so fiercely inside her ears she fears she is going deaf. She fears a heart attack. She fears death from the monstrous man. She stands frozen in the road.

The drifts are white mounds of down whispering indiscernible words that sound like incantations. Grandma Essie? She leans forward, her bleu brocade in sync with her every movement and listens. And then she hears, Silent night, holy night, All is calm, All is bright. . .Holy Infant so tender and mild. . . At last a Christmas hymn, followed swiftly by, There is a green hill very close by. . .

A sign. The cottage is nearby.

She clears her throat. She’s not going to be afraid. She’s not going to be the crazy girl her mother pretends she is or the compliant daughter her father longs for or the pliant wife Jonathan likes her to be. She’s going to be herself. The self that Theo knows deep in his heart.

She moves out into the middle of a drift, her feet cold, her bleu brocade growing stiff as starched crinoline. She sees two beaten paths leading upward toward the green hill, the cottage, dark lines curving through the drifts. Grooves from Jonathan’s chains. Leaden stands of trees spread pools of darkness. She wishes she had a lion, a scarecrow, a tin man.

She starts to run, her heart doing that little flipping thing, her hands sweaty in the cold. Now smoke stings the sky, a drizzle of gray veil. The sounds of the night are no more than the storm drifting away, the snow glistening tinsel sashes. She has no flashlight, nothing, not even shoes, but out of the blue her cape swirls and she soars onto the cottage porch, warm and dry. Dull flickering light shines through the windows. She
turns and sees the Jeep not three feet away. A faint ch ch ch in in ck ck ck comes from the wind chimes.

He’s here.

Grace pushes open the front door, slow-mo. A fire crackles in the fireplace. Smoke seeps through the screen. A funny acrid odor mixed with wine and spoiled apples fills her nose and eyes and ears. Sweet, spicy cinnamon floats everywhere, coating her. She hears the sizzling of green wood mixed with the popping of the seasoned, dryer wood. She hears the air flow up the flue. She hears the faintest whir of the grandfather clock, and she hears her own heavy breathing. She sees the person on the couch beneath Jesus’s nailed body, but she doesn’t see the person at the same time.

Time stands still.

Despite the cackling fire and snow creaking against the roof and tree limbs snapping-off outside and Gordon Lightfoot crooning, *Oh sweet lavender I must be with you constantly, Your presence means so much to me, Much more than life itself*, the room is silent. More silent than gray flannel falling from the sky. More silent than Grace’s mother lying in her old bathrobe on the couch. More silent than the silence of driving in the blizzard. As silent as the unworldly hush of the Dwayo caves. The light created by the fire and the candles makes for shadows that are mysterious and frightening. Nothing is rounded or soft—angles are sharp and pointy and in a state of flux and the flames dance and the candlewicks are gently blown by the movement of air. From her breathing. From the person’s breathing. There is that BB sound as ice strikes the windows. The candle
flames are reflected off the windows. Grace runs her index finger up and down her bleu brocade, twists her hair around her other index finger.

The person looks at her.

The silence turns to a loud buzzing noise in Grace’s head, the kind of buzzing noise you get just before passing out. She feels her heartbeat in her head as if it’s going to explode because her brain is sending two messages: this can’t be real, but it is real. Grace’s whole body heaves, and she gasps. An unintelligible sound from deep within her comes from her mouth. A groan like no other she has ever uttered.

Oh sweet lavender as fragrant as the name you bear

The person picks up the knife. The blade sticks up straight into the air, and then the person freezes.

Time stands still.

It can’t be. No. But it is. Grace sees the extreme urgency in the person’s face, the utter desperation that has driven him to take his own life. He moves the knife toward his throat. Grace sees a bloody gash already there. Remnants of a Victorian collar dangle.

Grace moves slow-mo like a film character in slow motion on camera across the living room to the couch. The knife slides right out of his hand into hers. She lays it on the floor as far from the couch as she can reach. She kneels down at eye level to him. Their eyes lock one on another. No words are exchanged, but a lifetime is. All that they have known together is right there with them—in them, beside them, on them, on the cross above them, in the odors and crackles all around them. Knowledge unknown but known.
And then the person begins to weep, the tears drip in dirty runnels down her powdered cheeks.

Grace gets up on the couch and sits close. She takes the end of her cape and gently wipes the woman’s face. She daubs at her bloody throat. She doesn’t care if it gets on her bleu brocade. This is a woman, after all. She takes hold of Grace, pulling her against her, and Grace can feel the rapid beating of the woman’s heart and that made her own beat less rapidly. The woman’s tears soak her bleu brocade and the lovely old lavender dress. Such fabric—has to be early nineteen hundreds—no one could find such an elegant dress anymore or such a subtle lavender color with that delicate shirring—she keeps her hand wrapped in the froth of the lavender. She, too, finds herself weeping. They’re rocking, back and forth, the two women, back and forth together, and for the first time in their lives. Grace doesn’t tell her to stop. She holds on fast to this large woman wishing with all her heart that her own mother had held her this close—just once, that’s all—once.

At last, pulling herself together, Grace wipes the woman’s face again with her cape. “You don’t want to mess up that beautiful makeup job.” She brushes off a piece of dried white wax from the woman’s neck. “Why, I’ve never even had a waxing.” Laughter shaped like a flared fifties’ dress flounces out of her mouth even as the tears keep falling.

Don’t try to get the best of her

“I thought you were with Carol,” Grace says, and even in her own ears her voice seems empty. Blood continues to ooze from the woman’s neck. A death has taken place. “Who are you?”
The woman rocks, crosses her legs once, twice, thrice, says, “My name is Miss Johanna.” All color leaves her face. There is something in this woman’s eyes that Grace has never seen before, something she can’t identify, and whatever it is, it isn’t something she’s ever seen in Jonathan’s eyes. Loneliness? Resignation? Desperation? Grace can’t take it in. She wants to say something, anything that will help them get through this moment, but what, after all, is there to say?

All of a sudden Miss Johanna leaps from the couch and grabs the knife. This time she points the blade right at her heart. The blade tears through the lavender froth. Blood trickles out. She sobs uncontrollably. She puts her hand to her throat and rasps, “The back of my throat burns. My fingers are numb.” Grace reaches slow-mo for the knife, and it slips out of Miss Johanna’s fingers. Grace takes the knife to the kitchen and throws it in the sink. She returns to the living room. Miss Johanna sags on the couch. She’s gagging. Grace takes her by the hand and leads her down the shadow-filled hall to the bathroom. By the light of Grace’s girlhood nightlight, Miss Johanna falls to her knees and vomits into the toilet. Even when she’s done heaving, she won’t turn and face Grace.

Grace sits on the floor beside the sink and waits. Graces sees that somehow her brocade has escaped any bloodstains. The tear puddles have vanished. Her bleu brocade bends to accommodate whatever moves she makes. Her moves are her choice. Her head feels as if it were filled with every material in her basket—muslin, linen, picot, satin, cotton, burlap, brocade. She feels as if her material head were disconnected from her body like Minette’s Barbie doll’s head so long ago. She feels feverish in that way when everything seems to be happening far away and a beat too slowly. She’s come to the cottage to take control of her life, face down Jonathan and Carol if need be, and look at
what it had come to—something unreal and outside time. She pulls her knees up to her chest, hugs her arms around them, feels the beginning of terror. She touches the material around her collar, the appliqué sharp, the Lycra flexible.

“No,” I say aloud, “this is not how this scene is to play out. I’m not going to let it. We all make our own decisions.” I get up. I help Miss Johanna to her feet. She’s wearing the most amazing high heels, little poufs of mink on them. “Those shoes are beautiful,” I blurt. “Such fantastic passementerie.”

Miss Johanna’s whole face brightens. In the flickering shadows, her smile is fragile and beautiful like her dress. We look at each other. All we’ve said to each other and all we haven’t float in the air with the shadows and the sizzle and pop of the fire. I smell Lovely on her. She reaches for my dress and lightly presses it from the bodice to the top of the slit. “Shatter the familiar, create something new,” she says, and smiles.

“Break the ‘grande logique,’” I say, and return the smile. So—she read my notes.

Once again she enfolds me in her arms. I smell her sour sweaty odor mixed with minty lavender and patchouli, cinnamon and smoke dancing its way through the musk. I hug her, half-fearful she’ll begin to make love to me. She takes my cape and folds it around both me and her, her breath hot on my neck.

“No.” I pull my cape off her. “This is mine.” I’ve drawn a boundary. I need Johnny Cash to sing, *I Walk the Line.*

We’re still standing smooshed together in a hug, and I feel her hardened penis against my leg. Her hand comes creeping toward the slit in my dress. “Don’t even think about it.” My voice is firm and strong.
Again, I feel her tears blotting my dress, my neck, my hair. We step back from one another and our eyes lock—the same way as before—and time stands still. It’s as if neither one of us has the slightest idea who the other one is. The nightlight burns out.

Somewhere in the distance the grandfather clock is whirring.

At last I lead her back down the shadowy hallway to the living room couch. Tenderly, I push her to her knees, and I fall onto mine. Together we face Jesus on the eve of his birthday. “It’s the eve of our son’s birthday,” I say. “That’s what we share. Theo.”

Again we exchange a glance that holds so many memories that I breathe slowly but don’t let the air out. Like Theo, I think if I don’t breathe, I’ll feel a catch in my lungs to keep me from crying. My heart constricts.

Miss Johanna weeps.

I put my arm around her, keep her on her knees. We say the Lord’s Prayer, and the line that resonates for me through the smoky cottage is “Forgive our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

A sudden shock of BB ice pelts against the windows, and a voice sings, Oh sweet lavender as fragrant as the name you bear. Please cast away the clothes you wear And give your love to me. . .

I can’t help it. I’m angry. I’m fragile, too. How dare she? “You think we can still be together after so much deceit? You’re going to talk dirty to me now? We don’t even know each other.”

Miss Johanna looks at me, a look I recognize, a look that says, Silly Grace, and she says, “That’s Gordon Lightfoot.” That’s me, all right. Silly Grace. Silly, silly, silly. Again, an expression crosses her face that I’ve never seen on Jonathan’s. Complete
despair? I see her look toward the kitchen, and at the same time, a warm breath of voice is inside my head spinning in umbrella steps: *We have left undone those things we ought to have done.* . . .words from the Eucharist and I know what I must do.

I ease myself from Miss Johanna and rush to the bathroom and grab both razors and two packets of blades. In the kitchen. I collect every knife and my father’s whetstone as well. I put all eight knives, the razors and blades, and the whetstone in a brass pot of my mother’s, one with a lid that has attaching clasps. Jonathan knows about my father’s hidden gun collection, but he knows nothing about the key. Still, I’m going to climb the icy steps to the upstairs room, dig out the key from its hiding place, and put it in the pot, too.

Miss Johanna stays on her knees before Jesus. She keeps hearing Grace’s voice, “*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those we trespass against us.* . . .,” but the voice is faint and thin, reminding her of The Invisible Boy. That horrible phantom boy who lives outside time and has no voice at all. She shivers. Tourettes.

The fire is dying down and so, for the first time in her life, she crosses herself as if to beg pardon for rising. She tosses some dry, split logs onto the fire to build it up. Soon she can put bigger logs. She spreads out the folds of her dress and sits on the couch. Spacious hollowness is threatening her life. She’s crossing her legs. Pulling at her Tonytail. A giant hand squeezes her heart. Her body grows calmer. Layers of Grace’s mousseline is being whisked away from her eyes. The last veil lifts. Reveals an image of beauty. A sudden miracle in the night.
She knows somehow that everything that has happened to her at the cottage is of a higher order of reality. The entire drama of Miss Johanna came from inside her own head. So instead of slipping outside time as Miss Johanna, she is living inside, in the here and now. As herself. She hears the clock. A soft tick tock, tick tock.

She gets up and puts bigger logs on the fire, the smoky musk the epitome of reality. She extinguishes all the cinnamon candles. No false odors. Not any more. No need for disguise. She walks down the darkened hallway to the bathroom and snaps on the light. Smell of burning wood wafting after her. Stands in front of the mirror. Holds out the skirt as if she might make a curtsy. Runs her fingers up and down its folds. Smiles. Gives a little laugh. Walks up and down the tiny space. Breathes its lush minty flavor. Collapses on the toilet seat and laughs. Folds herself into the sweep of dress material. Only sound the light bulb’s drone. The snap and popping of wood. Vague whirring of clock. Occasional slam of a BB against the window. Gordon Lightfoot repeating his song again:

*The colors that surround you there will be the shade of lavender, Shadows dancing everywhere.*

“My name is Johanna,” she whispers with a giggle. “Miss Johanna.”

She stands in front of the mirror. Runs her finger up and down the material from the torn collar. “It can be fixed,” she said. Smiled. Sighed. Giggled. Leaned toward the glass. Content. So content. No opium for her. So alive at last. A kiss?

No. Oh, no. A dark shameful flush spreading. Her chest. Her neck. Her face. Miss Johanna runs from the bathroom. Stands with her back to the flames and looks at Jesus on the cross. Gordon Lightfoot croons to her, *If you’d like to try your hand at understanding lavender, Then you must be very sure that life is not a game. There is no shame.*
A second miracle in the night. No shame.

Miss Johanna picks up the prayer cushion from the floor and places it on the couch as a pillow. She lies down, resting her head on the cushion. Content. So content.

6

I stood at the edge of the lake, brass pot with the knives and keys in my arms. Now that the storm had passed, winds slight, it was definitely growing warmer. My bare legs and feet are warm. My cape is armor against the chill. Silence. Then the squeaky crack of the frozen lake settling. I remember the day I skated fearlessly out to the dead center of the lake, making my own path—only to hear a slight crunch of ice become a crack and I’m slipping, sliding, sinking into the black cold of nothingness.

“Not anymore.” I breathe in the lake. It’s cold, quiet, brown grass at the banks, frozen cattails with long dry stalks blowing in the breeze, creating a soft crackling. The only light is the moonlight, a few stars, and their reflections from the snow and ice.

I fly over the sweeping snow to the scary place, the place I avoided so many years ago, the place where the spring drains off the lake, the water always moving. As always in winter, the dead cattails are thick and brown near the shoreline. Around the spring there is a skim of ice. When I fling the weapons and the pot hits the thin ice, it will fall through gently due to its weight. The thick ice in the middle of the lake, the snow drifts, the winter cold will make no difference.

I use all my strength and throw the pot. It goes through the thin ice almost soundlessly and sinks. It will sink to the bottom becoming buried in the mud. There’s a
hole now where the weapons went down, but I know the weather will cause the hole to re-ice before morning. Will this save Miss Johanna? I can only pray.

My cape whirls me into the air and back onto the cottage porch. I keep remembering that hymn “I’ll Fly Away” and wonder if it’s me who’s going to die. How can I? Jesus said I was already dead.

Oh, oh! The familiar warm breeze sashays its way around me, pushing me toward the door. I know what to do. No one needs to tell me. I walk inside the cottage. Miss Johanna is lying on the couch, smiling.

I slip to her side and kneel on one knee. My bleu brocade is still with me in every movement, my cape keeping me warm. The gleam of the fire shows me that all the burnt umber candles are out, puddles of wax in the bottom of their glasses. For the first time, I catch a whiff of lavender and its mint swells around us both. Like my mother.

I lean down, lightly kiss Miss Johanna’s powdered cheek and say, “I’m sorry.” Her eyes tell me she understands what I mean—sorry for what’s happened to us—sorry for what will never be, but I also see joy in her eyes. “There’s no shame,” she says.

“No, You’re beautiful. The Lady of Lavender.”

The clock strikes a whir of gears, followed by twelve tinny notes. After the last stroke, the whir of gears stops with a click and the room is preternaturally hushed. It’s Christmas.

“I have to go,” I whisper. “I know what to do.” And I do. I hurry out of the cottage, my cape winging me through the air to the old wooden swing, hanging on the maple tree, its naked branches glistening with the snow and ice. I love to sway in the air, high on this swing my dad put up. I push and pull and pump and make it swing higher
and higher—the way I should have as a child. I fling my legs back and forth, back and forth, my bleu brocade coming with me every pump of the way, and I feel that hallelujah tingle that starts deep inside me and makes me cry out, “Oh, oh, oh,” as the hallelujah chorus flies out of me nearly knocking me off the swing. Whew! My heart flips around like laundry in the washing machine right along with the rest of me. “Whew,” I gasp, a wet, spandex, swell of pink splendor. Jesus must be close. I stick out my tongue. Sure enough, a communion wafer melting into the pink of my mouth.

I keep pumping my legs, rubbing them against each other. I pump and thrust. I sing “Angels We Have Heard on High” and “Unto Us a Boy is Born! The King of All Creation!” My voice slides right along with my legs into “Amazing Grace!” Suddenly it comes to me that the last line of the first stanza is Grace will lead me home. Grace. That’s me.

I slow down. Catch my breath.

The sky clears of all the poufy gray cloud coverlets. Stars are sprinkled everywhere, glitter christening Christmas morning. I don’t know how, but the sky is already turning the rainbow colors of dawn, sherbety bridesmaids’ dresses, swollen scoops of raspberry and melon and lime. I’m the me I was so long ago, the me before the Dwayo caves. But then I hear a voice, His voice, saying, “You still don’t have it right, Amazing Grace.”

I think if I look beside me, He’ll be there and we’ll swing the way we did before, in rhythm, him inside me, but He’s not there—only His words—laced across the blue sky in a mélange of pinks and pumpkins and lime.
“Theo,” I cry out. “It’s Theo. I have to get him. I know that. I NNNN OOOOOO that, I NNNN OOOO TH TH TH AT AT AT.”

“Think.”

“I am the me I was before getting pregnant!” I pump harder. My cape is wings behind me, and I feel like Wonder Woman. I need her bracelets to thwart Jesus’s words.

And then I feel a delicious sweep of flannel pass by me, a flurry of minty lavender boa feathers, and I know, I know.

“I’m becoming the me I never was,” I call out to the pastel-dusted blue sky, the scoops of sherbety bridesmaids’ dressing slowly fading and wild-blue-yonder blue emerging—a sudden miracle. I love to sway in the air, high on the swing my daddy put up, but I’m afraid to jump off into the wild blue yonder—being sent through a vast space—for me it’s a jump into the emptiness of my bad dreams, yet I know that I’m supposed to jump.

As I swing and watch the amazing blue sky, I see a figure flying toward me. Then another. A little one. They’re blond, blue-eyed, and wearing bleu brocade robes! The little fellow is Theo dressed as Superboy, and Jesus is—well, Jesus. Blue eyes. Golden hair. They settle into the swing on either side of me. Theo sidles close to me, but doesn’t say a word. His eyes are wide. He holds my hand with one of his, clutches the icy rope with the other. Jesus does the same.

Everywhere is the wild blue yonder. Our three capes flap, fl fl fl a pap ap ap, FL FL AP AP AP.

“Let’s jump,” Theo whispers.
I think about how high we are, how we’re flying close to the heavens, how close to the edge of the earth we are. Anything might happen.

At the same time, Theo and Jesus tap my hand—one, two, three. I turn to Theo, “You forgive me?” He nods. He points at his feet. Boots! Red rubber boots that end in a point just beneath his knees. “They were under the Christmas tree. We got them when we got the capes.”

I look at Jesus and smile.

“Let’s jump,” Theo repeats.

“I’m afraid,” I say, “afraid I’ll die like in the song *I’ll Fly Away.*”

“We’ve already had that discussion,” Jesus says. We are sailing on that swing.

I try to catch my breath.

“Johnny Cash left out one verse,” Jesus says.

Theo and I look at him. We both know the Cash version. You couldn’t know my dad and not know it.

“Listen,” he says, and these words float from his mouth, *bleu* brocade capes in the wind, just like his, mine, and Theo’s: *When the shadows of this life have grown, I’ll fly away; Like a bird from prison bars has flown, I’ll fly away.*

Something deep inside me cracks. I think it’s an egg. A darning egg. And there’s ineffability all around, swirling and swishing, and I’m crying like a newborn babe. Theo and Jesus turn to me and say, “Happy Birthday!”

It’s then that I laugh, a glorious, and unfamiliar solid laugh that swirls up out of me, a ribbon of *bleu* brocade trimmed with sugary doughnuts glazing all three of us and
continuing up into the heavens. Theo looks down at the cottage from our raucous rocking on the swing and says, “Look, it’s Grammy. She’s dancing!”

“Look again.” Our family must become real.

“It’s Daddy! In a lavender dress. He’s doing umbrella steps! And smiling!”

I hold tight to Jesus and Theo and look down. An amazing wall has grown up around the cottage’s green hill bathed in snow, a beautiful wall made of stones like the old city walls in Jerusalem. Miss Johanna is twirling in umbrella steps. Theo tugs my hand. “Like my dream.” He points. “He looks so happy safe behind the wall.”

“I think he is.” Both of us sigh, little soughing sighs.

I look off into the wild blue yonder. I take three deep breaths in, three out. I grab Theo’s hand tighter and realize Jesus is gone. I don’t see Him. He’s not waving from a seat on the powdery white puff of a silver-lined cloud. He’s not even a hint of fading translucence.

It’s time to jump. I look off into the sky one more time, and for a second I see SJ on a flash of unwrinkled blue. It morphs into Super Jesus right before my eyes. Then it’s gone. It’s my turn to be Amazing Grace.

I squeeze Theo’s hand, take a deep breath, say, “On the count of three.”

One. Two. Three. My heart a ring of fire, we sail out into the unknown. Oh. Oh. Oh.