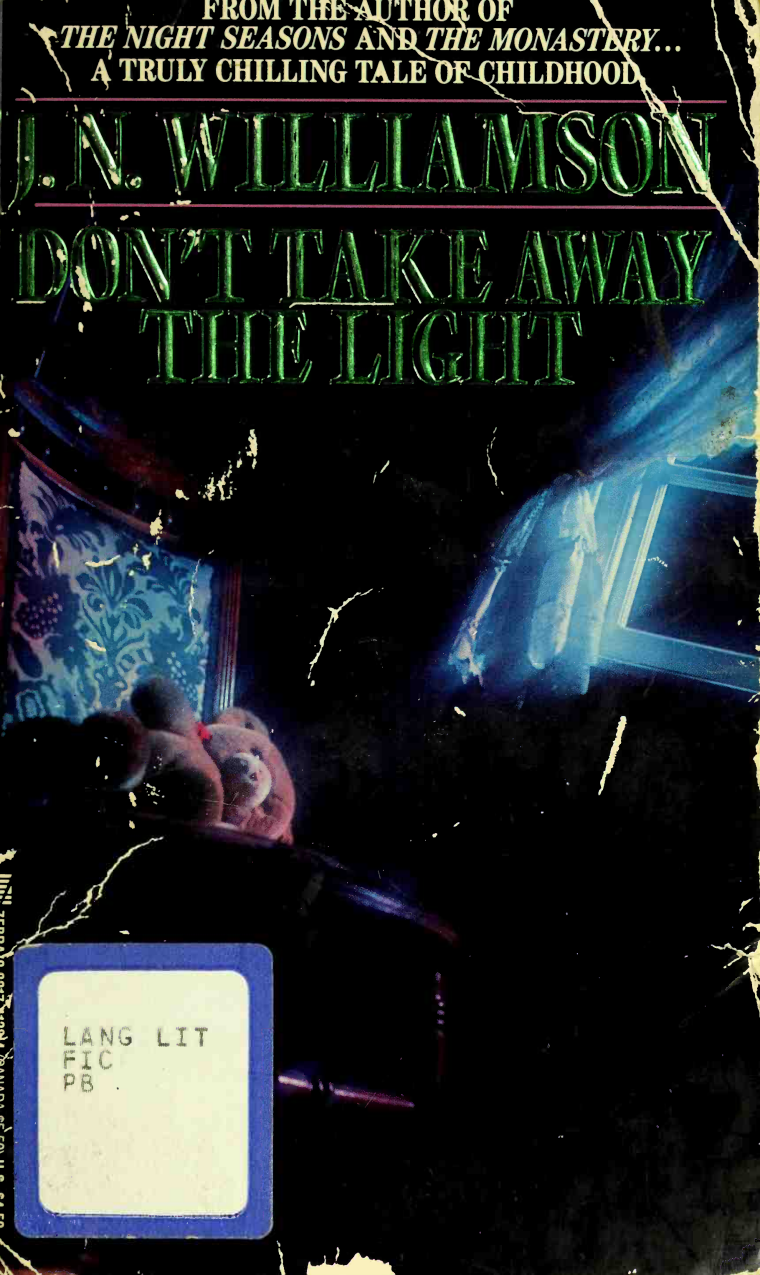


FROM THE AUTHOR OF
THE NIGHT SEASONS AND THE MONASTERY...
A TRULY CHILLING TALE OF CHILDHOOD

J. N. WILLIAMSON

DON'T TAKE AWAY THE LIGHT

The background of the cover is a dark, atmospheric illustration of a child's bedroom at night. A window on the right shows a bright, glowing light source, possibly the moon or a full moon, casting a beam of light across the room. On the left, a bed with a blue and white floral patterned headboard is visible. A teddy bear is lying on the bed, and a small, dark, shadowy figure is visible in the foreground, possibly a child or a ghost. The overall mood is mysterious and chilling.

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**TEDDY NOTICED A GLITTERING
PUDDLE OF VAGRANT LIGHT GLOWING
STEADILY AMID UNTRIMMED BUSHES
AND TALL WEEDS IN THE YARD.**

The light shimmered at the edges, the only part of it that moved. Sinuously, gently. It took Teddy a moment to realize that the shimmery part appeared to be beckoning him, even needing him for something.

I'm not going down there, Teddy thought. *Dear would kill me.*

But wasn't the glittering pool out by the fence like stars that had landed? Weren't they making the weird, somberly beautiful music only for him?

"I mustn't," Teddy mumbled as he climbed down the dark rungs of the ladder toward the ground. The final step was nothing but a big gap, and Teddy fell the rest of the distance.

Afoot, brushing at wet grass and dirt Dear hated so, he realized he would never be able to get back on the ladder and instantly tried not to think of it. Instead he recalled the words his mother had said to him that evening.

"You've absolutely got to adjust to the fact that your grandma died this week, and stop saying that she comes in to see you. If she was coming back to see anybody, it would be me!"

Teddy heard the music again. He gritted his teeth together and paused to stare toward the back of the lot. Beneath the neighbors' bulb, small, half-hunched forms darted into or out of that light, and their own.

This was the song they had just for him, and they wanted him to play with them. Suddenly, the nine-year-old forgot everything except the source of his wonderment and ran forward to play—for the first time—with small people like himself.

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J.N. WILLIAMSON

**DON'T TAKE
AWAY THE LIGHT**



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this grown child's groping
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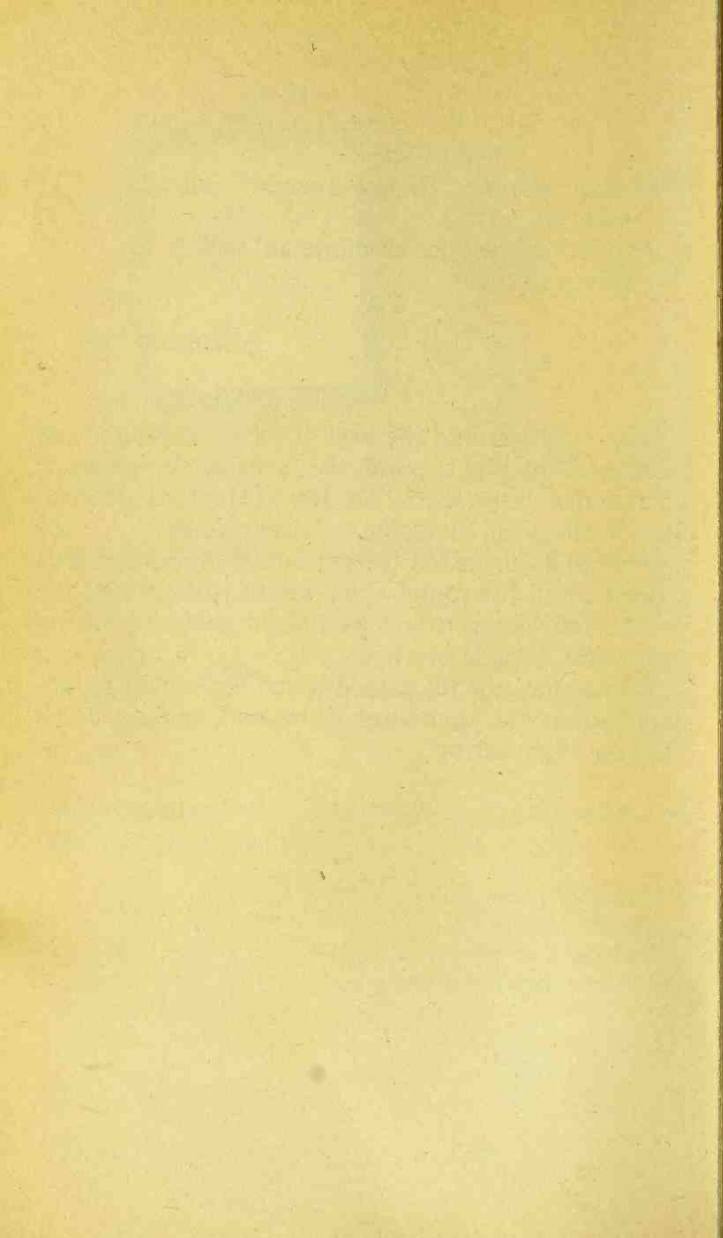
Mother tells me "Happy dreams!" and takes
away the light
And leaves me lyin' all alone an' seeing
things at night.

—Eugene Field

Have you ever had the experience of waking in the middle of the night, paralyzed, sensing the presence of someone in the room? Dr. David Hufford, of Penn State College of Medicine . . . reports that . . . the individual awakens but cannot move; the person feels a presence in the room which seems threatening; the person may hear footsteps or see shadowy movements just outside of view. . . .

Science has not yet gained much in the way of understanding the phenomenon beyond naming it the "waking night terror" . . .

— *Venture Inward*,
January/February 1991



Prologue

Our bodies go into the earth, food for worms;
our spirits go into the air, food for other
souls. — John Maclay

How long he had been sick this time and what had made him so were mysteries to Teddy—as they were to all children and, much of the time, to all people. But unlike most adults, Teddy also had not asked anybody when he might be better. Part of it was because he couldn't remember ever getting an answer he really wanted or didn't feel, without knowing the term, was probably an evasion. Part of it was because every time he felt like running and yelling or like playing war games with his toy soldiers—pointing his finger and going “*KKkkuh, KKkkuh!*” at them—Dear took his temperature and asked if he'd grunted. “Dear” was what his mother liked to be called, and “grunting” was their word for a bowel movement. If he hadn't grunted that day or his temperature was higher than the magical ninety-eight-point-six, there was a good chance Dear would take him to see Dr. Biddle.

Because he was also supposed to be God's perfect little child and mothers never lied, life became confusing on days like this when Teddy actually felt bad.

At nine, Teddy had the same unwavering, unquestioning trust and sense of now-ness for every hour of every day as a beloved, overprotected family pet. One day he'd be fairly convinced he was healthy—enough to forget about his body anyway—and able to go to school and stay the entire day; the next, Dear discovered a rise in his temperature or a wound beneath his Band-Aid that wasn't healing as quickly as she would prefer, and he was back in bed.

That was usually okay with Teddy because he liked to read a lot, and draw, and collect extra hugs from Dear and Grandma, and sometimes even to imagine bunches of neat things, and because he didn't like school anyway. He didn't like the other kids, either. They said he was stuck-up because his mother drove him to school and also picked him up after. He wasn't, but he didn't know how to say that.

But today was the day when Sergeant Mackheimer from the police was going to talk about student safety at school, and Teddy had to miss out on seeing a real officer—and worse, he actually felt bad enough to stay in bed. So now he was marooned in his enormous half-empty room at the back on the second floor of the old brick-front half-a-double on Washington Boulevard—the fourth home in Teddy Hivereve's life and the only one so far that spooked him a little. And he felt like shit.

I'm sorry, God, Teddy thought after he'd used one of his mother's favorite words to himself. That was confusing, too, since he was pretty certain Dear was perfect—a perfect lady—but he wasn't supposed to

say or even think the bad words she and Niles used. Maybe you got Permission when you were grown-up.

Every now and then, pretty Dear slipped noiselessly into his room that day. Teddy didn't know how often because of the now-ness of his mind and because he kept drifting into sleep like a big ship sliding without sound away from the dock. She was always armed to the teeth with militantly vile-tasting medications from Dr. Biddle or the sliver of a thermometer concealed behind her back, and the sad eyes Dear had when she was really worried or unhappy. Toward evening, he nearly noticed that her large brown eyes looked sadder than he could remember seeing them, but the recognition refused to stick with the single-mindedness of his illness.

Instead, he found himself wondering what mothers did with temperatures once they were taken. What did they want with them? Evidently they grew back or something during the night. Teddy definitely did not want *his* anymore.

Twice this particular day, with an interval that seemed around five years, Grandma put her perfectly round head thatched with going-white hair through the doorway, smiling a wavery line that said she would always be there for him, and gave a sort of life to Teddy. He never wondered how she did that or even knew, then, she was doing it. But since he knew she was at least as worried about his health as Dear, that afternoon and evening he pretended he was asleep to avoid seeing the concern in her eyes. So Grandma just floated to the edge of his bed, where she held his hand tight between her badly knotted arthritic hands, and crooned melodies nobody else—not even Dear, who played piano professionally—knew well. Be-

cause she thought he was sleeping, she sang so softly the words were nearly inaudible. But that was okay; Teddy'd heard them all before and let his imagination fill in whenever his ears or his memory failed him. Grandma was the best grown-up he'd ever known whether she was perfect or not.

His father, Niles, came into the room after he got home from work. Niles made colors of all kinds at the Picturesque Paint Company and usually had around half of them spattered on the white-billed cap and overhauls he wore, along with strong scents both of paint and perspiration. It wasn't sweat, according to Dear, whenever she wanted to tell members of her family what Niles was doing now, because he *mixed* paint, like some kind of kind of chemist.

Teddy had his own image of his father that he'd never told anybody. His was the father who hadn't gotten mad when Teddy experimentally called him by his first name once. Neither Dear nor Niles had gotten mad. In that private image, Niles went out of the big clattery factory where the other men toiled, stood beneath a warm, spring sky, and worked with rainbows.

Tonight, though, Niles wore his suit. He had the sort of look Dear'd had on her face, only different. He remained with Teddy even a shorter while than he generally did those times when Teddy was in bed sick. It could've been because Uncle Duane, Dear's big brother, was downstairs talking loud. The grown-ups were polite to each other, but Teddy didn't think Niles and Duane liked each other much. Which was confusing because Uncle Duane was there so often he might as well have lived there.

When his father turned to leave the room, picking

up some comic books Teddy had been reading and then putting them on a tall stack near the door, Niles said "Love ya" and left the door open the two-plus inches his only son preferred. That was what Niles always did and it was neat because Dear usually closed it tightly. The only time Teddy liked it closed was when Dear and Niles were having an argument. At times like that, Teddy wanted to nail it shut.

The sound of the front door closing aroused him from drowsiness some minutes later, and for a scary moment, Teddy thought he had been left alone in the old house. Living somewhere awhile didn't make a place really yours and neither did buying it. Just when silence began to creep up the stairs like a rising flood, Uncle Duane's lady friend started singing and dammed the emotional tides. Teddy forgot her name for a second; his uncle had had a lot of friends since he and Aunt Pat had got divorced. Whoever she was, she began playing Dear's piano and singing about amazing Grace. Teddy didn't know who that lady was, either. But he went to sleep awhile at about the point he remembered Uncle Duane's friend was named Molly and he stayed that way till his Dear came home, then came in to give him more medication and take some more temperatures.

What happened next—or *didn't* happen—was spookier than being by himself in the house.

Although Dear kissed and hugged him, cried until the brown stuff she put on her great dark eyes looked like hot chocolate running, and smelled even prettier than usual, she *neither shook down his thermometer nor asked him if he had grunted since morning!*

"I know it's going to be lonely around here now, darling," Dear said, "but you have to snap out of it—

soon. Your Dear can't handle any more problems just now. You do understand, don't you?"

Teddy looked her in the eye and said he did, and promised himself to try hard to figure out what she meant. It almost sounded as if his mother didn't want him to be the way he'd always been—in bed a lot. Dear was so *white*, she looked so *sad*, that Teddy was both terrified and loved his Dear even more than he ever had before. Maybe it was just the odd, disproportionate windows set in the wooden door behind Teddy's bed, letting in the backyard moonlight so that it made Dear's soft skin appear translucent, but Teddy thought there was more to their automatically shared, perplexed grief than that.

What made it next to unbearable was that he had no idea what he was supposed to be lonely or sad about, or exactly what Dear wished for him to snap out of.

But this night, tonight, he had the impression that he should know and just didn't remember.

"We'll get out of this awful house as soon as possible, sweetheart," Dear was saying. Standing, she unzipped her dress in back and the front of it came forward as if part of his mother was coming off. "It was always too gloomy and dark, too used, too *small*, for happy people like you and me. But it was all your father could afford." She looked for Teddy's happy and sympathetic expression and he gave them to her in turn. "Maybe then we can all . . . forget."

"Forget?" Teddy asked.

"We can, I *know* we can, the two of us!" she said excitedly, patting his cheek and then spinning away in a movement of girlish merriment. "We'll just make Niles get us out of here into a nice, bright, big

house." Her face was lovely with conspiracy. "The son of a bitch owes me *that* much, at least!"

She said something else, but it didn't immediately imprint itself on Teddy's mind. He was trying to remind her not to close the door tightly when she left.

He failed. The door slammed loudly enough behind her that, even if it hadn't been *that* loud, it reminded Teddy of the saying about noise awakening the dead.

For the first time it occurred to the nine-year-old that maybe that was how Dear got so many dead members of the family to visit her real late at night.

Then there was just the tiniest sound of his parents' easily identifiable footsteps down the hall with all the lights burnt out but one, and without Dear playing the piano tonight, their movements and uncharacteristically hushed tones were like the woollyworms that crept together beneath the bed.

When Teddy found the courage, he turned on his side to peer behind the bed toward the moonlight that had made his Dear's face so pale. If Niles had only put up curtains or venetian blinds like they'd had in the last place they rented, it could've helped. This room itself was so vast and the ceiling so high that Teddy's things couldn't begin to fill up the space enough to keep the room from sounding hollow—filled with echoes. Echoes of many strangers who'd lived in the old house long before Teddy was born. Back when they'd moved in, this was supposed to've been Grandma's bedroom because she had a lot of stuff. But when he admired the view of the backyard, Dear gave the room to him and Grandma hadn't objected.

Then Dear and Niles ordered him never, ever, to

open the door leading out to a sort of combined balcony and rickety fire escape because the drop to the yard could kill Teddy, and then what would they do without their perfect little boy? Already, the threats of polio and spinal meningitis were worse than poor Dear could think about without crying.

He felt pretty good now like he often did when the family had gone to bed and he was awake, but now he thought the only kind of sleepiness he had left came from Dr. Biddle's medicine. He still couldn't understand what he was supposed to snap out of although Dear's last remark before she went to bed was just on the outskirts of memory. What he did feel, along with his customary sense of confusion, was resentment at the possibility of moving again. The houses were always bigger or newer or, he guessed, better in ways grown-ups knew about, but you couldn't get a place to accept you in only a year or two. Houses were like dogs you didn't know. You shouldn't move in on them fast, but with your hand out carefully, so they had time to get your scent and check you all over before you turned your back on them.

The windows in the door to the platform fire escape were mongrel eyes. One was vertical and higher while the lower pane was a lot larger, square, and tried to see everything. The top one, actually, might be blind, he thought. And that was probably why it was taking the moonlight so long to locate him in the huge and almost empty room—that, and the fact he could squinch his PJ-clad little body down behind the headboard of the bed and hide so long as his sweat didn't give him away.

It wasn't the first night he had begun at the point of wakefulness while the family slumbered and he re-

alized, deep in the twelve o'clock corners of his imaginative brain, that he was all but naked and alone against the forces that waited for children in nature's shadowiest parts. He'd had to face them in other houses where his folks had taken him and Grandma—a bungalow on Thirty-eighth Street with sliding closet doors that partially slid open only after midnight, his room in a finished basement on Talbot Avenue, where there was a coal furnace with a door that clanked open, hungrily—and he guessed that was because he was so much like Dear, who'd received the phantoms of her grandfathers and cousins at night for as long as she could remember. Lately, though, he'd realized that his Dear was never really *hurt* by night things and he'd grown curious about what they wanted with ladies and little boys, what they *did* with them. On the other hand, Dear was also sick a whole lot of the time—there were days when she couldn't even make herself get up from her favorite sofa to play the piano—so maybe the shadow people carried germs that made you feel bad and got you all confused. Everyone and everything else did, even Grandma, whom Teddy wasn't supposed to kiss on the lips. It was real hard to figure out.

Clouds (or something) drifted past the door to the escape, making Teddy get on his knees to look at (or maybe back at) the cockeyed windowpanes.

It was then he finally heard the music, calling him.

His look became a watchful stare but he maintained it, strove to tell where the sounds were coming from, exactly. Maybe out by the fence separating his folks' old double from the backyard of some strangers—and strangers weren't people you could have *anything* to do with, except offer a polite nod if they

spoke to you. Maybe just carried like germs from somewhere else entirely, under the (it's dirty, don't play in that!) ground maybe, where roots of really old trees and worms and dead bodies stayed.

The sounds of the music Teddy heard were spooky. He'd never heard anything like them before; they weren't piercingly loud or harsh and ugly at all. They were the most beautiful sounds Teddy had ever heard. Even prettier than Dear's piano playing, when she was in a neat mood, though he would never have dreamed of telling her that or, Teddy realized, anything at all about these sounds.

'Cause the music was meant for him.

And it was magic, too—Teddy understood that an instant later as totally as if his Dear had told him so.

So he got out of bed and padded in his bare feet into the forbidden area behind his bed, feeling kind of funny, like his head was one of those floating balloons men sometimes sold at places during the summer. He was thinking about that when he tugged the heavy door open and stepped out onto the balcony escape before he fully remembered the orders not to go out there. But he *was* there now, it was too late to stop, and the beautiful music was clearer here—not really louder, but clearer. When he held on to the splintery railing—carefully; you got infections from splinters—and craned his thin neck to search for musicians with his eyes, winter air sifted into his Goofy-and-Pluto PJ pants and rustled up into his sick-sweated matching shirt. Trembling, remembering a rotted-out place in the platform that Niles had indicated that one time before when Teddy was standing on the wooden flooring, he squinted his eyes against darkness and his enigma.

Those who had occupied the property before the Hivereve family had installed no lights in the back-yard. At first it seemed the only illumination was moonglow caught mostly by passing clouds, trapped in the sky.

Then Teddy noticed a single, low-wattage bulb burning from somewhere in the strangers' yard . . . And a glittering puddle of vagrant light was glowing steadily amid untrimmed bushes and tall weeds on his family's side of the neighbors' fence.

The steady light shimmered at the edges, the only part of it that moved. Sinuously, gently. It took Teddy a moment to realize that the shimmery part appeared to be beckoning him, even needing him for something—because he had the most powerful impression that a *hand* was making the light. With an instrument that gleamed—and sought him.

I'm not goin down there, Teddy thought. *Dear would kill me.*

But wasn't the glittering pool out by the fence like *stars* that had landed? Weren't they making the weird, somberly beautiful music only for Teddy Hivereve? Sometime on the radio Teddy'd heard that starlight came from millions of years in the past—but the announcer hadn't said it made music.

"I mustn't," Teddy mumbled, beginning to climb down the dark steps to the ground.

One dog growled—sounding so close that one of Teddy's feet nearly missed the next rung—and another dog, then two, barked. From his vantagepoint on the escape ladder Teddy spotted one of them, its deep voice and furry head simultaneously seeming to have been crammed into a sack. He was really alone out here, if in a different way, Teddy thought, colder

by the second. The reason the dogs weren't barking a lot was that they knew, too, things were changing and some new strangers were out by the fence. Maybe they wanted to see what was going to happen.

The final step to the earth was nothing but a big gap and Teddy fell the rest of the distance, too surprised to be hurt or frightened. Then he glanced up the way he had come and couldn't see anything but a mammoth wall of black. The platform was invisible and the single light burning in the hallway outside Teddy's room was too feeble and far away to illuminate anything but the frame of the old house.

Afoot, brushing at wet grass and dirt Dear hated so, he realized he would never be able to get back on the ladder and instantly tried not to think of it. It wasn't the time to yell for help. Not yet —

Even if he just remembered what his mother had said before, tears standing in her eyes and trying to be brave for him, she had left his bedroom that night.

"You've absolutely got to adjust to the fact that your grandma died this week, and stop saying that she comes in to see you. If she was coming back to see anybody, sweetheart, it would be me!"

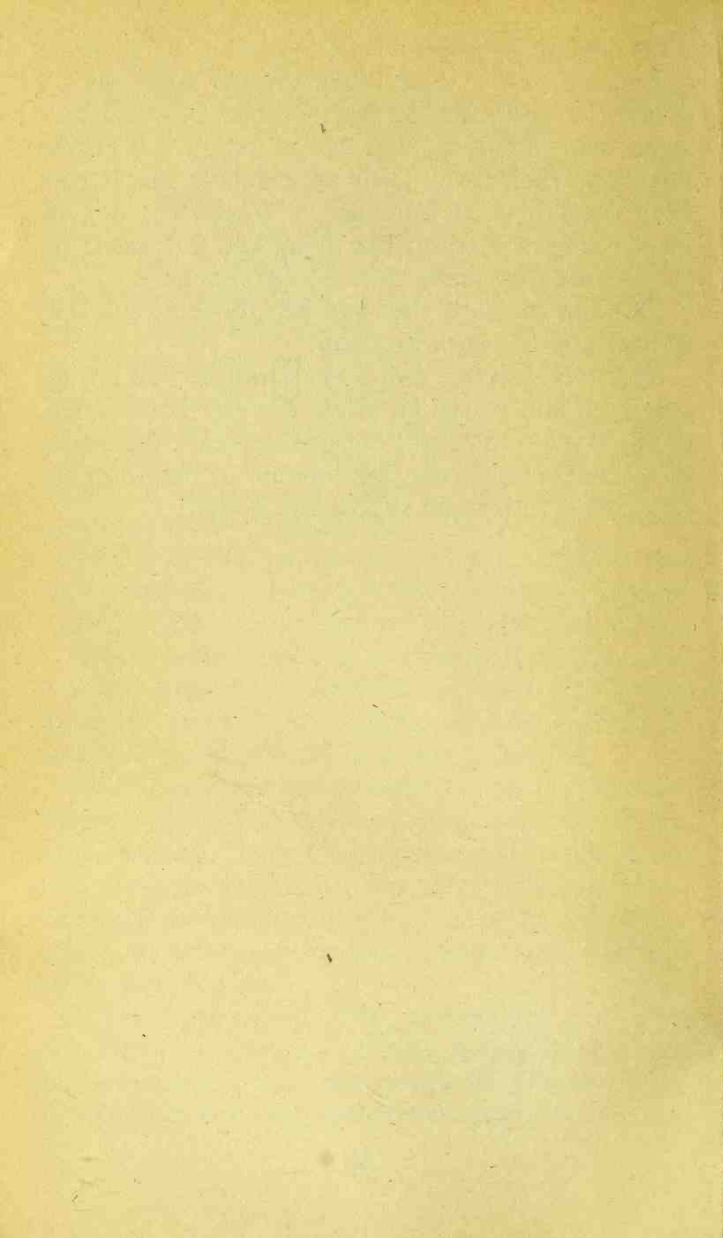
Utterly perplexed about everything except the shimmering light he'd have to find again now that he was on the ground, Teddy took two steps forward. Blades of damp grass adhered to the soles of his bare feet, seemingly alive with squirming, wiggly things. Teddy gritted his teeth together and paused to stare toward the back of the lot.

He heard the music again, mesmeric as a surprise gift. There was the stuff of bells, harps, and perhaps the instruments with the sound of perfect, high-pitched human voices, and fluted accents usually au-

dible only in the upper reaches of the sky or the lower regions of the planets. Beneath the more-distant neighbors' bulb but on Teddy's side of the fence, small, half-hunched *forms* darted into or out of that light, and their own. Their appearances would have been scary beyond tolerance if Teddy had not expected to see something like them, and if it wasn't for the melody they made even as they moved.

This was the song they had just for him, and they wanted him to play with them.

Suddenly weeping with a happiness he had not experienced and sensed he would not ever know again, the nine-year-old forgot everything except the source of his wonderment and ran forward to play—for the first time—with small people like himself.



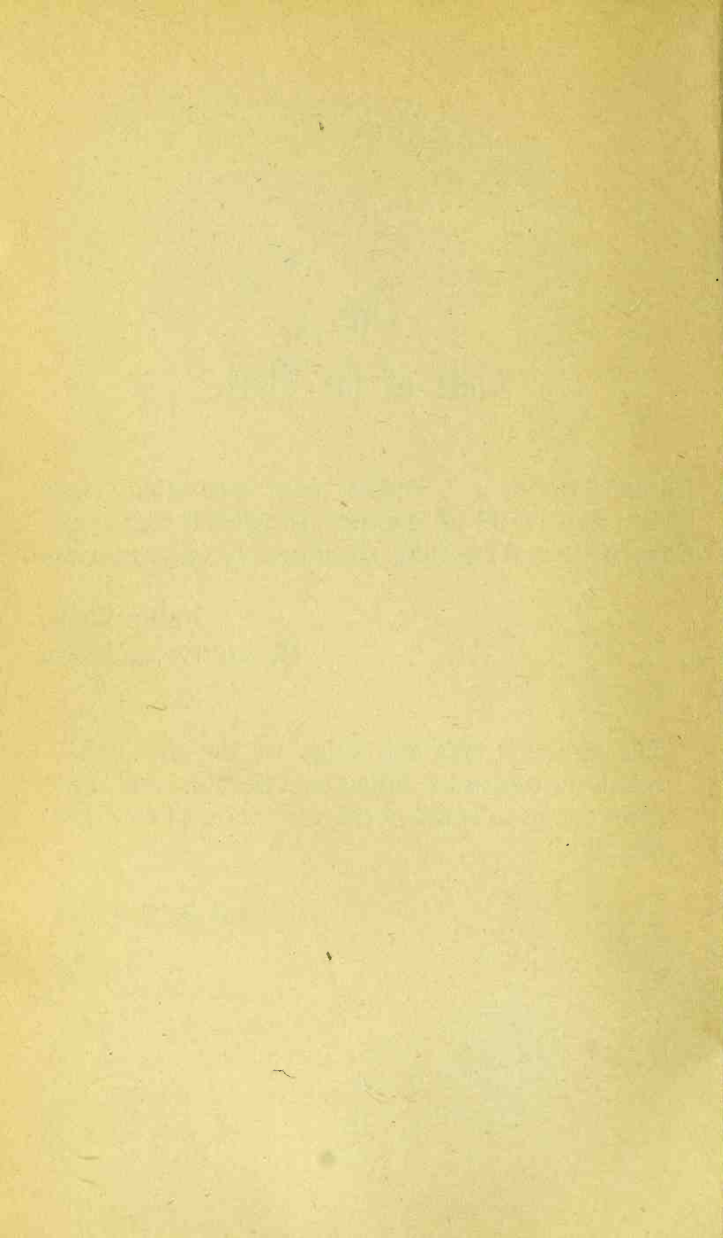
One Child of the Mind

[Mom's] policy . . . smiles, pats, presents, praise, kisses, and [with] all manner of childish representations of the real business, she moves on to possession.

—Philip Wylie,
Generation of Vipers

The mother's face and voice are the first conscious objects as the infant soul unfolds, and she soon comes to stand in the very place of God to her child.

—Granville S. Hall



Chapter One

With a sigh that was as close to inaudible as he could keep it, Teddy sat very carefully on the carpeted floor of the new house, then glanced up to see if he had disturbed his mother.

Dear was staring straight ahead of her, seemingly at nothing. Teddy watched her briefly, marveling. There were times when even grown-ups like Dear listened to the radio with such absorption that it got sort of weird. If a picture went with the Philco so there was something to see, it wouldn't look quite so much like listeners were sick or dead or something.

Satisfied that he hadn't bothered his couch-borne mother, Teddy set about spreading out a number of sheets of pebbly sketch paper. Scooting quietly on his knees, he formed a line that wound up reaching some eight feet to the open dining room entrance, then had to return on tiptoe.

Kneeling, he retrieved his big black-and-red Crayonex box and touched one finger to the first sheet of paper, reflecting on two matters. He liked the feel of the paper; that was one. The other amounted to an inquiry into the maturation of his own creative im-

pulse: Was he finally ready to move from single-sheet drawing to his first effort at a comic strip? There was a story he wanted to tell, he knew that, and had drawn maybe a million one-page cartoons; but trying to do a whole strip—that was ambitious.

Sprawled over the first sheet, a bare knee poking through corduroy and tucked beneath him, Teddy set to work with a silence that was, by intent, nearly as apparitional as his youthful mother's periodic nocturnal callers. He understood that being a bother while Dear was listening to her soap operas or playing piano tended to make her neck tighten up. When he'd done that before, Dear's mood had stayed bad for Niles, his father, even though Dear always said it was Niles who made her really sick. That was nice of Dear, who loved him more than any little boy had ever been loved before, but it didn't make a lot of difference once the fighting began.

They called it that, his parents. Having a fight. Not that Teddy's father ever hit Dear, 'cause he didn't. Grandma Bobby hadn't raised her boy to be a brute who hit his wife.

Hot air from the register close by eerily raised some of the drawing paper from the floor. Teddy knew that was what was doing it, but it made him think of ghostly hands from the earth lifting the sheets to look at them—he knew for a fact some dead folks were mild-mannered—and it caught him by surprise. Instinctively, Teddy seized the Crayonex box and bashed it back to the floor.

"Sh-*hhh!*" Dear hissed. Eyes alive again, she turned her head to glare at Teddy. "Must you always be so damned noisy?"

"I'm sorry, Dear," he apologized sincerely. There

was no point in explaining that the steamy register was the real culprit. Although she would have believed either that fact or a suggestion of visitation from what Dear called "the other side," it didn't matter. Her favorite program was on the air—not hot air; that was irrelevant—and she had missed one of Dr. Anthony Loring's lines. "I'll try to be more c'siderate."

She was still looking at him. "I know you will, darling," she said lovingly. A put-upon sigh escaped her brightly lipsticked mouth. "You can't help your little outbursts. You're only partly a Mengaltdt, like me, and the Hivereve blood surfaces now and then." A hand came out, nails munched to the quick but red as flame, to pat Teddy's cheek with tenderness. "I want to see your newest wonderful work when 'Young Widder Brown' is over—and 'Lorenzo,' of course."

Teddy sat again, quickly, holding a crayon guiltily in his lap and looking down at the floor to hide the tears in his eyes. Tears of guilt, disappointment in himself. He'd lost sight of the fact that Dear could not stand being by herself for long—because she needed to share her enjoyment of things and her opinions about life—and if he wasn't listening to her programs, it was exactly as if she was alone. He knew that; she had explained it a hundred times. But he'd forgotten. Disturbed her concentration, and forgotten to listen. Which made him an ungrateful brat and a Hivereve again, despite all the effort he'd made since they moved to this house to be like his Dear.

Why couldn't he get it through his head that *Dear* was the one who could bring him happiness, or guilt—that it was *Dear* who bought him little presents when he was sick and *Dear* who drove him to Dr. Bid-

dle's office (even if that wasn't really part of the happy times)—*Dear* who clothed him, still bathed him sometimes, confided in him about the way God wished for him to become, and made sure he had lots of crayons, paper, and books to read (even if it was Niles who went after some of those things 'cause *Dear* was tired or practicing the piano)?

He tried to share the soap with *Dear*. It came from their new cathedral-style radio, a huge Philco shaped like a church or something. It was a recent replacement for the once-trustworthy Majestic that Teddy owned now, part of the celebration in honor of his father's impending job change. Niles didn't have it yet, he was still mixing rainbows at the Picturesque, but *Dear* was sure Niles's professional friend wouldn't let them down.

Teddy wondered almost simultaneously what kind of friend a "professional" one was and if the old Majestic was beginning to kind of breathe out germs, the way *Dear* thought. Dimly, it was starting to occur to him that while *Dear* wouldn't ever lie to him, his own imagination was a lot like hers. Possibly she made mistakes every now and then. *Sure, once every fifty years*, he added the afterthought, grinning to himself over the realization that he had nearly imagined his mother capable of error.

This was a particularly drizzly, chilly afternoon, rain striking the high windows in the front room as if unaware that it could make *Dear* nervous. Teddy focused on the soap opera saga with all his might, thinking his own concentration might hold *Dear*'s. The program, on daily, concerned sweet, widowed Ellen Brown and gentlemanly Dr. Loring, whom *Dear* thought to possess the most romantic voice in the world.

It occurred to Teddy that he'd never heard Niles comment on that opinion. Not that Niles got to hear "Young Widder Brown" often since he'd always come home from work later than Dear thought he should, and now that he was studying a lot for his job change, Niles might never get to hear the show again.

Teddy swiveled his head around silently to sneak a glimpse of the clock on the dining room wall. "Lorenzo Jones" was on next and silly enough that Dear and he always shared some laughs or smiles while they listened to it. At the station break after "Widder," though, a news bulletin came on first. "In Washington today, America's long-standing Neutrality Act was drastically altered in order to permit the export of arms to belligerents in Europe. Stay tuned to this station for further information."

"I just hate the way announcers give us orders like that," Dear said fretfully.

But the somewhat plaintive strains of "Funiculi, Funicula" were picked up in progress and Teddy's mother rested her head back against the couch. The Italian melody was played on a mighty Wurlitzer and as familiar to Teddy and Evelyn Mengaldt Hivereve as their own faces. Dear could play the song on her piano, too, *exactly* the way the organist did.

". . . Lorenzo Jones, a character to the town but not to his wife Belle, who loved him," intoned the program's announcer and Teddy's mouthing lips. Though Lorenzo was an inventor and his wife was very patient with his crazy notions, Dear often said he reminded her of Niles. His voice reminded Teddy of Fibber McGee, but he didn't say so. Instead, he always felt *confused* when Dear talked about Niles, and sort of panicky.

He let his gaze rise toward the sofa, saw again how she peered out into space—maybe into her own mind—when her programs were on. She was so pretty, her eyes so bright and big and brown, and just about the only time she moved was to take a drag on a cigarette. He wished she would knock the ash off more frequently than she did because it often fell on her bathrobe and then Teddy got his confused feeling back.

• These were the only times Teddy ever saw his Dear like this, listening closely and very, very quiet, except for when she played some of the pretty songs from her girlhood. Generally, though, he was upstairs in his room—whatever house they were living in then—when Dear began a marathon production of 'playing music for hours and hours. Right now, leaning forward, she was resting her round, small chin in her cupped pianist's hands, her petite body was swallowed up by the shocking-blue robe, and she was the boy's favorite Dear. She had a cap of brown ringlets that appeared to squeeze her head and he found himself musing about the possibility that it was her hairdo that gave her so many headaches and nervous attacks, and the shouting, occasionally screaming moods that followed. Instead of Niles doing it.

Or him.

The radio shows came more from the Big City than the new Philco or the old Majestic, Teddy knew. New York, where Dear belonged and truly wanted to be. She had *so much talent*, she could remember how to play *anything*, change the key of even new sheet music—at once, almost like she'd written the tune—and she *could* even write songs herself. His Dear was wonderful; amazing—and after all, talent had to have its

head. Talent gave a person the permission to be different, *one's own self*, independent, *free*—

He knew that 'cause Dear said so. Not just to him, but to Niles, as if she needed to remind him of it the way she was stuck with reminding Teddy about so many things.

A very different realization that he was somehow responsible for Dear not getting to make the Big Time—to play with Big Bands or be one of those fools who played theme music to start programs, at *least*—festered like remembered pain at the rear of Teddy's skull, and the confusion he experienced so often began to give way to boiling panic. But he couldn't allow that, he didn't *want* that; he cried too much for a boy anyway, he knew that already.

Blinking fast, hard, Teddy changed the direction of his gaze and was looking at his mother's remarkably tiny, extremely pink feet. Lots of times, she sat up on the couch to trim the nails. They acquired little lives of their own as they came off, flying. *Snip, snip, flick, flick*, Teddy hated that. He sort of hated feet, especially toes. Hers looked like baggy eyeballs, the lids squeezed shut. She was forever telling the rest of the family that her feet were freezing cold but she seldom put any thing on them but her fuzzy slippers unless she was going out, and she never covered her feet while she listened to the radio.

A black crayon was between Teddy's fingers and he started outlining the form of Goofy, a cartoon character he liked. Teddy liked pretending that Goofy resembled Dear's brother, his Uncle Duane, but it wasn't so. Uncle Duane was more a redhaired Bluto, Popeye's enemy. At least in appearance. Deep into the age of nine, Teddy was good at art and he knew it.

Dear said so. Someday he'd work for Walt Disney himself, be famous, do lots of things for Dear and Niles. Dear didn't draw, but he got his talent from her, she said, and she always found the time to study his work with solemnity and encouragement. It was she who suggested he put "By Teddi" (with an *i*) in the corners of his cartoons, the letter *y* dipping its tail to become one of the *ds* in his Christian name. (The different spelling of it was, Dear assured him, "more artistic.") He never traced either; never had and never would. Tracing was for ordinary little boys who lacked the flow of Mengaltdt blood in their veins. He had never owned a coloring book either. Grandma Bobby had given him one when he was little and Dear had torn it up after explaining that he was "different," even before he could open it.

Teddy was so engrossed in his various efforts that he was unaware that his mother had dozed off until he heard a soft, silken snore. Lovingly, he looked at and studied her in sleep. But *was* she, really, asleep? Was it possible she knew everything that went on even while she was? Behind those beloved, fragile lids, could she even see him, know whatever he did, what he thought? *Prob'ly*, Teddy thought, his shoulders and head jerking, spasming.

He was working feverishly on Donald Duck—comic strip story abandoned, forgotten—when evening came. He was trying to get the minute, vertical slashes of ruffled feathers at the back of Donald's head just so, also trying not to raise the crayon and break the line curving downward into the duck's snarling bill. That was where people who just liked drawing ol' Donald seemed to mess up. And you couldn't show up where Mr. Disney drew and *ask* how

to draw Mickey or Donald! Tiny but sweeping slashes of feather in place, the top of the bird was pretty easy; you had to remember to leave two rounded places for the raised brows and two ovals for the littler duck pupils and you were done—except for getting the bill right. *That was hard.*

Two explosive things happened so close to each other that Teddy, jumping in alarm and drawing the yellow-for-the-duck-bill crayon across the face and up into the righthand corner of the page, couldn't tell which happened first.

The skies above the home called Draden House made a sound like all the arms exported to Europe going off at once.

Dear sat up straight on the couch, parted robe exhibiting two pink knees like grapefruit halves, and yelled, "*Thunder!*"

"Uh-huh," Teddy said softly. Maybe he could turn the yellow line into the bottom part of a speech balloon and have Donald be saying something. "It just started." He realized for the first time that Lorenzo Jones had gone back to wherever he stayed a long time ago. "It'll prob'ly clear up."

"But Niles *isn't home.*" She flinched from the sight of a lightning streak showing against one of the high windowpanes. "It's a *bad storm.*"

Teddy bit his lip, gripped the blue crayon he'd pulled out of the box; for the strip across Donald's sailor hat. "This is Monday night. Remember what you always tell me about more traffic then?"

Dear peered dutifully at her only child. "Did I say that?"

"I think," Teddy answered with a nod. He wondered if there was ever a time when Dr. Loring and

Ellen Brown were talking sweetly with each other and Dear became nervous.

Dear, restive, rose from the couch. While she stared toward the windows, her naked feet seemed to grope under their own volition for her slippers. "Do you really think that's why Niles is late again? The traffic?"

"He isn't really late," Teddy said in his most reasonable tones. His mother stood directly before him and she was trembling all the way down her body. "It's just —"

Two cosmic hands clapped, directly overhead. At once, Dear's arm was outthrust, strong fingers locked on Teddy's belt. He came to his feet as if yanked there by a rubber band. Inches above him, his mother's stricken face caught at the confusion, panic, and well-learned range of apprehensions already accessible to him, crushing reason. It seemed to run down one of her arms into his brain and, depositing a measure of it, run back up her other arm. A flare of lightning soldered mother and son together —

And together — mother in the lead, dragging Teddy — they bolted for the stairs to the second floor.

Blood raced in Teddy's ears. Caught offguard again despite being forewarned, he was also off-stride as their feet rattled on the steps like copper plate being shaken. Just when Teddy's shoulder began to hurt and his fingers, trapped as if in a vise, grew numb, they were rushing across a bedroom floor to his parents' bed and dropping to their knees. No words, no communication, were needed. Dear swept back the unmade ends of the sheets and blanket, and Teddy squirmed into the dark security under mattress and springs. He was trying to get there as fast as possible — so there'd be room for Dear and she wouldn't be

left standing, exposed—when the tail of his long-sleeved white shirt was pierced by a spring, protruding. Dear pushed, hard. He rolled out of sight into inky blackness as the shirt ripped.

He saw her anxious white face looking in at him for a moment. On all fours, she exuded breath as excessively warm as the heat that had poured out of the register and so strangely raised his sketch paper. “Hurry, my darling,” she entreated him. “For the love of God, Teddy, *hurry!*”

Then she was pressing in beside him on the floor, groping for his hand, clutching it. The closet door was to his right, unlike its location in the house on Washington Boulevard. With Dear panting to his left, he was in virtual darkness.

But he could see the familiar underneath side of the bedsprings and Dear was no longer using Grandma’s perfume. When it had run out, Dear hadn’t bought any more.

“Is Niles all right?”

“Sure. Sure, he is.”

“Good. I was worried for him.” She paused. “You okay?”

“I’m fine.” But his nose was wrinkling on him and he had to bring up his free hand to rub with half-exaggerated energy at the dust attacking his nostrils and lips. It tickled badly yet it also reminded Teddy of new, dry snow, and he hated winter. Trying not to sneeze, he did.

Dear giggled merrily. “Did the woollyworms get you again?” she inquired, and strove to see his face through the darkness.

Just for a second, Teddy didn’t reply. This house had more dust than the other places Teddy had lived

in. He told himself he wasn't actually mad at his mother or even grouchy like he sometimes got, but he felt out of breath, dirty, even soiled. That might be because he used to make number one when they hid from the lightning like this and he remembered that, remembered a lot of stuff these days. Things he knew were wrong, prob'ly, but they just came to his mind anyway.

"I'm hot," Teddy answered her finally. He generally was, too, since Dear got Niles to stoke the furnace till around *July* because of germs everywhere. Drafts, too, which managed to find his mother regardless of when or where they were. *Maybe a window will break from the storm*, he thought—and before he could oblige himself to pay the penalty for that grouchy, disloyal thought, he told his Dear again that he was fine.

"Well, of *course* you are!" Dear agreed with him. Her grip on his hand tightened 'til he wanted to scream. "You're God's perfect little child . . . remember?"

Thunder moaned like the anguish of a just-shot beast and a flash of lightning appeared to come into the room after them.

"Our Father," Dear prayed aloud, "Who art in Heaven . . ."

The anguish in Teddy's left hand was almost unbearable, but he prayed along with her. It was all right.

He was righthanded anyway.

Chapter Two

1

"Doc, thanks for calling back before I left! You caught me just as I was heading for the door." Niles Hivereve was leaning on one hand against the wall to speak into the mouthpiece of the mounted telephone. Noticing the paint stains on the fingers and the back of his hand, he stood erect. "Evelyn gets nervous if she doesn't know I'm going to be late."

The instant he said that, Niles knew he should have kept the information to himself. Because he always needed to pick and choose the words he uttered to Evelyn, he'd developed a habit lately of saying just what he thought when he was talking with anybody else. Now in his early thirties, Niles was a man who liked most people and believed that if he was open and honest with them, they would treat him the same way.

But this phone call he'd waited for at the factory all afternoon amounted to mixing business with friendship—old friendship, from his three and a half years

at Shortridge High—and he was so late in leaving Picturesque Paint this afternoon that he knew he was really going to catch hell.

“No, Doc, I honestly don’t think there’ll be any problem with Evelyn when I’m working for you.” He was beginning to sweat now but at least he had put his remark in a positive way. He *had* to talk Doc Greene into taking him on as a salesman—a salesman with a draw and a decent commission—or he’d never be able to keep meeting the mortgage payments on Draden House. *Crap*, Niles thought, *the minute she found out the old mausoleum had a name, I knew I was sunk!* Loyally, he added: “She just needs to know where I’m supposed to be and when to expect me. You know Evvie.”

Greene did know her, too, since they had all been in high school at the same time and Evelyn had even dated Doc once or twice. Besides, everyone in the school system had heard of Evelyn Mengaltdt, back then; she had begun playing piano professionally for every kind of public event there was in the city when she was just sixteen. And there hadn’t been a boy in town who failed to dream of Evvie entertaining him. . . .

“I just wanted you to know that I finished the correspondence course you told me about with honors and studied both the books you recommended,” Niles said. Surely Doc—Shortridge people had called Greene that even before he went to med school—would understand now what Niles was saying without the need to spell it out. Sweat was flowing so freely from Niles’s temples and under his workshirt that he felt clammy as well as filthy. But Doc said nothing. “Quiz me if you want. Ask me questions about it.”

Edward Cross Greene made sounds with paper on his desk. "Well," he said finally. And stopped talking.

"They're usually mechanical but there's terrific progress going on at the electric end," Niles blurted. "Eventually, it'll be possible to replace even internal organs! And *you're* one of the real pioneers in designing amazingly lifelike fingers, toes, artificial aids that can be directly inserted into or even *onto* the body!"

"We don't usually mention any specifics concerning the future to our customers, Niles." The voice on the phone line was drier even than it had sounded in high school. Drier, and much more easily bored. "The word 'progress' serves to provide necessary encouragement; otherwise, these needy people could be tempted to wait for—well, miracles. Arousing false hope would be a dreadful disservice."

Niles's stomach turned over. He went back to leaning against the wall. If Greene asked him why he didn't want to talk about all this from his own phone, at home, his goose would be cooked. Niles had no words whatever to explain that he could tolerate embarrassment of this kind while he was in his own cubbyhole at the factory, particularly when almost everyone else was on the way home, but he could never stand it while Evelyn was only four feet away with her arms folded on her chest—putting in her two cents' worth, probably urging him to make real *demands* on the son of a bitch. "The book by Dahlgren was great, Doc. It talked about that; being careful not to offer amputees more than we can deliver." Niles wiped at his forehead with his shirtsleeve, smiled as if Greene might be able to see him. "I also liked the part about molding healthy tissue to make a receptive stump."

"I'll make my decision about you soon, Niles," Doc said, and hung up.

Niles glanced at the big clock on the wall beyond his cubicle.

"Oh my God," he said softly, hanging up and sprinting for the door.

He'd have to drive like a bat out of hell.

2

Teddy turned his head on the floor to see Dear's face more clearly. How his hand hurt wasn't very important. The face he saw through the storm-strewn shadow was the face he knew best, loved best, in the whole wide world. When he thought about almost anything he had learned — except the stuff at school — he saw her expressive face in his mind. Way deep inside, he understood that his mother saved every bit of kindness and tender interest, all her knowledge as well as her laughter, for him. Once, she'd had part of that for Grandma, but that was before Grandma died. Dear didn't seem to have any left for her now. Even on the fairly rare occasions when Grandma visited her (*just like she did me right after she died*, Teddy thought before he could stop).

Dear's eyes were almost closed, her sweet face turned to him, yet she smiled back as if she could see him real clear. It was nice, this way, if you could forget about being under a bed. But Dear parceled out the things she knew about life and dead things and God a little at a time, and even when she was telling him the most, her ultimate secrets — her explanations — seemed to be withheld. For example, she loved God and God loved everybody, so why was it neces-

sary to be afraid of thunder so much? She'd promised Teddy that heaven was as real as his toes or his fingers—"foo-doo's" were what he had called them when he was a baby—so why would God need to make her nervous or scared?

The telephone screeched downstairs.

The mother's eyelids raised, unhurriedly. Teddy banged his forehead on the bedsprings. "The idiot," she said.

The ringing continued. "Shall I get it?" Teddy inquired.

Dear's laugh was derisive. "Don't be so ridiculous," she replied. Her eyes flashed toward the rest of the house, or Outside in general. "I've explained to you a hundred times or more that only morons talk on the phone during a bad storm. It's very dangerous."

Every storm was bad, he supposed. Dear, if she was on the telephone and she heard thunder or saw flashes of lightning, hung up instantly. It wasn't just phones that could kill you either. Sometimes Niles would be listening to Jack Benny or Fred Allen, and if he didn't turn the radio off right away when a storm came, Dear switched it off immediately for him.

Which was surely for Niles's own good. Many things were for people's own good, only Teddy's mother appeared to know unless they were all morons and idiots and were just *daring* nature. He imagined that if Dear had her way there'd be a law against phoning anyone while a storm was going on, and the people in the Big City who ran the radio shows would be fined hundreds and hundreds of dollars for not knowing what the weather was everywhere.

Scratching his crotch surreptitiously, he sought

Dear's patience in waiting out the present storm. Just as the phone stopped screaming at them, lightning illuminated the bedroom and Dear dragged his hand awkwardly to a soft spot in her bosom. Chewing down on his lower lip to hide the sudden pain, he concentrated on the mysteries of nature and the world. His mind pictured a trailing dragon's tail giving off flecks of light as it moved its bulk and inestimable length along the street, so big and so bad that it took almost forever for it to pass Draden House. Someday, maybe, it wouldn't pass them by; one afternoon or evening like this the dragon might stop, peer through the upstairs window, and its red eye would see them.

"I saw Aunt Sylvia last night." She wasn't looking at him, but staring up, at the underside of her bed. "As clearly as I see you."

Then he was right. She *could* see in the dark!

"Where?" Teddy asked.

"Out in the kitchen." Her voice was husky, deeper now than usual. He imagined one of her cigarettes in her hand with the end glowing red and his mother breathing out clouds of smoke. "I couldn't sleep so I got up to have some of that warmed-over puke your father calls coffee." She laughed. "I've tried so hard to teach him how to make it the right way." Teddy laughed too. "Anyway, I was getting a cup and saucer from the cabinet over the sink—the one to the left—when I felt her presence." Her shoulder that was touching Teddy's shrugged. "She was just . . . *there*."

Aunt Sylvia, Dear's aunt, had died six or seven months ago. "What did she look like?" He didn't want to know but he was unable to find another thing to say.

"Well, I couldn't see her *clearly*. You know—like herself." Dear inhaled a lungful of air. "Oh my darling, I saw her wondrous *eyes*! And I'll never forget them—you remember how pretty they were?" Dear squeezed her eyelids together. "They're so sad, now, Teddy. So very, *very* sad." Tears showed when she glanced at him. "For this evil world and the countless awful things we've brought on ourselves by refusing to heed the message of God, and his special envoys."

"Which message?"

Dear snuggled close until her mouth and nose were no more than inches from Teddy's face. Adorably, her breath was still scented with cookies she had eaten after their lunchtime, while Morton Downey sang "A Little Bit of Heaven." They didn't hear Morton every day, but they did Kate Smith when Teddy was home sick. "I can't remember everything she said, sweetheart. There was so *much*. It was about President Roosevelt and those other terrible men in Washington getting us into war, and giving work to the *dregs* of society. Him and that ugly wife who is really his sister or cousin, as everybody knows. Anyway, Sylvia said that all the horrible things they're doing will come to *life*. Don't ask me what that means exactly, I'm not some godless scientist. And the horrible things will *claim* the people who made them." Now the whites of Dear's eyes showed all around, kind of milkish of color but almost pebbly like eggshells or Teddy's sketch paper. "So we're all in for it now," she finished happily.

"For what?" he whispered.

"God's wrath." Dear inclined her head with immense solemnity. "War and more wars. Bigger bombs than you ever saw before." She shuddered, her touch-

ing skin cooler, tightening. "The whole world is in for it now. Syl said so!"

Reactively, Teddy's own eyelids drooped shut. There were too many scary things to think about for him to cope with. Spirits, lightning, Grandma dying, President Roosevelt, war, and the folks who were in for it—it was just too much while they were lying in the woollyworms. Years ago, though he wasn't ten yet, he had formed a habit of just letting most bad news into his unawake mind so that he could avoid thinking about it right away. Mostly, it returned to his awake mind without him asking it to come out; sometimes it was sort of in *disguise*, like Pegleg Pete when he put a mask on his big cat face. And Pete didn't fool Mickey Mouse either, not very often anyhow. But sometimes.

Dreamily, Teddy saw ol' Mickey with his yellow-gloved, four-fingered paw, waving at him. *Hi, Teddy*, he said, oblivious to the one-legged cat behind him. *Look out, Mickey!* he called back, another corner of his mind remembering how he himself had tried to cram his ring and middle fingers into the same glove-hole so he'd have just four fingers too—*there's a big cat in a mask behind you!* And—

"Who's *that* at our front door?"

The question from Teddy's mother was a shriek, yet there were nearly equal parts of annoyance and hope to it.

Yanked back to full wakefulness, Teddy struggled to hear what Dear had already heard. She asked no rhetorical questions and always expected an answer.

Then, fearful because he had no reply, Teddy felt chills knotting his stomach as he realized that their

front door had, indeed, been opened. And closed. All but soundlessly.

"Omigod, Teddy," Dear demanded. "Is it a burglar?" Her mammoth eyes themselves insisted on explanation, reassurance, as the pupils contracted. "*Worse?*"

Worse? What, then? A spirit more evil than Aunt Sylvia? Somebody like President Roosevelt? Teddy's mind raced, pain roiling his belly, needing to soothe his Dear. "Well, it might not be a burglar," he said thoughtfully. Then he had it! "*It could* be Niles getting home."

"Oh, I *hope* so!" she cried. Teddy saw her head turn so she could see out from beneath the bed. For some reason, her tightly curled dark head made him think of Minnie Mouse. Then she was scrambling to extricate her small body and stand, convinced by his desperate suggestion, then hurrying on her bare feet toward the bedroom door. "Thank you, God," she added, her voice fading now. "Thank you!"

The space on the floor where she had lain was an immediate void, drab, deserted, clean. He saw her abandoned slippers, warm as pups, did not draw one of them near because he felt peculiarly unworthy. By accident, they were at an angle, toes in, somehow kind of little girl. He felt dazed; he did frequently. Dear was so animated that she was capable of nearly filling up all physical space with the shadow alone, but her absence just then made Teddy think of how the storm had stopped, gone on; taken its dragon's light with it.

He lay on his back, resting. He didn't edge away from the closet to his right. He thought about catching a glimpse of the soiled soles of his mother's naked

feet when she was crawling out and of the infinitude of lines in them. Of Niles's wadded-up maps on summer vacations. Of filled-in dot-to-dot books. And he thought again of his Dear's soles, how they looked as if she had not only walked the world but as if she bestrode the universe — as if the two small pink feet were many thousands of years old.

Once, Dear had begun reading the lines in Uncle Duane's hand — Dear could even tell everything there was to know about a person by looking at their palms! — and her brother had positively torn his hand free. Teddy wasn't sure about feet — if anybody could read foot-lines. Perhaps people wore socks and shoes so no one would know what they were really like or tell their futures.

"You *no* good, thoughtless, selfish son of a bitch, *where* have you *been*?"

Niles was home, good! Teddy grinned happily. His Dear was so glad Niles had made it there safely again. So was he.

"Your child and I have been scared out of our *wits* — frightened half to *death* by your *stupid* masculine ways!"

Teddy rolled on his side, facing the bedroom door, his smile genuine and knowing. His mother was so relieved and she'd be okay again soon. He supposed it was awful to have nerves.

"I could almost see your fat, empty Hivereve *head* crushed by the accident," she was saying, "what few brains you *have* dripping out on the pavement!" Yes, all was as usual. Dear was kind of joking with Niles now. It would be okay if Niles kept from getting serious about it.

"I had to work late," came the father's even bari-

tone voice. "I *did* stop at a drugstore en route, and phone." Bottles being jostled together in the ice box made their sounds. Worrying that Niles might mention the storm or even talk about Dear's fear of storms directly — just to avoid the responsibility of being late — Teddy held his breath. "Maybe I dialed the wrong number." The ice box door nestled shut.

And no one downstairs said anything else, that time.

Niles's heavy footsteps were in the hallway seconds later, hurrying into the bathroom. Two lights went on, one blinking out when Niles pulled the bathroom door to, after him.

Teddy saw the way the floor beneath the bed looked almost luminous where his Dear had been lying. Startled, he touched the clean place with the tip of a finger and was surprised by how cool it was.

Sighing, he told himself to wiggle out, but nothing happened. The shouting was over again, the fight, but he thought maybe he would simply stay put. Awhile. Niles wouldn't come in right away and Dear was fixing supper. No hurry.

Teddy removed his glasses, drifted. Without them, he couldn't identify the bedsprings, he was just conscious of a weight above him. Which was okay, 'cause his parents would eventually remember that he wasn't around and they'd never lie down on the bed and smoosh him.

Not if nobody got careless and turned off the light. That was when trouble always began. Things appeared, and you might hear the night music.

Moisture adhered to Teddy's long eyelashes and that surprised as well as disappointed him. Nothing was supposed to happen any more to turn him into a

crybaby who passed out on the ground like an itty-bitty infant; he felt pretty sure that had been taken care of. They could be *old* tears, he supposed, but they positively were not new ones. And why would he be crying anyhow?

He tried for a while to stare straight at the mattress screening his vision and went cross-eyed in the effort, not knowing it. What if he *was* little again—tiny enough to hide in a teardrop? Would he be able, then, to wash away the Things?

"Teddy." Small pink feet had materialized and were nonchalantly poking their way into the slippers. "Supper's nearly ready. Get washed up."

"Come on out, Ted," Niles called from the door. "Can't hide from me. I'm hungry enough to eat a horse, hide and all!"

Teddy lay very still for another moment, then sighed.

It was no use.

He'd been found again.

Chapter Three

1

"You won't gag."

"Yes. I will." Teddy's slight shoulders, bowed because he felt both resistive and forlorn but also resigned, made him appear at a glance more ancient than the old man.

The latter, Dr. Biddle, broke off poking at Teddy's lips with the stick and squinted narrowly at him. "How d'you know you'll gag, Ted?"

"Because I always do," replied the small patient.

Dr. Biddle withdrew the offending stick another few inches. "Teddy, the only always is that nothing whatever *is*. Do you follow me?"

Teddy turned his face to one side to consider that. He wasn't astonished that the remark was brilliant—whatever it meant. The old physician seemed obviously smarter than any of Teddy's teachers, who wanted you to think they knew everything, too, but kept looking into books. Prob'ly the same ones the kids were reading. Although Dr. Biddle's office was on one hand just one more place to go to get terri-

fied, there were hundreds of fascinating instruments there and it had a look of being even older than Dr. Biddle. Old stuff by itself didn't scare Teddy. Most of the places he had lived were old as sin — an expression he'd heard lately that he rather liked the sound of — and some of Dear's nocturnal callers hadn't even been alive for close to one hundred years.

"C'mon, Ted. Open up." It wasn't impatient, just a friendly prod from a familiar friend with whom Teddy visited every Tuesday, at least. Dr. Biddle had smoky blue eyes on either side of a monster nose and a calmness of heart Teddy seldom experienced. The old man also exhibited a smile that seemed to tremble on his wide lips as if he could explode in hilarity anytime, and that, too, was an infrequent sight. Teddy hoped he'd get to listen someday to his laugh. "I have a new and secret means of depressing your tongue so that you won't even know the stick is there." The doctor pinched the depressor between his fat thumb and index while he raised his pinkie finger, then waggled the stick and winked. "The secret is kept only by one of the Mayos, a hunchbacked witch doctor in Borneo . . . and I."

Teddy laughed, the hard pressure of the cold wood lay upon the back of his tongue in an instant —

And he gagged. Loudly; horribly. Dramatizing it for all it was worth, then switching to a satisfactory impression of a nine-year-old on the verge of retching.

"Sweet heaven, what a ham!" Smiling, Dr. Biddle snapped the stick and tossed both pieces into a wastebasket next to his littered desk and one worn, enormous shoe. "Do stop that caterwauling at once or your mother will be certain I've killed you this time!"

Teddy frowned down at the wastebasket and pieces of tongue depressors rising from a bed of cotton balls like sleds sticking out of a huge snowbank. He understood about germs since Dear had them near the top of her list of things to loathe, so he wasn't exactly insulted. But why couldn't patients take the depressors home with them? There were a lot of fine uses for a perfectly good stick.

He glanced up at the sound of scratching. Dr. Biddle making marks mysteriously in the big black leather-bound book he always used. Scratch, scratch, and a dip into a purple inkwell; ruminative expression on a fleshy face with skin more like parchment than the paper in the book. Scratch, scratch.

Old wasn't bad. You got a bigger curve in your back when you scribbled things and bald except for hair like a white hedge, maybe looked some like a turtle, but you got to where you knew nearly as much as Dear knew and could find out how to live forever, if you were a doctor. Prob'ly you learned, too, how to let a Lucky Strike droop from the center of your lips—hanging by tiny strands of tobacco, and spit—and allow the silver ash to grow, and grow, till the suspense of waiting for it to fall was marvelous. If it turned your mouth brown in spots and made funny little holes in your vest, that was all right, because you were already old.

And you could pretend to be thinking really *wise* thoughts when your eyelids started closing over your watery, weary eyeballs, but nobody could know for sure *what* you were thinking! Uncle Duane had told Dear, "Biddle ought to be put out to pasture before he kills somebody," but that was because Dr. Biddle wouldn't see Uncle Duane anymore until he agreed to

stop drinking so much. Or maybe Dr. Biddle was thinking of doing really *neat* things behind his wire-rimmed glasses that slid down his nose while he kept his eyes shut—maybe he was trying to think up a *cure* for somebody!

The Lucky Strike ash fell off just as it was nearing a new record, tumbling onto the old man's shiny blue vest. He ground it into the material absently and asked Teddy, big dinosaur head lurching in his direction, "Would you like to know what's wrong with you, Ted?"

Once, it had been scarlet fever. And trips to other doctors, young but not young enough, shots in the arm of something called "sulfa" which led to the need to put on glasses, then almost a year of school lost—every minute of that time spent at home. So Teddy said nothing because he wasn't sure at all that he wanted to know.

Dr. Biddle blinked, appeared to change his mind. Or to change it in part. "You, my good fellow, have a *cold*." He said it with great gravity and a glint of what his grandma'd called devilment in his eyes. "Not precisely what I went to med school to learn, but perhaps it will satisfy your mother," He scrubbed at his nose till the veins were like spaghetti. "Pray the sweet Lord."

"It's not the scarlet fever again like Dear was afraid about?"

"It is not." He interlocked the large fingers across his vested, ample abdomen, cleared his throat. He looked like he might spit the contents somewhere but didn't. "While otherwise odious and unwelcome, disease ordinarily does not behave as a persistent caller at a maiden's door. It seldom drops around more than

once." Eyelids rose and lips parted in silent self-amusement. "Why don't you have a pet?"

"They got germs. Dear says maybe a puppy when I'm older."

"You and I have them, too, Teddy. Germs." He paused, took a drag on the fractional remains of his cigarette without touching it. A grunt of possible humor. "I was about to add your lovely mother to the list, but I must reconsider her application."

"Why?" asked Teddy.

"I doubt that she has ever been so careless as to permit a germ on her person." He had been close to lying down in his old desk chair and now, abruptly, slammed his large feet against the floor. "Ted, you draw pictures in the waiting room. You read. You like comic books. Do you know there is more to life than them—not necessarily anything *better*, but more?"

"Uh-huh," Teddy answered. "Sure."

"*Do you?*" Dr. Biddle dropped the minuscule remnant of his Lucky in a smoldering pot, poked at it with his finger until it disappeared, buried. "Examples, lad. Indulge an old and plausibly senile physician by itemizing a few of those pastimes, pursuits, and dreams that enlighten or begin to fulfill the dark corners of your being!"

This was a trick like the secret technique with the tongue depressor; Teddy knew it for what it was. He looked toward an alcove at the rear of the office, at a wall of books. Shelf after shelf aloof from patients and disease, one side of it (the doctor had confided in him) "no more involved with human illness than each writer deemed necessary." Trove; a personal library. Before being told he had scarlet fever, Teddy had been allowed to browse through the books; after, authors'

titles and names had melted in his mind like expensive twenty-cent candy bars surrendering their flavors to his mouth.

Why would Dr. Biddle challenge a young life primarily lived in the imagination? Teddy did not have access to those words, but he had the gist of the question. *A few dreams?* How was he to snatch even one from the flames of his nightmares?

"I do like to read and draw," he began to answer, cautiously. "Music is great; you know Dear"—he paused, amended it—"my *mother* plays piano professionally. And there's lot's of neat stuff on the radio." It was getting hot in the doctor's office. "Dear and Niles take me places sometimes on vacation."

Biddle drummed on the desk with his fingers. "Those are all fine things you mentioned, Teddy. I listen to the radio, too. Allen's Alley. The Mad Russian. And Jerry Colonna is funny."

As though cued, Teddy bugged out his eyes and painted a make-believe mustache under his nose with one finger. "'I don't ask questions,'" he aped Colonna, raising his voice to a manic cry—"I just have fun!"

Without lighting it, the doctor worked another cigarette out of the pack. The pack was no longer the color it had been because, Teddy knew from the radio commercials, "Lucky Strike green has gone to war." "Do you have fun," Dr. Biddle asked, "*any* fun? I wonder." He lumbered to his feet and leaned forward to open the door of his office. In a dimly lit short hallway, neat rows of white pill packets lay on a table where he'd left them to be picked up by patients for whom he'd prepared them. Other than occasionally peeking out when he happened to hear his patients

arriving, he sometimes left them there for days and did not have to be bothered when people came for them. "I guess this isn't the time for attempting to become a *complete* healer," he murmured. "*Evelyn!*"

Lips wide in fretting concern, brown eyes mammoth with drama and tension, Dear appeared to fill the doorway instantaneously. The Max Factor on her lashes and cheeks looked hurriedly applied; caked. "Is he all right?"

The old man slumped back into his chair, fingers in his vest's pockets, lumping them like cartoon moles. "My prognosis is a long life, my dear."

Dear wrapped both arms around Teddy, who thought he heard vertebrae pop. "Thank God!" she whispered. "We have to be so careful with our precious little son after that terrible sickness."

The Lucky Strike was in Biddle's mouth, tip burning, as if by magic. "I was just telling Ted that a great many diseases strike only once, doing their damage like tornadoes and moving on. He has a cold this time out, Evvie; merely a cold. I prescribe aspirin and an instant return to school."

"But not to gym class," Dear said hastily. "Remember? You didn't want him to attend gym."

Dr. Biddle's Lucky was already starting to grow, his lids narrowing in thought. "I gave you the note excusing him from participating indefinitely in gym," he said, sighing. "I suppose it will be in his school files just as long." The eyes opened and the feeble blue turned smoky again. "My dear, there's no need to haul Ted back here week after week. He might well be better off with other—"

"But you *said* he has a cold!" Dear answered irrefutably.

"He's running a slight temperature today, yes; he has some sniffles." A white brow was hoisted. "I am constantly amazed by the large number of my patients who can survive perfectly well without my regular aid."

Teddy tuned them out. He had gotten better and better at that, dropping out of adult conversations, the past year or two. He didn't want to keep coming out all the way across East Tenth street once a week but he really liked Dr. Biddle, coming here was one of the scenes in his own regular story, and no longer having some of the participants in his life around would be like Mickey without Pegleg Pete, Popeye without Bluto. It was the routine he knew, and the doctor, Aunt May-May, Uncle Duane, his cousin Cass, and all of Dear's dead and living relatives were in every panel of his comic book — the only real story he knew.

Without any of them, he would be very lonely. He knew that already because he missed Grandma a whole lot.

The yellow venetian blinds covering Dr. Biddle's office windows made limp, slatted, pale shadows on the throw rugs the old man had put over the older carpet. They were something like the Things that Teddy saw getting partway out of the closets in the bedrooms where he'd lived. Teddy squirmed in his chair, tried not to think of them, of other, lowercase things. Past Dr. Biddle's rolltop desk was a big white examining table to which Teddy cautiously maneuvered his seated body until he could spin marvelous steel stirrups on the end. In their shiny surface he saw his own bespectacled face, smaller, looking back at him with surprise. Just for a moment Teddy thought it was some other little boy . . .

"I guess I'll be seeing you again next week," said the aging doctor, making Teddy start guiltily. The boy in the steel stirrup *vanished!* "Unless you're visiting at a friend's house that day." He paused. The silver ash he was growing was really defying gravity this time! "Ever play ball, Ted? Do you like going to see sports? Circuses?"

"I have had to be very protective where Teddy's outside activities are concerned," Dear said. She was looking at Teddy. "I almost lost him, you know." The remark startled him because he couldn't remember ever getting lost, even being far enough away from his Dear to come close. "He's all important to me. I know my duty as the mother of a *special* child." She rose, stiffly, her glance toward the old man like so many she'd directed at Niles. "Don't blame me for it. His vision was almost *wrecked* by experimental drugs. *Doctors'* drugs."

They were outside the office seconds later. The sunlight was brilliant on an afternoon that promised spring might come again soon, and Dear was tearing the car door open. Before anger caused her to hurl him inside, Teddy leaped into the backseat. Going around to her door, Dear was seething so much Teddy halfway expected to see smoke begin to pour out of her fine nostrils.

"That *arrogant* old bastard!" She slammed the door closed after her, jabbed the key into the ignition, nearly flooded the motor. "How dare he question the way I raise *my* child!"

Several boys roughly Teddy's age were filing by. The outside two jumped on the curb to get around the automobile. From the backseat, Teddy smiled. They didn't appear to notice him. While his mother peeled

rubber, he toyed with the fluffy buttons on the back of the front seats. He was thinking about what it would be like to have a friend when Dear had to swerve wildly in order to avoid plowing the Chevy into either a fruit-wagon man or his swaybacked old horse.

But Teddy enjoyed the outing up until they were pulling into the long driveway of Draden House. Oddly, his nose began to run again.

Since he lacked a hanky, Teddy checked the rear-view mirror to be sure Dear didn't hear him sniffing, then wiped his nose on the inside cuff of his jacket sleeve.

Prob'ly she wouldn't see the couple of flecks of blood he left on the dark material.

2

Failing to find Niles in the house the way she'd expected, Dear surprised Teddy by not panicking; instead, she strode out back with such an obvious appearance of knowing where she would find him that it seemed like strange foreknowledge to Teddy, at her heels.

A glimpse of his father made Teddy grin with delight.

It was really nice to see Niles happy again.

Their new house—*their's*, whether it was named after somebody called "Draden" or not—once had been on choice property indeed. White River meandered at the rear of the lot, and in the days when the neighborhood was new, the river not yet detectably polluted, neither the Hivereve nor Mengaltd families could possibly have afforded this house. Using the

hard-earned money saved from Niles's years of labor at Picturesque Paint and other jobs for a down payment and then moving in had been Evelyn Hivereve's grandest achievement and happiest moments—

And maybe they had been for Niles, too, Teddy thought while he watched his father. Making half-gasping, half-snorting sounds each time he disappeared beneath the surface of White River and chuckling loudly to himself when he popped his black-haired head back into view, Niles was having the time of his life.

He saw them an instant later—Dear, arms akimbo a few yards outside the back door, Teddy grinning—and froze. The water where he stood came up above his ankles. His curly black chest hair was drenched, plastered down. His affable face with the even features went blank, expressionless.

Then he slapped his way toward wife and son, his short smile determinedly back in place, shivering while he reached down for his towel. "I'm prob'ly rushing the season but it was like Klinger Lake out there." He managed to get his breath back, looked fondly down at Teddy. "Remember? When I told you where I swam as a boy?"

"Sure, in Michigan," Teddy said fast, staring up at Niles. What would it be like to swim? Just to splash around in more water than a bathtub would hold? Dear said it was forbidden for him to "so much as put a *toe* in that goddamned diseased mud," so he hadn't. But Niles could *swim*, he could catch a hard ball *really* good, he did *all kinds* of neat things. "That was kind of like real sports, what you were doing—wasn't it?"

"Kind of, maybe," Niles answered, rumpling his hair. Teddy's father looked a little like Robert Taylor,

the actor, except Niles was stronger. "Except I didn't have any competition."

"I absolutely can't believe the evidence of my own senses," Dear began. Her gaze had never left Niles and she sounded incredulous.

"I have now," Niles said. It was an aside for Teddy's benefit. Then he was walking toward the back of the house, one arm over Teddy's shoulders.

"Stop right where you are!" She hadn't come an inch after them and she waited until her husband stopped, turned to confront her. "While *you* were pretending to be a goddamned *fish*, your only son was at a *doctor's* office for treatment!"

Niles wrapped his towel around his middle. "I didn't know this visit was a special one. Are you sick?" he asked Teddy. And to Evelyn, "It's not the scarlet fever again?"

"Disease isn't like tornadoes," she said airily, mystifying Niles. She rushed past him to the screen door. "No thanks to *you*, I got Teddy there just in time to avert pneumonia!"

"Pneumonia?" Niles repeated the word to her back. The door crashed shut behind her. Puzzled, Niles smoothed back his mop of black hair and looked questioningly down at his son. "Did Dr. Bidle say anything to you about that, Ted?"

"He said I have a code," Teddy replied. Sniffing loudly to clear his nasal passages, he tried again: "A *cold*."

Niles laughed once, a whoop of real amusement. Then he ordered his mood and face, clapped Teddy's shoulder, and followed his wife into the house. "A cold!" he said to himself, his bare shoulders silently quivering.

Teddy smiled too and went on doing so until he had been outside — alone — for close to a minute. When he realized a breeze was picking up, he turned to peer at the unruffled surface of the river, his shoulders spasming. So quiet out there, so still. The former was nice and the latter, though almost the same thing, was too different for him to enjoy seeing. Shadows from occasional overhanging trees reminded him of the Things he'd seen trying to leave his various closets; they looked ready to come alive and bolt straight up from the water. They also reminded him of other moments of terror that appeared as lacking in substance, in his memory, as shadows.

Had Dear saved him from another disease, put off dying for another period of time, just by driving out to the doctor's office and getting Dr. Biddle to talk with him? Because he hadn't gotten any shots, he hadn't been given a white envelope with pills or a bottle filled with nasty-tasting medicine in it. He hadn't even been forced to get any aspirin down yet.

White River would look different, tomorrow. It even looked different today than the way it had appeared throughout the winter. But he hadn't seen it till now, with evening coming. One day, Teddy understood, the river would get as nice as it ever looked — but it wouldn't *stay* pretty, nice, because fall and winter had to come again. It was a rule for some reason. It was only for a while that White River would sort of be like a mirror, all clear and smooth so you could see your face in it. And nearly anything neat that you wished to see on its surface, or below.

Teddy glimpsed — just for a moment — the watchful boy face looking back at him from the stirrups on Dr. Biddle's table.

Then he knew he wanted to wade out in the water if only once—before it was filled with lumpy Things, *floating* Things; shadows that would not go away.

So quiet. Still, here. And lonely.

Very lonely. Quiet, too.

“Teddy darling!” The shrill, loving shout made him jump around one hundred and eighty degrees and brought his heart into his mouth, almost stopping it. “I’ve got something for you to take.”

The term made his feet tire, trudge, going toward the screen door. You didn’t *take* good food, you ate it. Taking was always medicine. “Coming.” An aspirin probably but maybe something worse. Maybe that was why taking things was bad, so he didn’t do it. What you stole might be medicine.

“Teddy.” She got bigger the nearer he got to the door. “Did you make number two before we went to Dr. Biddle’s today?”

He froze, saw in his mind’s eye the newspapers from yesterday spread out on the bed. Felt his bowels tighten, mutely protesting, making his stomach hurt. He saw himself as an idiot, then, a moron.

Because Dear didn’t lie and he didn’t lie to Dear either, and he couldn’t remember whether he had or had not for the life of him.

3

There wasn’t much to do before the evening meal but lie on his bed and wait for it. He had been spared an enema this time, but he was still drained. Teddy pulled his two pillows out of the fold of the spread into which they had been quickly crammed, propped

them behind his neck, and waited.

Since he knew no one his age to talk with on the telephone, he'd had quite a bit of practice in learning patience. He wasn't very good at it, he didn't think he'd ever like it, but he had his practice time in. Nights when he couldn't sleep, there was a possibility that dead folks might come to visit. As near as he could tell, they never came to see him any more than live folks did, but they dropped in on Dear a lot and knew everything that was happening. Usually, Dear told him what they had revealed to her and that stuff was pretty interesting, usually.

Actually, it wasn't true that no one alive or dead came to see him but sometimes it felt good telling himself it was. Good in a bad kind of way. Uncle Duane liked talking to him, he thought—especially when Uncle Duane was tight—and his cousin Cass, Duane's daughter, looked straight at him when she sang. Dear always played piano for Cass, who wanted to be a singer when she grew up, and it was obvious to Teddy that his cousin Cass was already the best singer in the world, and grown up already. He forgot how much older than he she was, but she was big on top like Dear was and Niles wasn't, and she was very pretty. Once, he'd been real sure Cass was singing *entirely* for him, during one of her visits to "Auntie's," and it had made him feel sort of weak and strong—little and big—at the same time. He remembered the way she'd worn what Dear said was a pheasant or peasant blouse or something, and Cass had kinda bounced around, all of her bouncing, and the fact that she'd been singing that Betty Hutton tune—"My Rockin' Horse Ran Away"—hadn't spoiled it at *all*, not a *bit* . . .

Time was different once you were dead, Teddy guessed. You could see just about everything anyone was doin', inside their heads too. Like you were God. So you had to keep stuff you thought just right, really pure, like, or the dead ones would see and might tell God. Or Dear.

He thought about turning on the radio, seeing if there was a station without a bunch of static that night. 'Cause they'd been coming home from Dr. Biddle's, he hadn't heard "The Lone Ranger." Of course, that was all right since Dear'd missed "Young Widder Brown," too, she was thinking of him, giving up so *much* to keep her poor, sickly child as well as could be expected.

Teddy sighed, folded his hands on his stomach. It was kind of good just to lie there awhile. He hadn't been feeling great, whatever Dr. Biddle said. He'd felt tired—not sick exactly, certainly not bad enough to tell Dear. Just—tired.

For the billionth time maybe, he tried to decide if he liked living in Draden House. His Dear had craved it; it was on the River Road Boulevard, large, named after someone. He guessed maybe the house was a sort-of substitute for the Hammond organ his mother yearned for more than anything else, except playing piano professionally, which Dear had done for years. She even kept a scrapbook, marked PERSONAL, of things she wanted, and every other page had a picture of a Hammond organ on it. A Hammond would implement her career, make her just as popular as she'd been before—

It was dark in his bedroom now and out of the corner of his eye Teddy saw the shadows of the Things making gray stains on the carpeting. Long, skinny

ones, not red like blood 'cause they weren't from living folks. They were gaunt, pale, came from nothing his eyes could catch. Worse, if you turned your head to stare right *at* 'em, they could either slither into a closet or somewhere so fast it got hard to go on seeing them.

Why hadn't he thought to turn on the light when he came in?

Because light, well, Things didn't like light, they hated it like he hated them. And they could hide in or behind anything except his bookcase—then wait, like he was doing—till they could sneak out again. Enough light would kill them, though. He'd always had just enough to kill *parts* of them in time. But if—

Dear could get a piano job whenever she god-damned well felt like it, Teddy knew that. Sure enough, every now and then somebody called a "booker" phoned and asked her to entertain at places called cocktail lounges, clubs and places. But usually, Dear told him she had had her own dance band; that a musician of her calibre needed always to be cautious about where and when she agreed to perform.

And she had given up her active career all for him.

Teddy began to cry. Most of his mind didn't know he was, not until his glasses were so wet he couldn't go on checking on the Things, but he accepted one more time the terrible truth that his being born had ruined his Dear's playing, and it was just about the toughest thing he ever thought about. She didn't *say* it was his fault, no, of *course NOT*—not Dear. He just knew how long it'd been, and even though he couldn't quite understand a world without Teddy Hivereve in it, he trusted that there had been one; and that was when the prettiest and most perfect musician

and person on earth had been a star. He owed her everything. He owed his *life* to her. To a *star*.

"Teddy, get your little ass down here!" Dear called to him.

He got up promptly—no dallying; that was being bad—and easily jumped over the Things in time to swing the door wide and bring light in from downstairs.

At the foot of the steps, he grew aware of the Presence. Of someone, watching him.

A shallow but showily surprising balcony jutted from half of the stucco wall above and behind where Teddy stood. It overlooked the imposing front room of a house so thoroughly built to someone else's dreams and specifications that portions of each room seemed brilliantly lit while other stretches of each room lay in virtual darkness. In addition to the bronze plaque mounted on a stone post at the end of the driveway, proclaiming the property DRADEN HOUSE, this spacious room—"Why, it's *ideal* for entertaining!"—and the full balcony were what had captivated Teddy's mother and turned her obsessive about buying the place. At more than fifteen thousand dollars, it had appeared beyond Niles's reach; more than a few loud and bitter quarrels had ensued shortly after the death of Evelyn's mother. Her family, she reminded Niles, was "People." He'd sought to explain why it was unwise to go into more debt, adding, "I'm like a frog who sees a familiar stone in the middle of a stream and just wants to be high and safe while the rapids pass. I'm not a climber, Evvie."

"And I am a Mengaltdt in spite of having married a Hivereve," she'd told him. "I'm entitled to *something* in life considering the sacrifices I've made to satisfy

your needs." She had begun crying then. "Just do this for me, Niles — pay me back for surrendering myself and my career in music — and I'll never shout at you or call your mother names anymore. I won't!"

Well, she'd placed her piano conspicuously beneath the graceful balcony, and Niles, assisted by his late mother-in-law's insurance, was going to give up his job at Picturesque Paint, get a great job with his friend named Doc, and really do what Dear called "making something of himself." Things could be good, at last, maybe even fun sometimes.

"Hi, Aunt May-May," he answered, staring up at the presence.

Dear's aunt, Grandma's surviving sister, the slight will-o'-the-wisp trembling on the balcony, was peering unblinkingly down at him — or might have been; her cataract-blighted eyes swam like fish in a murky pool behind her glasses' lenses — with her fleshless arms crossed on her thin chest, white hands on her elbows sustaining some inner balance. Aunt May-May's arrivals at the house seemed nearly as spectral as those of Dear's dead relatives; on one day she wasn't there, on another she was materializing, spookily but sweetly, picked up somewhere by Niles or dropped off by one of her nervous, periodically rejection-prone grown sons.

"How are you?" Teddy asked when she didn't answer him. He wasn't sure for a moment that she had found him yet.

"Oh, Teddy," she sighed like distant wind. Threads of old gold or straw showed in the bird's-nest hair left sparsely on her head as if targeted by starlings. Clad in the black gown she always wore, memory that wasn't finished with her yet was all that kept her erect

except for protuberant bone. "Are you really still with us?"

4

A few hours after the evening meal, Niles, lying alone in bed with the lights on, glanced up. He was startled by the sound of the bedroom door lightly hitting the wall. He'd been reading an article in *Argosy* about the buildup of a new war machine in Germany and hadn't been expecting Evelyn to come up for hours; it was only ten-thirty according to his watch and she hated retiring for the night before midnight.

She sat down in front of her vanity table and began removing her makeup without saying a word. That was fine with Niles. Doc Greene had told him on the phone earlier that day he was ready to let Niles "take a fling" at selling prosthetic devices, but it couldn't be done on a part-time basis. The old high school buddy had also ruled out a draw against commission so Niles planned to ask his boss at Picturesque tomorrow for a leave of absence. There was no way they could keep this house either on his Picturesque income or straight commission—not right away—so he needed to get plenty of rest in order to explain his situation properly to Lou. Lou Tilton was both his superior and a relative who knew Evvie, so he might understand why he'd bought this place—and why Evelyn believed he had already quit the paint company. Her health, like Teddy's, was rather fragile, so he'd just allowed Evvie to believe he was already Doc Greene's full-time and salaried employee. It was what she wanted to think anyway.

The only two things that bothered Niles this instant were that he didn't know what would happen or where they could move if he didn't turn out to be a good salesman, and the fact that Evvie's favorite observation about him was that he always took "the path of least resistance." Which was true enough, but she never seemed to understand what a compliment that was to her and their marriage. Deep in his own mind, Niles knew, he really didn't want to agree with hardly anyone about anything and was inclined to feel extremely stubborn about any idea that might rock the boat; or knock him off his rock in the middle of the stream. Since he saw Evvie as thriving on crises, he imagined he was doing her an unspoken favor of the most loving kind to put himself at risk from time to time.

And it *was* himself he jeopardized, not his wife or his son. Because it was the man in the family whose basic task it was to provide for them, and he would have been content just to have pushed a *broom* at Picturesque Paint until he dropped, and to have lived in a hovel. Just so long as he could remain near the gifted and gorgeous girl who had made his dreams fulfilled forever simply—astonishingly—by agreeing to marry him.

He was starting to doze off, *Argosy* slipping from his fingers, when he felt Evelyn's presence at the side of the bed and looked up to find her naked from the waist down. And still as a mouse, there, waiting for him to look at her.

Niles obliged, not very alert yet in any sense but attempting to force himself intellectually to grasp all the meanings of this experience. His wife was not only phenomenally talented and often too delicate—

spiritually, anyway—to get much done around the house, but far brainier than he was. He had told her so, many times, using that word. So Niles knew that she surely had reasons for everything she did or thought, even when he honestly didn't understand them. Couldn't. She also had an amazing knack for remembering the smallest details of conversations and things people had done to her or Teddy—even years after the fact—and quoting or describing those unkindnesses in ways that made them seem to have taken place only days before. That was only right, too, of course. Women and helpless children were so vulnerable, so easily hurt, that her photographic memory was just another example of what a perfect mother she was.

So, if Evvie wanted to have sex now, there was no possibility that the reason was merely founded in lust. She was a *woman*. There was a good reason for seeking him out, like this, and he'd be wise to figure out what it was before she remembered one day in the future every detail of their lovemaking. Because, she would.

He kissed the soft part of her tummy. Evvie sort of folded herself over him, arms trailing down his back to the waistband of his BVDs. Among Evvie's charms was the way she had acquired a number of preconceived notions about lovemaking from her Tech High girlfriends or someplace and she had heard that men liked it best when they first saw the woman naked below the waist—"Down there," as she sometimes expressed it. It wasn't that Evelyn didn't have beautiful, even perfect breasts—because she did! But back when she had been a flapper, breasts were pretty much tied down, and a lot of girls had developed the idea that

young men didn't like . . . tits . . . to be big.

That was a bunch of bull, Niles thought, guiding Evvie down before him by the bra clasp and the breast he was cupping in the other hand.

"Thanks for going and getting Aunt May-May," she said. Her enormous brown eyes fixed upon his face where, Niles knew, they would stay. "I think she looks a little stronger than the last time she was out."

"Maybe," Niles grunted.

"Oh, before I forget it," Evvie continued, "I had a letter from Cass! Her music teacher at school said he knows somebody in New York and he'll provide an introduction for her after she graduates."

"Good!" Niles said.

"Cass said she'll be down here soon for a visit, won't that be nice? She sent a picture some boy took of her. You want to see it?"

"Not right now!"

"Anyone hearing her sing would know she had Mengaldt blood in her, you know?"

Niles nodded. He found it getting difficult to keep his eyes open, his vision focused, but he was trying. That took up all his concentration, didn't leave any for talking.

"I know Dr. Biddle just said Teddy had a cold, but he looks—more peaked than usual. What do you think?"

"Looks fine!"

"Well, if you say so." Evelyn's expression changed, minimally shifted. It looked like a frown. But her eyes bore into Niles's sweat-smeared ones. "Duane's coming." She paused as though awaiting a comment. Duane was her brother. "We hadn't heard from him for a while so I phoned him at the shoe store." She

paused again. "He said he hasn't touched a drop all of March, so far. Isn't that good news?"

"All riiiiight!"

Evelyn got up from the bed a few moments later, to go to the bathroom.

"I knew you'd be pleased, too," she called.

5

Dear was spreading out the old newspapers on his bed, face festive. She was humming. He stared at her from a corner of the room and saw that his bed was getting larger, ever larger, but that newspapers from all over the world were covering it—to protect his bed, his mattress, from the darkness in him.

"Please," he whispered. Hoping not to be caught doing it, he rubbed the front of his short pants. It got tiny when he was cold or scared. He felt both ways now. "Please don't, Dear. Okay? I h-hate enemas. It—hurts, it's hard to w-wait."

"*Did* you make number two, or not?" Her arms were folded over her muumuu-concealed breasts. The great expanse of white around her brown eyes looked like chalk on a blackboard. He couldn't answer. "And you did not go two yesterday either, if memory serves? Did you?"

"Yes, some," he answered. But he couldn't hold her gaze. "A little . . ."

"But you only made knots, right—little, hard knots?" A smile anticipated sure victory. "That's what it was, wasn't it?"

"Yes, Dear." How could he deny her when, half the time, she came in to squint down into the toilet as

soon as he got up? For the first time, he saw the hot water bottle in her hands. Teddy gasped, pressed his fingers to his lips. The rubber contraption was nearly a yard long, it was steaming, and the ugly, black, hard nub at the end of the dull-red tube that jerked like a snake when she moved her arms was almost as long as the ruler he used at school! "*Please*, Dear! I'll grunt later today—I promise! I'll drink some prune juice the way you like, and I'll make number two all over those newspapers!" He glanced down at the array of paper and newsprint and saw headlines in languages he couldn't read. "I'll grunt all over the *world*!"

"Ohhh, Teddy," his mother sighed. She stooped to his size, smiling, leaving the hint of a halo in a room Teddy suddenly realized was painted a surgical-unit white, and there were huge shiny machines everywhere, enormous lights that illuminated him for everybody to see. "You know your Dear only wants what's best for you. Don't you know that, my sweet Teddy?"

There were so many old newspapers spread out everywhere that he couldn't tell if his own bed was under them! "Yesssss," he drawled it out, staring at her, around the altered room, at his gentle, smiling mother again.

"Then, take those pants down!"

He heard what she snapped to him but his myopic gaze had moved to another corner of the place and what he saw there was terrifying. Great stacks of old papers—columns, *towers* of newspaper—standing in readiness for him, for her.

"I said to drop those drawers, Teddy!" she cried, her fingertips curling into his belt, loosening the tightly bound buckle. The hot water bottle remained

in one hand—held high, with the tubing and the long nipple—but she was able to tug at his underpants until he was suddenly naked from the waist down, trying to cover himself with his hands. But her dark hair, brushing against his groin, tickled, and flinching, spasming, he let a giggle seep from his lips like something treasonous he had inside of him—something else he could not control. “Get up on that bed *now!*”

Newspapers crackling under his light weight as if they had been kindled, Teddy obeyed, squeezing his eyes shut.

“Stick your bottom over the edge,” Dear ordered. “No, no—stay on your side!”

He did what he was told, his eyelids popping open, his glasses askew because of how he had to lay his head.

But something—someone else, perhaps—was there . . .

“Lie still!” she commanded. Involuntarily, Teddy glanced up at the hot water bottle before his mother’s head. It seemed to be her face, red and wrinkled but fat, too, smoke pouring from her pate. The bed, the newspapers, were the plane of the entire planet and his bare bottom was dangling in space, an absurd target. The nub was longer than any of his fingers, than *Niles’s* fingers, the enema cord was writhing as if it had become one of the Things, alive at last. Cramming both hands between his legs, positioned fetally, he started reading the headlines in front of him, saw NAZIS, IMMINENT, FDR, many other meaningless things. *Who was that on the other side of the bed?*

“You must hold it this time, Teddy,” Dear said behind him.

He felt the touch of her fingers parting the cheeks of his buttocks, and invasion. The nipple was usually cold, lifeless. Now it was hot, very hot, before the liquid was even inside him. Again opening his eyes, he caught a glimpse of the device itself flopping, gone organic, felt the start of a pulsation deep in his body. But the rubber nub wouldn't go in far enough to please Dear, she was swearing in a string of muttered curses, jabbing it into him, forcing it as the lava began to fill him like a balloon. He saw—

Teddy Hivereve, saw his own *face* staring at him from across the world's press—but Teddy didn't wear glasses, this Teddy *smiled* at him!

Make her stop, said the Teddy with no glasses. "I can't," Teddy answered between gritted teeth. He spoke to Dear, the boy, the nations. "I just can't."

"I've got the world on a string," the music declared joyously.

Teddy stared at the shadows in his room, instantly seeking, with his eyes, the nightlight that was supposed to be burning on a card table just inside the door—and it was, they hadn't turned it off! It had all been a *bad dream*, that was all, and his Dear was playing piano downstairs, under the balcony—playing just for her and him, a *happy tune* real late at night! There hadn't been any enema that day after all!

She finished that one, began afresh. Changed mood, started playing "That Old Rugged Cross" so beautifully it was enough to make anybody cry.

He did. But thought, before falling asleep again, about how funny it was to see himself in a dream.

He thought about it a lot.

Chapter Four

1

A year ago, Teddy had been pretty sure he hated food. When, at about eight, he wondered why he didn't enjoy eating, he imagined it was because food came straight out of the ground. Lots of it, anyway. The earth was dirty, as everyone knew, and inhabited by dead and weird Things, as Dear had instructed him.

For basically the same reason, he'd concluded, he didn't care a great deal for flowers. Which was surprising, since Dear did.

That one act of self-examination—even if the reasoning was wrong—had gradually led Teddy to the point this morning when he was able to admit tenuously to himself that the main reason he'd thought he didn't like food was because of how Dear prepared it. That, and the kind of conversations that generally went on at the dining table. Dimly, today, he began to perceive that the tension as well as the anger level rose in surprising proportion to the family members

present for the given meal.

Alone with Dear, there might be tension but seldom anger, meaning, to Teddy, the variety that was directed at him.

With Niles home for dinner or present at breakfast because he hadn't had to go to work early, tension didn't have much of a chance to build for the reason that there was almost always an argument going on before the meal was over, sometimes before the food was lifted (a term that made Teddy giggle), and occasionally before Niles (or Grandma, when she was still alive) had set the table.

Until very recently, Teddy had liked eating most when Aunt May-May (Grandma, too, before she died) was there. Unless Dear was furious because Niles had done something she said she couldn't just let go, there weren't many fights and the tension level changed, assumed a different flavor. Dear and Niles acted more like they could stand each other a little bit, settled any quarreling by saying stuff with their eyes, and then spoke real *quiet*, so Aunt May-May couldn't hear.

Worst was when Uncle Duane came over during the day, while Niles was at work, and Dear asked him to stay for supper (which was what she liked to call it). Teddy didn't know how many times he and Dear had been sitting at the table, talking, Duane telling stories about how wonderful he'd been back in his basketball playing days or he and Dear remembering the way Grandpa had liked disciplining Uncle Duane, and Niles had gotten home. Maybe no one in the whole world ever saw, like Teddy did, his father's tiny little *stop* just into the front room from the foyer and how he stared at Duane before speaking. It was like Niles

couldn't see real well because of the sunshine on his way home. Not that Niles ever said whether it was his eyes or his brother-in-law that made him look like that, but Teddy knew it meant lots of tension and possibly a big fight while they all ate supper.

Breakfast was the worst from a food standpoint. Dear liked runny and slick soft-boiled eggs with broken-up Ritz crackers souped around in them, so he got them for breakfast also. Sometimes he'd ask for hard-boiled eggs, which he liked, and he couldn't figure out why they would make him constipated if they didn't do that on Easter. Maybe the coloring on Easter eggs had some Milk of Magnesia in it.

This morning Niles hadn't yet left for work. He ate the serving of Quaker oatmeal Dear would usually have urged Teddy to eat and wolfed it down hungrily, looking very cheerful today. (Aunt May-May helped out, too, though her helping was so small it wouldn't have been meaningful without Niles's portion.) Maybe that meant the round box with the beardless Santa Claus of a Quaker on it was empty now, Teddy hoped as he swallowed a spoonful of drippy eggs and crumbs. The only use Quaker products had, in his viewpoint, was limited to the container. It made a pretty neat toy drum.

"How's the arithmetic coming, Ted?" Niles asked.

The question was out of left field. "It's okay."

"Well, your arithmetic grade brought down your whole report card last time." Niles studied him over an appetizing-looking slice of toast with grape jam. Jam had too much sugar in it for kids except for treats at special times. "You want some help with it when the weekend comes?"

"I don't think so, Niles," Teddy said carefully.

"I'm studying, too, Teddy," Niles added. "So I can do the best possible job for Doc and earn the money to keep this house. Together, maybe, we —"

"For God's sake, Niles," Dear said, "let the poor child have his breakfast without nagging at him."

"I'm not nagging him." Niles put down his toast, eyelashes batting nervously. "Evvie, he'll make a great cartoonist, I know, and his English grades are good. But he needs to learn to multiply and divide, too." Blinking and grinning at Teddy, he rumpled the sandy hair.

"Teddy isn't going to be an accountant, darling." Dear poured coffee into her cup and her aunt's. "Teddy has an artist's disposition, he's sensitive. The way all Mengaldts are. Not that you would know much about that."

"Honey," Niles said, "you promised not to —"

"Where's Jimmy?"

The speaker's voice was so light and feathery it registered on their minds as if bypassing their ears. Teddy turned to Aunt May-May, forgetting which one of her sons Jimmy was. She was always asking about him, just the faintest whine of concern left in her voice after countless repetitions of his name. Teddy impulsively patted her hand. Dr. Biddle had one kind of old, Aunt May-May had another. Hers was the kind that got young again, in a way. Under his fingers her rigid hand was set in a line that looked broken, with bumpy arthritic knuckles just like Grandma's had been, and the hand was very cold. He saw her as fortunate. Nobody told her to eat the oatmeal or her soft-boiled egg or even to drink the coffee.

"Gotta go," Niles announced, bounding to his feet. He rumpled Teddy's hair again, stared at his wife,

bent to kiss her cheek. Not yet gone, he lifted a pack of Viceroys from his shirt pocket—the kind Grandma Roberta liked—and knocked one up into view. Dear smoked, too, but hated Viceroys. Niles got out a book of matches, lit his cigarette. “Wish me luck today.”

Smoke curled beneath Dear’s nose. She coughed, hacked, made a face. “God, Niles, that’s *awful*. Why can’t you smoke something decent for a change?”

Niles thought of Lou Tilton, who would decide if he could have a leave of absence or must simply quit. “Thanks for the good thoughts,” he said quietly, turning.

“You’ll knock those doctors dead out there!” Evelyn promised him, snatching his hand, believing he was already working full-time as a salesman. She looked up at him with her large brown eyes vivid against the exposed whites. “Darling, you worry too much about our Teddy’s grades. A boy shouldn’t be expected to do well in subjects that aren’t his natural proclivities. All the modern experts recommend that parents raise their children *naturally*.”

“I just hope the kid doesn’t have a natural proclivity toward becoming another Dillinger or a Russian Communist.” He didn’t pull his hand free. “Or toward preferring boys.”

“You’re so silly.” Evelyn kissed the back of his hand, released it as though throwing it away enthusiastically. “Go! I’ll take care of our sweet little Teddy.”

She would, too, Teddy thought as he drank the rest of his juice and reached for his milk to wash the taste away. Just like she always took care of everyone, even looked out for Niles and Aunt May-May, Uncle Duane, cousin Cass, and *everybody*. It couldn’t mat-

ter that his Dear was more help in English and art and geography than she was in arithmetic 'cause she and he were talented, and that was better than smart. "Smart" was just real stuff, and old stuff in school-books. Jobs like Niles's. Important things were all right there, at Draden House.

"Did Jimmy go upstairs to his room?" Aunt May-May inquired delicately. She squinted up from the dining table at the morning sunstream. Despite Dear keeping the windows and doors shrouded in draperies and curtains—bedsheets, doubled, were temporarily hung over two of the dizzyingly high windows in the front room—to keep out drafts, light kept on infiltrating the house. "I don't think he should play alone in the dark. Do you?"

Niles left a trail of smoke on his path to the front door, and following his departing father with his bespectacled eyes, Teddy caught a glimpse of a boy who looked a lot like him in his mother's coffee service. Except the other boy wore no glasses.

2

He passed through the school halls of the old brick building as rapidly as he dared, mindful of monitors. When it appeared clear, he ran a little, darting distances, then slowed to a mildly smily trudge whenever it might be dangerous. Another interminable day of classes was somehow over, and Dear or Niles would be waiting outside at the curb, motor running, to take him home. One of them always did.

Out of the corners of his eyes, Teddy spotted the white horizontal and diagonal slashes on the traffic

guards' belts, the glint of light on their important badges a cautionary bother. All of them were boys, too, all older or bigger than Teddy, or both, the majority of them swaggered like the vice-principals, and Teddy yearned to be one of them. That appeared to be an implausible dream, however. Some of the traffic guards had posts in the hinterlands many blocks from PS 60—over on Washington Boulevard, even over on North Meridian, the busiest street in town—and there was no guarantee that he could have a post just outside the building.

Besides, Teddy supposed as he pushed with all his weight against one of the front doors, they would probably expect him to be a regular kid who walked to and from school. And healthier.

Two other boys—bigger, older—burst through the door Teddy was opening, ahead of him. The books in the arms of one of the boys struck against his elbow, made him draw back his hand and arm, and the door swung shut. The suddenness of it gave Teddy the impression that he'd nearly been hit in the face, nearly had his glasses knocked off, and he stood still for another moment while he pinched the frame of the spectacles at the right side, adjusting them to his nose and ear. Through the door's small pane of glass he saw the other boys, who hadn't seemed to notice him at all, running out to the curb; saw the traffic guard there shout at them to walk; saw one of the running boys raise his middle finger in apparent defiance; saw the guard get his notebook and stub of pencil out to scrawl the offender's name.

Teddy grinned, remembered Dear was supposed to be waiting out there for him, banished the grin, and once again shoved the door open.

Neither parent—nor the family car—awaited him at the curb.

Muttering high voices, behind Teddy, froze him. Herkimer shot into his view, and though the seventh grader was at least three feet away and nothing obstructed his passage, Herkimer raised his arms and pushed Teddy off balance. “Hi,” Teddy said to the other boy’s back. The back didn’t reply or pause but one of two boys with Herkimer said, “Fairy,” and the other showed his middle finger more or less in Teddy’s direction.

Teddy knew neither of Herkimer’s friends (he knew who Herkimer was because the seventh grader let everyone know he was going to play football in high school) so, absentmindedly, Teddy grinned, adjusted his glasses, and switched the weight of his own books to the other arm.

Where were the folks? Was Dear sick, did she know it was cold out? Had somebody died? What should he do? Why did that one boy think he was a fairy when fairies were so little you almost couldn’t see them? What should he do if the Herkimer trio returned—should he speak, should he call that one kid “fairy” too?

Oh, yeah (Teddy recalled): “Wait ten minutes in case we had car trouble, then start home.” She’d said it like any nice mother but the improbability of it was so immense it was almost like, “Wait awhile in case I send some dead folks to bring you home.” Nonetheless, a wait now was mandatory so Teddy guarded himself as well as he could against any further unexpected personal attacks. This was Outside Alone, after all.

But he couldn’t *know* when the time was up ’cause

he didn't have a *watch*, Teddy realized with a mood similar to a fireman forgetting his engine, a lion tamer lacking his chair and whip. All he could do was guess. Heck, most folks he knew didn't have watches. A thought made him giggle, then suppress it—a mental picture of folks going around lugging clocks balanced on their wrists. E.H., Dear's daddy—a lawyer—he'd owned a pocket watch. A fine, hefty, fat thing he kept tucked inside a tiny pocket of his suit vest. And Grandma had owned a genuine gold watch; it was one of the few—he groped for his mother's expression—few valuables Dear'd been left except for a rather pathetic dab of cash money. She was saving the gold watch, he knew, for good. Uncle Duane wasn't to know about it. Maybe *he'd* gotten E.H.'s pocket watch.

Stragglers came from behind him, mostly either those kept after or brains who belonged to clubs and all. They appeared at the curb and passed on without a glance. They didn't glance at each other either, though. It occurred to him that most people weren't very friendly. Or maybe they were scared—or maybe they had scarlet fever eyes, too, and just couldn't see much. There was a great deal to learn, but teachers didn't teach a lot of the necessary stuff.

Eventually the traffic guard in front of PS 60 (and Teddy) got bored, saw no one else leaving the school, and ran away as abruptly as if he'd been chased. Afterward, it got very silent at the end of the school lane. There was seldom much traffic in this older part of town except at rush hour. Most of the buildings around had been wonderful homes for rich people once, he'd heard, but now they were turning into rooming houses. *I hafta get a watch someday*, he

thought, shuffling his feet to keep warm. Maybe a mile away, over on College, a trackless trolley made strange sounds of distance and loneliness. Afternoon shadows crept.

Surely ten minutes had passed! It wasn't raining, it was prob'ly too late now for snow, and he knew his way back to Draden House 'cause he'd watched close whenever Dear or Niles was driving him. He still felt kind of bad but it might almost be fun, being outside. Walking, looking at stuff.

And by the time he decided he might as well walk, he had crossed the street and school 6O was a good block behind him.

And by the time, somewhat surprised, he turned to check—to look for the family car belatedly arriving—the school building was nearly out of sight.

The ensuing instant of cold terror didn't last. Two, three steps closer to home, it was supplanted by a stirring of adventure along with an awareness that, while he was moving, the temperature wasn't as chilly as he'd believed. First he loosened the wool tie Dear said he looked so nice in, then he slipped out of his blue jacket and draped it over one arm. This was distinct rule-breaking, but the sun was lying between his white shirt-shielded shoulder blades like a pat, a caress, and it felt good. Dear wanted him to feel good, didn't she?

Four blocks from the house set well back on River Boulevard he got winded and his legs began to ache. Now, if he stopped to wait for a ride, his folks wouldn't see him and he'd find out who the perverts were that Dear said were Out Here. And nighttime, not his parents, would come—black nighttime with no lights turned on just inside the bedroom door, because everything then would be like a big *closet*—and

that was exactly what he got for not telling time by *some* means, and for letting his tie down and removing his jacket!

He trotted the pavement until he believed he couldn't keep going, finally forcing himself to rush up the driveway to Draden House on legs that he honestly thought would collapse under him and leave his crippled body for Niles to run over when he got home from work. Poor Niles. He was actually pretty amazed to reach the house itself, sweating like crazy, felt sure he might throw up, but was otherwise all right—and he decided to peek through the picture window in hopes of discovering why Niles or his Dear hadn't come for him. Besides, he had to put his jacket on, smooth back his hair, and—

Uncle Duane was sprawled in a chair tugged out from the dining table. He was visible all the way from the front of the house not because he was big but partly because he was Uncle Duane, because he was somehow always glaringly conspicuous.

Now Teddy thought he knew why his Dear hadn't come to get him at school.

She must not have been able to learn if her brother had a bottle of whiskey in his coat. And no one would leave Duane Mengaldt alone in her house if she suspected he did. Dimly, Teddy understood that one or two things came ahead of his own comfort, even his own safety if the dangers around him weren't quite *real*. Because Uncle Duane, drinking, *was* real danger.

It was actually nice to see Uncle Duane again. Sort of. This way, outside the house, where you didn't get talked to or have to sit around being ready to duck away from his crutch. That wooden artifact was

propped against his accident-wrecked leg, within reach as ever—and he could grab it up and swing it *fast*, even if he almost never really did that to anyone. It was never personal, it was the product of a good athlete's fine reflexes even twenty-five years after school. And booze, of course. The car accident, the leg and crutch, booze, and the bitch he was married to—though that word of Duane's had better never ever pass Teddy Hivereve's lips! The noun belonged to his aunt, whom Teddy somewhat liked since she'd never sworn at or hooked a flying crutch at him. The aunt he might never see again even if she *was* cousin Cass's mom, 'cause Dear was loyal to her big brother Duane.

A shiver flashed through the nine-year-old from head to toe.

It might be nice to see his uncle from out there, okay to spend a few hours sitting at the dining room table with him—but there were times when Uncle Duane *moved in*. Remained, for about thirty-seven *years!* So where could he—Teddy—*go?*

Idea One was Grandma Bobby, Niles's mother, but the folks so rarely went to her place that Teddy didn't know if it was east, west, north, or south of there. Cass lived with Teddy's aunt in the town where Evelyn and Duane had come from, and it might as well be on Mars. Some guy named Jackie who copied Teddy's papers in English—tried to—had spoken once to him, but where Jackie lived was a total blank. Running away was *hard*. Niles worked for a friend of his called Doc, but he couldn't remember Doc's last name and, he realized suddenly, he didn't know *anybody's* last names except for family members', his teachers'—and President Roosevelt's.

If Duane just didn't "stop by" the way he did, if only Dear'd known he was coming, Teddy could have gotten out of school early. He'd done that a lot already for many reasons tied to his Dear's activities. Had he gotten his regular ride home, he could be hiding in his room right now and avoiding most of Uncle Duane's visit!

He saw Dear rise, go out to the kitchen, prob'ly to check the time. Obviously she was getting worried about him, and good boys didn't make their mothers worry. He'd just have to go in in another second . . .

But it was sure different, sort of *great*, staring through the window, unseen, at she who was a kind of goddess to him, and not have to hear her. She and, of all people, Duane, seemed now to have been stricken mute, and the loss of their unveeringly severe commentary on life, death, the Almighty, and all beings on earth was fascinating; uncanny. Although the redhaired uncle was not always present, he could be counted on to make up for the irregularity both with volume and vast range. His harangue of people and institutions he violently detested for thwarting his aspirations might have been somewhat narrow of topic, but it was vast and all-consuming where the number of characters were concerned. Up close, to a boy who knew few people and rarely heard other sides to stories, his uncle was nearly as intimidating, imposing, and awe-inspiring as his Dear—

But out here where their lips could be seen to move yet the famous Mengaltdt wit, the dominance of personality, the readiness of short, sharp response couldn't be *personally* experienced . . .

Teddy went straight to the front door and tried it before he verged so perilously near to filial blas-

phemy that God would hear and punish him, maybe through Dear. He found the door unlocked and went inside, then paused. Behind him, he saw when he turned—down the paved drive to the distant street—a mammoth Packard was easing past as silently as a dinosaur without peer or fear.

He had told Grandpa Hivereve, Niles's father, that someday he would buy him and Niles "a new car just like that." The two men had been vocally admiring the sleek but solid lines of the Packard when Teddy had spoken. Grandpa was a nice, jolly man from Teddy's view if not Dear's, and he'd thrown his big head back to laugh just as big, then bestowed a giant bear hug on his grandson.

How could he buy Packards for everybody he liked if they were going to just go on dying or getting pushed out of the family? It was hard not to resent death, and other things, when such unhappiness went on all the time.

3

"Niles, I'll tell you what I'm going to do," Lou Tilton said slowly. Looking across his desk at his younger relative, he spoke even more measuredly than usual, then paused and smoothed down his silvery hair. Like his second cousin, he had quiet and even ways, a luxurious thicket of hair that grew straight back, and a disinclination toward harming a soul.

But he had one thing Niles didn't have and lacked something Niles had: nine more years at Picturesque Paint, and his cousin's patient understanding.

"I'm not going to give you a leave of absence nor

any promise that we won't get another tinter. I *am* going to tell you," Lou continued quickly, "that we'll re-hire you if your sales job doesn't pan out, and probably progress you pretty quickly through the ranks because of your experience—and I'm going to give you some advice that you don't want to hear."

Niles uncrossed his legs, prepared to stand and leave. He'd given everything he had to this paint company, he hadn't gotten any of the raises Lou'd told him he could expect if he learned the job, and he was getting pissed. The fear of being entirely his own boss and depending on commissions for a living would come later. "You think I should stay here and tell Doc to go to hell. Right?"

Lou started to make the most direct of answers, thought better of it. "That isn't whom I think you should tell to go to hell, Niles," he said, offering his familiar family smile. "My advice is for you to dump that white elephant you moved into with Evvie and Teddy while you still can. That's not your kind of house, Niles. Maybe it's not the house of anyone we know—or anybody still alive."

Niles stood. "Shall I finish out the week?" he asked.

"I meant what I said, cousin," Lou murmured. He rose too, extended his hand. "And even if you can keep the place"—he stopped when Niles's hand clasped his, rephrased his remark—"what are you going to have, really, then?" The younger man pulled his hand away. "No; go home, go sell plastic body parts—or go somewhere other than home and think over what I've said. I'll have 'em send you your check for a full week on Friday."

"That's white of you, Lou," Niles grunted.

Lou chuckled quietly. "Look at your hat, your clothes. White's just about the only color we don't have a lot of around here." He sat down. "White's for elephants."

Niles had little to clean out of his shared office except for some pictures of his wife, son, his mother Bobby, and his late father. Bobby, who'd taught him not to lie "unless there's a good point to it, Nilesette"—her occasional name for him—"such as sparing someone's feelings." Which didn't help much when it came down to deciding whether to tell Evvie the truth now: that it was only today when he'd quit Picturesque. That his sales position with Doc Greene was a straight commission job. If he didn't square it with her, how was he going to explain it when a couple of weeks passed and, if he hadn't begun selling right off the bat, there was no money coming in?

On the other hand, if he *did* tell her the belated truth—what would happen? Like Teddy, she wasn't strong. Could she handle it?

And if she did, would she kill him or, worse, leave him?

Hands shaking, he said goodbye to his pals Miller and Cope, went to the time clock, and juggled the things from the office he was taking home.

One fact was certain as he crammed the card into the machine and heard the little bell chime.

He'd never be sorry that this was the last time he'd have to punch in or out!

his uncle's state of sobriety before he himself was observed, Teddy went through the foyer, tiptoeing on the tile. A single photograph hung there, on a wall, where people entering Draden House could see it.

The picture, ornately framed, caught a somber mood on the skin-and-bones face of E. H. Mengaldt, attorney-at-law, Dear's and Duane's father, the grandfather Teddy had seen maybe ten times before Grandpa was murdered for the case fee he had in his wallet. Everything about the face, Teddy knew from staring at it a lot, was almost. The hair was almost snowy white and almost sparse but there were no balding areas. The forehead was almost high and distinguished, the nose was almost long and aquiline, the mouth was almost a straight line except the camera appeared to have trapped it just as the thin lips were beginning to open—and swear, probably, since Teddy had heard this grandpa's voice on the telephone more often than he'd seen the face, and he usually was cussing someone out. (Usually a Hiverve.)

One photographed hand was almost in a vest pocket—possibly holding in the gold watch that had disappeared (*maybe the killer took it!*)—and the other gripped a book that looked very old. After moving to Draden House, Teddy'd stood on tiptoe once before, not for silence but to read the name of his grandpa's book. *Constitutional Law*, that was the title. Grandpa had almost been the attorney general of the state, even its governor, Dear said, which was why the police had never been willing to believe her assertion or Grandma's—from whom E.H. Mengaldt was separated for the last decade of each of their lives—that the great attorney had been killed. True, the crumpled body that was found lying at the

foot of the steps — which led, in that ancient narrow structure, only to E.H.'s office! — still had a wallet in the pocket. Dear, however, had found no problem in deducing the truth about her father's demise: First, he'd been paid a great deal of money by his client less than an hour earlier but hadn't gone to his bank; second, his wallet was discovered in a pocket *other than* the one where he always kept it, and the eleven or twelve dollars in cash had been left to throw detectives off the scent; and third, Dear had never been able to find a trace of the whiskey bottle (or its contents) which police claimed were seen within yards of the body. It was a put-up job all the way!

E.H.'s eyes, restlessly shrewd, dreamy too, were lighter of hue than Dear's (Teddy knew) but they were also almost the same shape, the lids marginally lowered over them. They'd been photographed when Grandpa rolled them to one side. From just the exact angle in the foyer, they could watch you wherever you went.

The cathedral front room was carpeted, so it was possible for Teddy to move all the way through it and reach the dining room entrance unheard. There he paused, next to a wall decoration with the fading prayer GOD BLESS OUR HAPPY HOME. A miniature American flag with the forty-eight states was stuck in the corner of the ten-cent-store frame.

Duane saw his nephew almost immediately but said nothing. The cigarette stub pressed to his lips was held by a fairly steady, reddishly haired hand, Teddy noticed, relieved. Today — often these days — Duane appeared frozen in a time machine that didn't do its job very well. Beyond youth but also before age for a while longer, the uncle had massive hands for his av-

erage height. So long as he was allowed to stare directly into someone else's eyes, his blue ones could have been chipped from White River ice. Moving, the eyes had a tendency to swim as if one's own had fallen from focus, and the brazen Mengaltd grin he hid behind his wide palm and the omnipresent Camel turned as indecisive but ultimately determinable as ice melting. Niles's shirt, which Duane wore these days, was taut across his belly; he didn't wear an undershirt, like Niles did. He'd been called "Red" since boyhood by everybody but members of his original and marital families, and the reason for the nickname remained clear when the light was just so.

Duane summoned a glow to his eyes, a basically fond smirk to his lips, took his crutch, and rapped it once on the dining room floor. "The little SOB himself is home." Maybe the crutch rap was like a judge using a gavel, if Uncle Duane had ever seen his daddy in a court room. "Hello, little SOB."

"Well, I like *that*," Dear said to him, playfully reproving. "Your sister is *not* a bitch."

"All verdicts are final but subject to appeal," Duane growled. He took the butt of his cigarette from between his lips, astonishingly did not grind it out, used that hand to motion to Teddy. "Don't stand on ceremony, Teddy. You may approach."

All the Sad Young Men, the boy remembered — F. Scott Fitzgerald. Niles had a copy of that book, there had been a photograph of the writer on the back cover, and Uncle Duane had similarly regular features, something similar way back behind the eyes. Even the hairline was familiar. The main difference Teddy could see between the two men whom he'd heard described as handsome was that his uncle's

nose had been repeatedly broken. Duane liked saying that "the other guy" looked a lot worse but Dear sometimes said the police had broken it when Uncle Duane, unwilling to leave this bar or that, had resisted arrest. Other times she said his nose had been broken when he was a star basketball player at Tech High.

"Hi," Teddy said. Tentatively, he went to his uncle, hoping no handshake would be required of him. Uncle Duane's was a crusher when he was drinking—or maybe powerful handshakes ran in the family, since Duane didn't play piano. "When did you get here?"

"About forty years ago, give or take a couple of years." He ran his free hand through an auburn, autumn remnant. "Or a damn century."

"You look pale," Dear said. She nearly knocked her coffee cup off the dining table as she curled her body round so she could rest a warm hand on his forehead. "You didn't take that coat off, did you? I'm sorry no one came to pick you up, but I thought Niles would be home in time from his sales rounds to get you." She aimed a kiss at his mouth, got mostly nose. "It's just like that no good father of yours to be incapable of filling in on the one day in the year when my family is visiting."

"I thought Aunt May-May was family," Teddy said idly. "Where'd she go, anyway?"

"Would you believe it, her precious Jim-mee came for her and took her back to that awful home? If your father earned enough money, you can stake your life on it that *I'd* take care of her, poor thing—remember how your grandmother spent the rest of her years with us. Well"—she looked bright and relieved and

happy—"at least you don't have a temperature."

Uncle Duane was grinning at him, a new Camel burning between fingers—the index and middle—that always looked to Teddy like they'd been bronzed. "That was a pretty good crack. Maybe you have some Mengaldt in you after all." His jaw had a persistent stubble as if he had tried to grow a beard, or the whiskers were as tough as the rest of him, but it was enamel white. With his reddish hair and brows, he was as two-toned as a car.

"God, I *hope* he does," Dear breathed. Her big eyes sought Teddy to the right of where she sat at the table. "Well, you're certainly going to stay here with us the rest of the afternoon and behave like a *civilized* child, maybe even learn something." She laughed, hugged him. "At least I can keep you away from those awful comic books Niles keeps letting you buy—and that goddamn shitty river! Duane, you wouldn't *believe* the way he and his father are drawn to that cesspool!"

"I got some homework," Teddy tried. He did, but it wasn't what he had in mind doing.

"You can take off your jacket and tie now, darling," she said. Loving smile changed to a frown. "Dear God, do I have to do everything for *evvverybody*?" Her arms shot out, her fingers found his zipper, and she was yanking the coat down his arms. "Go on now, Teddy—hang it in the closet."

He did, hastily getting out of his tie before she chose to unknot it, then returned dutifully to the dining room. His mind spun, turned over the things he'd heard like the shiny, inexplicable pieces of a kaleidoscope. She'd *known*, somehow, that he had taken his jacket off. He did feel pale. He knew for a fact Niles

hadn't been expected home earlier than usual, and that he'd rarely stepped into the backyard without one of his folks accompanying him, so he *wasn't* "drawn" to the river—or was he? And what Uncle Duane had meant about his making a "crack," at *Dear*, he had no idea.

Unobtrusive as a ghost without enough ectoplasm, he slipped to the end of the table, and Niles's meal-time chair, and perched on it.

"I don't know why you don't have more respect for the family name," *Dear* was saying. "Daddy could have been governor of this state, possibly a vice-presidential candidate, if he hadn't been struck down. And Mom used to correspond with that famous woman who took the journey to Tibet. What was her name?"

"She had three of them," Duane said. "Alexandra David-Neal. It's a wonder Mom could stand up, let alone write letters to that crackpot, after E.H. had used her for a punching bag."

"You're still mad at Dad because he punished you for smoking."

"Punished?" Uncle Duane's expression was admiring. "He damn near crippled me. I played against Washington High that night anyway. Came off the bench for the two winning free throws."

Teddy quietly refilled their coffee cups. His *Dear* was so busy talking that he reached for the sugar bowl and, exercising great care, put in her four spoonsful so she wouldn't have to bother. Teddy guessed he knew almost everything about his mother. Her favorite color was blue, she'd nearly had a chance to sit in with Benny Goodman when Teddy Wilson was sick, she knew Franklin D. Roosevelt was

syphilitic (whatever that was) so he knew, too, her sizes in clothes (except for her underwear), how she liked the Widder Brown's Dr. Anthony Loring and didn't like Grandma Bobby or Niles's other relatives, that she thought it was awful people needed a day set aside for mothers when mothers should be honored a lot more often than that.

"Well, Mom shared all her letters from Alexandra with me, everything she discovered about magic in Tibet including *tulpas*, and those letters confirmed everything I'd learned on my own about both spirits and the powers of the mind."

Duane was looking at Teddy. Resting the current Camel in the overflowing ashtray between his sister and him on the table, Duane's hand trembled. "Leave my coffee black."

"You know, I was always certain our Mother had many untapped psychic powers," Dear noted, watching Teddy pour. "But she was a Job's daughter and I don't believe Masons care very much for occult studies."

"It's all bullshit anyway," Duane mumbled as he took a noisy sip.

"Remember when the lightning struck Mom's glasses and just ran *allll* the way around without hurting her eyes? I think that was an omen—a reminder of God's power, since He *could* have gone on through the lenses."

"I remember you and Mom talking about it," the brother grunted. "It's all water over the dam anyway. Water over the dam."

Dear was so animated, so *pretty*, when she was discussing her dead family members. He had the nicest, prettiest mother in the world. He wished he could say

how bad he felt about getting born and ruining her career. He hadn't *meant* to.

"Duane," Dear said real quietly, like there was a lot more to say, "do you remember what Mom told us about Alexandra, and—the hat?"

"Sure." He made a show of poking inside his cigarette package, like there might be a little teeny Camel in it, then crumpled the empty pack. That meant he would go get another package out of his overcoat pocket and drink some whiskey from the bottle he'd have in the coat. Dear and Niles never seemed to catch on to that trick. Duane started to get up on his crutch. "But it was all bullshit."

Dear got real red and her eyes just sparkled. Duane had said the *b*-word so clearly then taht she couldn't let it go. Teddy thought she would really blow up that time; instead, she reached over the table and hit her brother in the arm as hard as she could. Smiling, eyes twinkling, like Joan Bennett in that movie *Private Lives*. "Bastard! You just say things like that to get my goat."

"Goats are all right. They say '*Baaa.*'" Uncle Duane's head snapped erect. "May I please go get more smokes out of my coat?"

It was getting interesting now! Prob'ly Uncle Duane wanted to rub his arm where Dear'd hit him, too.

"You stay just where you are," Dear said, mock-commandingly. She was wearing her gold-colored lounging robe—Mary Astor had one like it—and her small hands stuck out of the voluminously fluffing sleeves like the ghosts of doves. "Say whatever you must, Duane, but weird things are in our blood. Do you *hear* me? Weird things—"

"I couldn't argue a point like that, sis." He braced his hands on the rubber grip of his crutch, the knuckles white, launched himself erect. "Except that the only goddamn thing in my blood except blood is alcohol." He turned his grim face to peer down at her. "What the hell was that you said about 'tulpas'?"

"Duane, they're all part of Alexandra's story about the hat, you said you remembered!" She patted the table between them, pointed to her own pack of cigarettes. "Smoke mine. Niles can go get more if we run out."

He paused, glowered at his nephew, dropped back into his chair. "I do remember that somebody's hat blew off on a mountain pass. In Tibet."

"And the hat came down in a valley. Well, really surprising Mom's friend Alexandra, not a one of the village people would even approach it."

Duane wormed a cigarette from her pack, lit it. "I remember. They thought it might be some sort of animal or bird. Because they believed the hat was under some kind of . . . spell." He tapped ash into the tray, hard. "I told you I remembered it, damn it!"

"That isn't all, Duane." Dear's glance brought Teddy into their inner circle or would have if he hadn't already been listening intently. "In Tibetan magic, Alexandra found, their beliefs are so powerful that they feel they're able to *prove* the hat is alive—because they can make it move all by itself!"

"That's the part, the one that makes me feel like puking." Duane gave the floor a resounding thump with his crutch. "The *bullshit* part. It's why I forgot about it!"

"That's not the reason, you stubborn bastard," Dear declared. She paused before going on, building

up for it. "You forgot because it *scares* you, Duane — it scares you half to death!"

It was Uncle Duane's turn to get red in the face, and he did a fine job of it. He was very frightening like that, his temples got pink and veiny, his mouth turned white, his whole head came up till he seemed to grow bigger and his bristly jaw stuck out around a foot. Dear's courage was wonderful, astonishing. She faced him down and then — all at once — he was rubbing his chin and chuckling. "Mebbe so," he said.

"Alexandra *saw* the hat moved by the power of their minds, and what they believed." She did not seem mollified. "But even *she* did not realize how much magic they possessed until . . . the *tulpa*."

Now the story they were telling began to sound distantly familiar at the same time that one corner of Teddy's mind realized that it got a lot scarier now. Maybe you didn't exactly remember everything, he saw; maybe you blanked out some of the spooky parts so your mind wouldn't make nightmares that were even worse than they were.

Still, he could not have risen and gone to his room to read comics or listen to the radio at that moment if he had had permission to go.

"The tulpa was a person, Duane." Dear spoke in her most even tone of voice. "The Tibetans utilized the same force of their minds they'd used to move the hat in order to *make . . . a person*."

Teddy shivered. Duane stared back into Dear's solemn eyes until it was as if they were attempting to hypnotize each other.

"They began by picturing someone they intended to create," she explained, "and they had to gather together many times before he started to become clear.

They knew how old they wanted him to be, how tall, what he should look like—and gradually, sitting together in a cave, all by themselves—little by little—those wise old Tibetans saw him in their midst. Saw him *come into being*, take *form* . . . and walk in their midst.”

“I guess I was wrong,” Duane said simply, nodding his head. Then he added, changing the kind of tension that hovered over the dining table but not banishing it, “*That’s the bullshit part*. Either they were all drunk as skunks, crazy as loons, or—or Alexandra Whatever made the whole goddamn thing up!”

“They were not,” Dear argued. “She didn’t!”

“Well, then,” Uncle Duane said as he centered his feet in preparation to rise, “*you made it up*.”

Till then, it could have been all right. A thread of brotherly and sisterly affection had gone back and forth between mother and uncle, and while they had disagreed, Duane’s joking older-brother prods of humor had served to balance out Teddy’s mother’s stark earnestness.

Now, though, there was another current. Something was going to happen.

“You pusillanimous little son of a bitch,” Dear breathed, “*I do not lie*. Admit it!”

“I’ve heard you tell some tall ones, Evelyn,” Duane answered, limping a step toward Teddy and the end of the table—toward freedom.

“I’m the most honest human being in the world, Duane Mengaltdt! The women in our family never *have to lie*.” She threw out her arm, caught Teddy by the hand. “And my precious son is just like me! We could do what Alexandra did if we wanted to! We have the belief, the faith.”

"Dear's right, Uncle Duane," Teddy said. His fingers and forearm ached from his Dear's tight clutch. "She would never tell a lie."

"*Because . . .*" Dear squeezed harder, cuing him.

"Because mothers never lie," Teddy said.

"Bull," Uncle Duane said, stopping beside Teddy.

"'And I'll always believe,'" Dear began.

"'I'll always believe . . .'" he said, waiting.

"'Everything my Dear tells me,'" she finished.

"'Everything my Dear tells me,'" Teddy said, nodding firmly.

"Prove it," Duane said.

Dear craned her neck to her standing sibling. "What was that?"

"Prove it, I said," Uncle Duane repeated. He seemed now to be sculpted to his standing position. He had one palm encircling most of Teddy's neck from behind, but he wasn't squeezing. His hand was rough yet warm. His face was no longer in Teddy's line of sight. "Prove to me—to this kid, to God—you can work magic. You don't have to manufacture any weird people, all I want is a little demonstration of your power, baby sister." The fingers tensed, not painfully. "See, I keep hearing only the bullshit parts so I'm afraid this court must instruct the jury"—the fingers almost hurt—"to stay out on the questions of whether or not you can, *ipso facto*, make *anything* real."

The expression on Dear's face was so different from all those Teddy'd seen up until then that, finding most of it unreadable, he squeezed his eyelids together. The elements of her expression he was able to read were terrifying.

"That my own brother would do this to his only sis-

ter," Dear said, "is the worst act of betrayal I have ever seen and heard. In front of her only child!"

"I'm not much for telling the truth myself," Duane muttered. "I just don't make anything big out of it."

"*Stop!*" Dear screamed. He had let go of Teddy and was limping toward the front room, but that tone of her voice must have been one even Uncle Duane had never heard before. "Right before E.H. died, I smelled flowers. You remember it whether you'll admit the truth or not. Days before Niles's cousin Rod expired and again with our own Uncle Ned, I smelled them again. You can't deny it, Duane."

Teddy was able to see his uncle now, almost at the same instant he saw his beautiful, passionate mother. Somewhere in the house the theme music of "Young Widder Brown" was playing, the program going off the air. Every other inch of Draden House was devoid of sound but, to Teddy, the earth seemed to breathe, to groan, under the soles of his feet.

"Unfailingly, Duane—*unfailingly*—I receive the scent of flowers just in advance of a loved one's death. At the least, that proves the power I have to know of death's approach; the magic."

Duane stared somewhere between mother and son but did not deny what she was saying.

"Immediately before Mom, our beloved mother, perished from this earth . . . I was blessed to inhale the purest, sweetest, flowery perfume I've ever smelled. And I *told* you that, Duane. I told you about it."

"*Dear,*" Teddy whispered. He meant, *Please don't go on.*

She raised her head. Chandelier light hollowed her soft cheeks, hallowed them for Teddy. Her large eyes

were more intensely focused than he'd ever seen them but, that instant, they did not seem to be looking anywhere in particular. "For more than one week — to my immense regret — a steady emanation has hung in the darker spaces of Draden House. A fragrance whose scent is, unmistakably that of . . . flowers."

She turned the total candlelight of her eyes upon her son, flinging out her hands to steady herself on the dining room table, and Uncle Duane's crutch — dropping from his hands because of shock — clattered to the floor.

"Someone in this family," Dear said, "is going to *die*."

Chapter Five

1

When the first faint sounds of the front door opening reached his ears, Teddy scrambled to his feet and ran through the living room into the foyer. Without pause, he jumped into the arms of the medium-sized man who was entering the house.

"Niles," he said breathily, not in amazement but excitedly and on a forlorn note, "Dear said somebody in the family is going to die!"

"You're getting pretty big for this stuff," Niles said with a grin. He hugged Teddy, set him back down on his feet. Hoping the boy wouldn't follow up on his comment at all, he rested a hefty leather sample case on the credenza, tried the catch. "Stay out of the bag, okay?" he said, rumpling Teddy's hair.

"Sure. Those are your samples of Doc's stuff, for your new job, right?" He observed Niles's movements closely. He hadn't tossed him up to the ceiling in a long time and it had just occurred to Teddy that he liked that. And the hug. "Dear really did say that. Right before you got home."

"I believe you." Niles unknotted his tie, rolled it up in his hands as he mused. "The funny thing is that neither of us is *really* surprised to hear such a thing." He turned toward the living room.

"Uncle Duane heard her say it."

Niles halted within a pace of the place where the carpeting began, his back a mountain to his son. "How in the world could I forget he was coming—even on a crummy day like this?"

"You knew he'd be here?" Teddy was surprised. "Dear said he—"

"How is he?" Niles asked without turning.

"He's okay, I think. Dear wouldn't let him go get on his coat."

"Thank God for small favors." Niles looked over his shoulder, smiled. The buzz of conversation from the dining room had completely stopped and Evvie was banging away with pots in the kitchen, starting dinner. "Ted, your mother is a very good woman but she's not God. I wouldn't be so scared by the things she says if I were you."

"Okay," Teddy said, bobbing his chin. But since Niles wasn't him, maybe it was all right if both of them were scared just a little.

He followed Niles through the front room to the dining room, wondered where Uncle Duane went. Then they saw him sprawled on the old couch Dear and Niles put there for just such visits. His arms and legs were strewn in all directions, his head back; Teddy thought of cartoon scarecrows.

But Duane's icy eyes weren't closed but slitted. And when Niles passed through into the kitchen to tell Evelyn hi, Uncle Duane's gaze followed him with neither man having said a word. Those blue eyes of his

looked strange, like there was no kinship whatever in the following gaze. Neither of family tie nor a mutual attachment to the human race. Oddly, Teddy noticed, there was no anger or hostility either.

They were like the eyes of catfish that Niles said swam in the river at the back of their lot.

Teddy decided to wait for the evening meal in his room. Some kind of trouble seemed to be brewing and he was still tired from his walk home. Too tired to face another argument without getting to spend a little time alone.

Way back when he was just a little kid, Teddy had found it hard to remain by himself in his room for long. Even if night hadn't come yet, it was boring and he hadn't known how to pass the time. Now, being alone was usually okay and Teddy was getting pretty used to it. In addition to stuff on the radio and his drawing, he could reread his Tarzan books and he'd become a great fan of comics and acquired a lot in just the last year. Dear hated them and not just 'cause he left them lying all over his bedroom. That was hard to figure out since she sort of wanted him to be a cartoonist and having comics around gave him lots to practice drawing. On the other hand, Niles sometimes gave him an extra dime allowance to buy a comic and had several times brought some home from Picturesque. Dear said they were "trashy."

Later tonight, "Baby Snooks" would be on. Teddy had memorized just the way Fanny Brice said "Daaaaaddy," but he didn't imitate her out loud. His voice hadn't changed yet and he sounded just like Snooks. Abbott and Costello were on later too, but this was now. He sighed when he realized his bed was practically hidden by comics, and since he was "tak-

ing five" like musicians did, he stretched out on the floor to look at that morning's funnies.

Dagwood and Blondie's son, Baby Dumpling, was prob'ly four or five years old by now and still couldn't walk. Maybe he had polio. Alley Oop and Moon Mullins were strips he liked; alone in his room, Teddy made a quick inspection of one arm to see if he was yet developing forearms like Oop, the prehistoric man. He enjoyed Snuffy Smith, a hillbilly, but not Barney Google, and also Mutt & Jeff.

He lowered his head in a sudden search for Popeye. He knew all the characters from Poopdeck Pappy, Popeye's daddy, to his girlfriend, Olive Oyl, and her baby brother, Castor, and he could copy all of them exactly the way they were drawn. But his real favorites in Popeye were a bizarre, lumpish entity known as Alice the Goon and Popeye's fat friend, Wimpy. Alice the Goon was sort of scary (so he didn't know why he liked her) while Wimpy . . . well, the character who would give his life for a hamburger caused problems for Teddy.

Niles's pals down at Picturesque Paint called him "Wimp" when they came to the house and Teddy didn't know why. Maybe it was because both of them had mustaches.

Tensing muscles in his thumb, index, and middle fingers as though trying to sketch untried characters even then, Teddy checked out dark-haired Ella Cinders, Dixie Dugan—there were a *lot* of girls in comic strips—and Tillie the Toiler; he moved on to Toots & Casper; then finished his reading with boxing champion Joe Palooka. Boyish, blond Joe had a punch but Teddy was sure the Brown Bomber, Joe Louis, could lick him any day of the week and twice on Sundays.

Wimpy and Niles, the Joes Louis and Palooka—it could be hard telling the differences between what was real and what wasn't. (Dear had said someone in the family would die soon. She said everything with her big eyes as well as with her voice and mothers didn't lie but she hadn't said *how* soon. Or who . . .)

Teddy squirmed into a sitting position and pushed back the funny papers. Black splotches began and grew longer across the bedroom floor. Somebody had left the closet door open a crack. Teddy swallowed. Things wouldn't try to get out till it was good and dark, but supptime was when they liked telling you they weren't gone, and hadn't forgotten you. He heard Niles telling Dear downstairs that he hadn't meant to lie when she thought he was already working for Doc, he hadn't wanted to worry her until it was essential to know they wouldn't have much income for a while. Teddy could make out what they said 'cause Niles was repeating himself due to Dear shouting of being weary of goddamn liars. And when the folks said "income" instead of *money*, it was real serious. Dear said she supposed Niles "expected her" to play piano "just for the pursuit of filthy lucre," and "pull Niles's chestnuts out of the fire." Teddy hugged his arms around his bony knees, rocked back on his bottom, and grinned. "Chestnuts" made him think of cousin Cass when she sang for him, and hit high notes.

The part of the shadow in the room that was strangely pale stirred. *Someone was going to—*

Teddy leapt up, ignored the fissure of darkness within the closet, and looked searchingly down: at the vivid comics covering his bed. The windows where curtains lay motionless against the sealed

panes. The hand-me-down dresser on which sat his dozen or so real books, clamped by angel bookends that had been his grandma's. Peered from the silenced radio to the bedroom door to the partly-crumpled funnies at his feet.

Olive Oyl's little brother suddenly and inexplicably had his face, minus glasses.

And he wouldn't have told anyone in the world whose face—that second—was on the lumpy body of Alice the Goon.

"Does anyone in the vicinity have the price of a hamburger?" plump Wimpy pleaded with the Popeye who momentarily possessed the face of Teddy's Uncle Duane.

2

After a meal that was amazingly quiet and outwardly peaceful—more like it usually was when Aunt May-May ate with them—Dear looked at the others sitting around the table and said simply, "I think all of us could use some music to help us digest dinner."

That and Dear's quiet voice were surprises. Often when a meal was eaten peaceably till the very end of it, Teddy managed somehow to do something terrible—like Dear discovering peas tucked under the rim of his plate—or Niles would say some thing casual, and the underlying tension was brought into the open. It had occurred a few times to Teddy that even if he got nervous or sick to his stomach during his folks' usual quarrels at the table, there was a sort-of relief when the tension was broken. He stood in readiness to follow Dear to the front room and wondered

if his father and mother had made up so quietly that he'd missed that part of their conversation.

Dear'd said all of them could use music — which referred to her playing the piano while the rest of them listened — but that hadn't included Niles. His job now was to put the dishes down to soak in the sink, and it was his invariable task.

But he caught Teddy's elbow right before he went out to the kitchen and whispered urgently, "I'll come fetch you in a little while." He unfolded a fresh dishcloth, a big secretive expression on his face. "I've got something I want to . . . well, show you."

Teddy nodded but didn't answer. He knew Dear was already sitting with polished poise on the shiny bench before her Steinway, running her fingers over the keys in rippling, melodic preparation for entertaining them. Uncle Duane, Teddy noticed as he entered the big room, had taken Dear's chair, the chair she sat in whenever she wanted to sit up but not play the piano. When Teddy gave him a panicky stare and faint shake of his head, Uncle Duane belched loudly.

"Sounding your A, Duane?" Dear asked without turning.

Teddy sprawled on the sofa, giggling and resting the point of his chin on his laced fingers.

"Mengaldts don't need much warming up," Uncle Duane growled. He folded his hands across his belly, rested his feet on a hassock. As an afterthought, he reached down to remove his shiny shoes — Duane was a shoe salesman and however old his shoes happened to be, they sparkled — and let them fall to the floor. He sat back again with a contented, proprietorial smirk. "What about 'Shanty in Old Shanty Town'?"

Teddy put his face in his hands. His redhaired uncle

loved to sing the special Johnny Long lyric. He liked saying his daughter Cass got her singing talent from him but Teddy knew that wasn't true. Uncle Duane sang like a happy dog barking. True, Dear was his sister, she seemed to love him and that meant he had some talent; Teddy just didn't think it was in music.

But Dear played the first few bars of the tune her brother liked—exactly like Johnny had recorded it—then stopped just before the chorus. Her hands rose from the keys. Duane had begun clearing his throat, but Dear had a glint of inspiration in her eyes now. "I know!" she cried, just as though she had never had such an idea before. "All of us love the good old songs!"

Duane glanced her way but Dear began playing a medley of songs her mother had adored. From what Grandma used to call the Gay Nineties. Teddy liked them too but hadn't ever figured out why they were called the *gay* nineties. The first song Dear played was "After the Ball," one of the saddest melodies he'd ever listened to. Then she segued into "When You Were Sweet Sixteen," which also made Teddy feel a little like crying; he heard his mother and her brother humming.

He might have been listening to the radio that evening if the mood to entertain hadn't swept over Dear. He still hoped to catch Abbott and Costello, though thinking about them then prob'ly wasn't very loyal. "I'm a *baaaaad* boy," Teddy thought, echoing the rotund Costello. Of course, he could hear the radio anytime; this was a professional performance he was getting from his Dear, and it was free! He concentrated on both hearing and watching his mother, tried to hum along. Her touch was lighter than air;

true; never hesitant but sure as — Niles's term leapt to mind — "death and taxes." Dear prob'ly would've been on the radio herself, if he hadn't been —

A measure of spring sunstream, the last of the day, pierced the high, churchlike glazed windows and dappled the carpeting. Teddy saw it lie like caressing fingers on his Dear's fair forehead and stroke her rouged cheek. She was so pretty when she was happy; when she entertained people. Her hair, in profile, seemed to be puffs of rich dark cotton both at the temples and where it clustered on the nape of her erect neck. Her customarily bare feet were crowded into fuzzy slippers — blue, her color — and her gifted piano playing evoked hazy images of worlds Teddy could only imagine. She was a fairy princess, or Queen Ozma. Who needed a bunch of silly radio programs when he had Dear and when *he* was the most important thing in her —

Niles coughed out in the kitchen. Water from a faucet gushed, flooded the kitchen sink. What was it Niles wanted to show him?

Now Evelyn Mengaldt Hivereve switched rhythms with the suddenness of spring lightning. Her segue was perfection, Teddy — experienced fan — knew. She came up from the Nineties to a crisply orchestrated music he knew was called Ragtime, dabbled with alterations of beat including a brilliantly improvised venture into classical styling, and abruptly went to jazz — Dear's own favorite.

The effect, though half-expected, was stunning. Teddy, even Uncle Duane, clapped their hands with pleasure. Rolling her eyes, Dear appeared not just to fly at will over the make-believe limits of time but to change sex, to change her skin color. The saints came

marching in almost as if a fine black trumpeter led them into the cathedral room, even as the sense of jubilation modulated to the mournful "St. James Infirmary," ending with Dear's growly enunciation of the tune's closing line, " 'So cold, so white, so bare.' "

If he *hadn't* been born. It did no good to realize he hadn't *asked* to be (or couldn't remember it), it had happened. He was *there*. On a cusp in his mind between those things he had known and those he'd been told, images like real memories twisted, took a certain shape and form. He thought he was actually seeing a young girl called Evelyn, arduously picking out song after song on her mom's old upright while she tried to hide and never hear a ranting drunken father whose brilliance she worshiped, whose brutality to Evelyn's young mom demanded that the girl Evvie choose between them. Between vile curses and taunts couched in legal terms but crudely, incisively witty and a brave kindness that dared to whisper to the girl in the late night of God, His goodness, and an adventurous companion named Alexandra. So the Evelyns merged as she struggled for a measure of mature independence in a world of making music for the people; for others whom she might glimpse only through a footlight, limelight, inspiration.

So finding talent, one's own talent, was the main thing, maybe the only thing there was. Except God, all relatives always, and the borderland between memory and the bleak, black Thing. Eyes hooded, Teddy stared, studying everything there was, embodied in the nearly completed Evelyn he called Dear. Night shadows circled the big room at a rate so rapid only Teddy and his Dear could see the bleak, black thing, but it was to be ignored, Teddy realized then,

observed only when one was ready for it. You outraced it with your talent, with imagination. Or it won everything that was. Dear's hands darted, raised, slowed, became mercurial doves lifted into the air by vivid sound and dark idea. She reminded Teddy (in an aside) that a Hoosier like them had written "Star-dust" even as her fingers stroked the keys with aching melancholy, reaching envy, and love. She was Satch, Fats, Teddy Wilson, Art Tatum — she was —

"*Teddy*," Niles said in his ear, and it was *his* name. Not Wilson's now.

Finding his father stooped to him, face and mustache gray in the gloom of the dining room behind Niles, Teddy started, asked "What?"

"C'mere a second," Niles said as near to Teddy's ear as possible.

"*Silence!*" The peremptory tone of the female voice was not accompanied by a turn of the head but Dear's eyes flashed as they turned their heads toward her. Fingers moved tirelessly, errorlessly prodding ivory like a hunter who wants all the elephant he can get. This was Evelyn Mengaldt improvising at the keyboard, "winging it," drawing melody from her mind and shooting it through her small feminine form to those strong and restless fingers.

Fearful of departing, Teddy peered into his father's eyes. Niles nodded, wiggled his own fingers to follow him.

By the time Teddy and Niles had melted into the hallway leading to the basement steps from the kitchen and Niles was preceding Teddy through the open door, flipping on a light switch as he went, the musician in the living room seemed oblivious to all but her music. (She was interpreting *Polonaise*, a

word Teddy remembered by rhyming it with mayonnaise. He knew she wasn't reading it from sheet music either. Sometimes that was cheating, like tracing pictures instead of drawing them.)

Once or twice before—always with one of his folks—Teddy had been in the basement. It was as forbidden as the second-floor porch of their old house had been, and mostly for the same reasons: height and rickety steps. But there were also the giant roaches Dear had thought to mention to him, and mice so big they might as well be rats. He'd learned, when he came to in the backyard, not to disobey, even if the other events of the night remained enigma to him. When Niles called, "Well, come on," Teddy was only halfway down the stairs and had to take a quick breath and hold it in order to journey the rest of the way down.

Niles was standing beside his work bench. A naked bulb hanging from a cord that unaccountably twisted and which dangled, in turn, from the wooden ceiling, blinked. About half the bench held canning jars of Dear's, empty as the day Niles had brought them there for her, but he'd reserved a square of space for himself. At his back, filled packing boxes with the scrawled monogram EMH squatted like brown frogs on the floor.

And something else which Niles had kept directly behind him until then. "I made this for you," he told Teddy in as gentle a voice as he'd ever heard, then stepped aside.

Teddy stared through the shadows. When he realized what Niles had made, he whooped with joy and ran to it, breathless. He jumped a foot into the air. "Wow!" His glasses came off but he caught and re-

placed them without thinking about it. "Wow, wow, WOW! Great!"

Niles's smile was almost as wide as Teddy's. "I do believe you approve."

"Oh, gosh, I *do*!" Enraptured, Teddy touched the comic book rack—Niles's height—on every side. Constructed of plywood and three comics wide, nearly four inches deep with each bin, it had a neat band of wood over the pockets. To protect the comics. It was only on his second examination that Teddy noticed an inch-long square beneath each pocket where he could alphabetize and label his treasures. That was his dad's way of getting him to keep the magazines off the floor and out of the way, making both Teddy and Dear happier. "Niles, I just love it."

Niles put his arm around his son's shoulders. "I'm really glad you do."

"Why, you even *sanded* it," Teddy marveled. "And you—"

"I varnished it." Evvie hated it when he tried to teach Teddy things about constructing or repairing objects. "No splinters. Your mom could eat off it."

"But *when*—when did you make it?" Teddy looked up at his father with a new sense of wonder.

Niles thought about that for a moment. "There are times when I can't keep my mind on prosthetics, studying manuals. So," he shrugged, "I came down here. To work on stuff I like." He hugged Teddy briefly, then disengaged their arms. "You'd better hold down those mouse noises or Evvie will be convinced the roaches are eating you! Wanta help me lug this thing up to your room?"

"Yes, I do," Teddy said earnestly. He had a lot of other words he wanted to use but they were rattling

around in his head. Nobody'd ever made anything just for him before, and it was perfect!

"Fine." Niles turned the comic rack sideways, raised it under one arm, but permitted Teddy to grab up the bottom of it. He walked two steps toward the stairs, then paused as he felt Teddy's end dip. "You coming?"

The basement had a potbellied coal furnace, paint and maybe other stains on the floor, corrugated boxes filled with Mengaldt memorabilia, the winking bulb of light, and it was pretty dark down there. But the shadows were all different. It wouldn't be any fun being kept in the basement or anything like that, but it wasn't really a spooky place. There was no evidence Teddy could see of roaches or mice. Or of Things he never wanted to learn about.

"Coming," he said, and assisted Niles up the steps to the kitchen with as much effort as he'd ever put into anything.

In the center of the room, Niles stopped long enough to press an index finger to his lips and incline his head toward the front room cathedral.

3

After flipping on the light switch just inside the door, Teddy threw himself into his work with excitement. Trying to solve the problem of alphabetization to his own satisfaction took longer than he would have expected, and he had to pull all the comics back out of the rack to start anew, but he wasn't sure he had ever enjoyed doing anything else so much.

Should he put "Silly Symphony" under S, or M for

Mouse, Mickey? Did Popeye go under P or T for Thimble Theater? Challenging tasks like that.

He had dialed in Kay Kaiser's Kollege of Musical Knowledge on the radio but Ish Kabibble's dumb jokes couldn't compete with his cataloging, and the pianist with Kay's band wasn't nearly as good as Dear. He was, well, "korny." Dear was never that.

Niles had *made* it for him! *Wow*. No other kid had a dad who'd make him a bookrack for his comics! In the future, if he wanted to practice drawing a certain character, he could just go straight into his ol' room and go get the comic it was in! This was the best of worlds, this was the *great* world, with Dear downstairs playing and happy, Niles doubtlessly sitting with Uncle Duane to listen, and he was by himself doin' what he wanted!

Finished at last, stepping back to evaluate his job, Teddy slapped his hands together with a sense of satisfaction. It'd been a tight squeeze to get 'em all in, but now they looked absolutely beautiful to Teddy and he couldn't remember when he'd been so happy. Even how he'd felt coming home and once at dinner, sick to the stomach, was all right now—which meant he'd prob'ly grunt in the morning and make Dear happy too!

She was playing a hymn while he undressed, one that generally made him want to cry. Tossing his clothes on a chair, unaware he was smiling a lot instead, Teddy padded across the floor to the light switch before he could change his mind. This was a perfect time to get bigger, older—to turn off the lights like a big boy and jump into bed before Things could emerge from the closet and get him. What he needed to do was *not* think about it, think about Dear's mu-

sic instead. "On a hill far away," she sang to her own accompaniment, a sincere though crackly alto, "stands an Old Rugged Cross"—Teddy smacked the light switch down, spun, and ran for it—"the Emblem of suff'ring and shame . . ."

He made it—heart pounding—tugging up the covers and squeezing his eyelids together. Smiling. (But he'd have to take his glasses off before he went to sleep.) *C'mere a second.* Still smiling, he fell soundly asleep.

4

"You unappreciative little son of a bitch!"

He sat up with his limbs jerking, his heart thundering. The lamp in the room was still off but he'd fallen asleep with his glasses on and illumination from the hallway enabled him to find the speaker once he'd adjusted the glasses on his ears.

She was across the bedroom beside the dresser with his regular books lined up on top of it, clad in her golden lounging robe, drumming her fingers nervously—very rapidly—on the tops of three Bobbsey Twins books, a dog-eared copy of *Winnie the Pooh*, three thrilling novels about dogs by Terhune, and his two treasured Tarzan books. Watching her fingertips dance over them as if she were playing the piano mesmerized him, instructed Teddy that she'd been waiting for him to wake up.

But he could also see that his Dear was angry, so he sank back into his pillow and closed his eyes, feigning sleep.

"Oh, you're awake all right!" she said, turning on the light. "You little liar!"

It was silent for part of a second. Then he realized he'd better open his eyes again, in case. He was in time to see her walk, her back partly turned, to the comic rack Niles had built. Still wearing her robe, Dear's hair looked mussed. She froze in front of Teddy's gift and raised both hands to it. Her fingers, Teddy saw, were clawed.

She reached for the closest comic and yanked it out of its assigned pocket.

Teddy gasped in anticipation. The terrible knowing of what was going to happen next twisted his insides into knots.

Dear bent Little Lulu's curl-laden head in two, at the binding, and tore it in half.

"No," Teddy said as the magazine fell. He was on his knees in the bed, trembling.

Dear didn't answer. Choosing another comic at random, tugging it out, she read the words on the cover and held it at an angle so Teddy could see too. Rugged little Sluggo was depicted in a moment of fun with frizzy-haired Nancy. Unhesitatingly, Dear ripped the magazine apart—and once more extended her arm, her rock-steady, unerring arm.

"Don't, Dear! *Please!*" Teddy cried. He dug his fingertips into the sheets, agonized beyond producing a better plea. He caught a glimpse of two Daily Planet buildings and realized with horror that his Dear had two comics at the same time! He recognized Clark Kent in glasses on one cover, Superman vaulting to the sky on the other, and knew the Man of Steel had met his match. He was torn to pieces; Superman fell to the bedroom floor without protest. "*Plleeeeease.*"

"I thought I told you you weren't to read such filth!" she declared, spinning to confront him. The

other D.C. comic was lifted to the level of her raging lips. "This trash can *ruin* your mind!" Her face turned red. "I did tell you, Teddy—didn't I?" She scorched his face with her eyes. "Answer me: *Didn't I?*"

Teddy nodded.

Clark died in shreds that dripped brightly from her hands like butterflies dying. Butterflies that had never hurt anyone.

Dear selected three more comics, the power of her yanks snapping away two of the protective wooden bands. "This," she said, "and this"—short pause—"and this!" And she destroyed the trio in one furious rent, threw them down atop the others, and ground them beneath the heels of her cute fuzzy slippers.

And then she whirled again to face Teddy, who fell over on his back, bare feet up, moaning with fear and loss.

"You *knew* I was playing for *everyone* tonight, didn't you?" she shouted. Leaning forward at the neck made it appear that she was coming for him next; but when he shrank back against the headboard of his bed and tried to hide behind his pillows, his terror only increased her fury, turning up the flame in her cheeks. "But *you* ran off with your *daaaaaddy*, ran away like *he* always runs away from life!" She edged to the foot of his bed and he yanked his feet back, curling into a fetal position. "You *preferred* that—that Hivereve son of a bitch to your Dear! Didn't you?"

He saw at an unconscious level that she was nodding and he made the terrible mistake of nodding back.

Before he could correct his mistake—shake his

head violently—Dear had turned back to the rack.

She tore the next bunch of comic magazines on a diagonal line, wadded the pieces between her hands, and hurled them partly to the floor, partly in the direction of Teddy. Perspiring from the effort, face averted in her work, she reached again, ripped more comics apart, didn't notice when a staple bloodied one finger, then repeated her performance as smudges of blood like fingerprints left on dead victims' bodies covered the colorful shreds.

He could no longer think or begin to react. He'd known his Dear often peeped into the things in his bedroom when she was cleaning it, while he was at school. But he'd imagined his possessions were his, only his, and would never be harmed.

Abruptly, the comic rack was empty. She stood, bent with exhaustion, ankle-deep in the amorphous mess, panting for breath and only dimly seeing her son. At random, she thrust out awkwardly with one foot, sending "Shazams" and "Blow me downs!" and the nose of Robin and the batwing ears of Batman flying once more. The image was like the last gasp of a tornado.

"This will . . . teach you . . . to defy my orders, young man," Dear panted, plump breasts heaving under her sweat-drenched yellow robe. "And to remember . . . who it is . . . who takes care of you." Her hands, fisted, were on her hips—

And she was smiling. Happily. Almost with real satisfaction.

He cried with small sounds, shoulders moving, face buried in his pillows.

"You must never interrupt an artist during her performance." Catching her breath fully, adjusting the

robe, she was a beaming Wonder Woman who had vanquished a pantheon of titans. "Now, you've learned your lesson. And that is that." She raised her arms and went round the side of the bed toward him. "Give your Dear a nice night kiss."

Teddy peeked through his fingers in astonishment. Then he closed his eyes and turned away.

"Teddy?" she said, bending. It was a sweet, fond call. With insistence to it.

"No!" he said, and ducked his head away when she had her golden arms around him. Her breath smelled, her expensive robe smelled. His Dear was sour. "I *won't* kiss you goodnight!" Wiggling away, he pressed against the wall, eyelids pinched together.

And the mother went away! Silently straightening, withdrawing—she moved off from the bed as if she'd used her magic to disappear *literally*!

It didn't begin again until he'd cranked his neck around to watch, opened his eyes a crack, and clearly had her in his line of sight.

She kicked in one of the bands over a pocket of the rack, stuck out her hands, and pulled two more off. With several more fierce kicks, the bottom row of comic bins was caved in, but she had brought a bright red bubble of blood to one big toe. It ran on the ruined plywood after she'd torn the remaining bands away and, cursing, threw them to the floor and jumped on them. When the injured toe hurt too much for her to go on, she switched to her other foot and kicked out the small squares on which Teddy had planned to add the appropriate letters of the alphabet. Tomorrow, which might never come now.

"Go ahead!" Teddy yelled, kneeling in his bed again. "Kick it to pieces if you want." The pounding

in his ears rendered him nearly deaf. "Kick the damn thing till your *foot* falls off—'cause I don't want it anymore!" His sobs were wrenched from the deepest parts of him. "*You've ruined everything again!*"

Dear spun on one slippersed foot, and ran at him. Instantly she was looming above Teddy, snagging her fingers in his hair. She thrust forward with both arms. Teddy felt his neck snap back, his head ram against the wall. Dear's face zoomed in.

"Take that back! You take that back!"

"Won't," Teddy sobbed.

"Damn you, Teddy, *take it back!*" Her eyes were black caves in front of his. Her face was fire. Her locked fingers squeezed his hair. "You tell me I have not ruined everything—tell me *now!*"

"Leggo," he said, staring. "Leggo my hair 'n it's back."

"The *rest* of it, darling," Dear commanded through her clenched teeth, mystifying him. But her clutch loosened slightly, then one hand released his head completely and she was gently stroking his temples, smoothing back his own sweaty hair. "Don't you remember that I told you to give your Dear a nice night kiss?"

Aghast, he opened his mouth to shout—to scream any old sound that came out. Her hand instantly cupped the open mouth tenderly, shakily, pressing. He did his best to shake his head and succeeded minimally in turning it despite her hold on him.

"Kiss me, goddamn it!" she hissed. "My God, don't you know I *love* you?" Then she shrieked in his ear. "Don't you know how *much* I love you?"

Her mouth was weeping lipstick from where she'd brushed against his forehead, but when he tried to

press his lips together and pull his face away, Dear used her free hand to clutch his shoulder and tug him forcibly until their mouths were a fraction of an inch apart.

"Damn you, my darling little Teddy, if you don't give me a night kiss, God will strike you *dead!*"

He looked into her burning brown eyes, stunned by the words but also by the way she'd spoken them as if she was afraid for him, afraid for both of them. She had not yelled it, and even while the awful message rang in his ears and his heart, he knew for a fact that he had never been as terrified in Draden House as he should have been.

Teddy hugged his mother near. Her beautiful eyes, a moment before his face was snuggled into her soft shoulder, had been all anxiety and plea, devoid of anger. Yearning, too—a *want*, something his Dear needed *so bad*—and he had nothing but night kisses to give her.

She had looked just then like the Lady he saw on Christmas cards.

They kissed, and her consuming mouth barely touched his lips—her own were pressed together because she was smiling her love at him—and a lock of her pretty brown hair tickled the lobe of his ear.

"I only want what is best for you, precious little Teddy," Dear said. Her voice was husky. Withdrawn from his face, her mouth was an aperture of youth and sanctity. "Only your own Dear *knows* that, my dear; only your Dear knows your secret heart." Eyes filling, she touched his mouth with the tip of her index finger. "None of the others can share a sacred love such as we share, my Teddy. Perhaps you will never know yourself what is right for you. But God

and your Dear will always know."

He wept against her, hugged her again, said, "Don't ever go away, Dear. I don't know anything. I can't do anything without you. I g-gotta have my Dear, I gotta have —"

"Shhh, yes, I know," she said. "Sh-h-h." Nodding, weeping with him, she smiled adoringly, then got quietly to her feet. "I'll be here, my son. Forever. I'll be with you always." She rolled him over onto his stomach, pulled the covers up, and tucked him in. Kissed the exposed ear. His body spasmed, jerked; he felt his glasses come off, knew his Dear was putting them down carefully, for morning. "Forever, my precious, perfect Teddy."

Dear's magical hands rubbed his quaking back. His legs were rubber, her touch slipped out his spine and left him a softly sobbing, shaking pool of tears. He tasted Dear's blood, from her finger, on his upper lip. Pain knotted his belly, his teeth chattered faintly, he felt so bad because he'd been bad to his Dear.

"'I have a little shadow,' " the mother chanted, crooning the poem, ceaselessly rubbing his shoulders and back, " 'that goes in and out with me. And what can be the use of him is more than I can see.' "

Teddy showed her his appreciative grin, raising his profiled head an inch from the mattress to do so. He started to say, "Me too." To agree with what she was quoting.

But Dear was staring up at the ceiling with her half-closed eyes, hands moving, fingertips prying tenderly into the flesh of his back. Healing him.

He didn't know it when he fell the long fall into sleep.

Chapter Six

1

When he awoke in the morning, Dear, straight as a yardstick but for her neck and head (curled to read a numerology book in her lap), was there. Her face was youthfully pretty and expressionless where she sat soundlessly at the foot of his mattress, reading. She was a portrait in profile of radiant austerity in the flush of sunlight from his window, a brilliant nimbus in golden rays that lightened the colors of her hair and hallowed her like an angel. Maybe he'd died and gone to heaven and this look-alike of his mother was Teddy's first glimpse of one.

He shut his eyes before he could be seen.

Everything was ruined, he'd said. Even if he had pretended to take it back; now everything seemed different. But *was* it, was it really different? And ruined?

Dear was his constant, the moon and sun, the last thing he saw at night and the first thing he saw in the morning. In between, though, did he really sleep, like other boys? He had no way to know the answer to

that since he didn't know any other boys well, and for the same reason, he had no way to know if other mothers were like his Dear. Maybe she didn't really sleep either and he got that from her. Though he remembered what she'd said about the time when he was a little baby and, when he bawled, Dear brought him to sleep between her and Niles, he had no mental picture of ever seeing her lie down in bed. *Under* it, when it lightnined, sure; that didn't count. And the couch in the front room, yeah. All the time practically. But even while she dozed there a lot, Dear always seemed to be acutely aware of everything that happened in the house. And nights there was the piano playing, running around doing numerology charts, praying, visits from dead folks. Stuff.

When she had come into his bedroom today, this morning, he had no idea. For all he knew, she had never left. Maybe she'd just gotten into the closet with the Things, stood there all night amid the coat hangers, waiting for him to wake up again. If so, she *could've* been keeping the Things from getting him, but he doubted that this morning without knowing why . . .

Teddy sensed he was being disloyal, nervously kicked one leg under the covers, and knew that moment that he'd peed himself, his pajama pants were soaked. They clung to his skinny legs like another, clammy skin and made one more thing Dear wasn't to know about if he could help it. Except she *would* find out when she made the bed, mothers knew about everything; and she'd strip the bed, take the sheets down to the basement, and might mention it to Niles, to Uncle Duane—

Moaning, he whipped his head from side to side,

saw that the pile of ruined comic books was gone—disappeared from the room as if the whole incident hadn't occurred—and noticed the Mickey Mouse alarm clock on the little table by his bed.

10:17! That other world—school—came to mind for the first time since he'd left the building and had to walk home, and there was a test in arithmetic this morning—in subtraction—and he'd *missed* it.

Dear laughed gaily at her cleverness and pointed at the plunger on the back of the clock. Stretching with merry grace across his body, she showed him that she'd pushed it in!

"Don't fret, darling." She wasn't wearing her lounging robe today but an old, very frilly patterned blouse with a small rip under one armpit, and a swirly red and black skirt purchased last week. "Your Dear knows how hard it was learning last night's little lesson." Smiling, she moved to sit beside him, took his hand, and held it in her lap. "Sometimes a growing boy must experience a great deal of pain in order to learn what's good for him and what matters—before a mother can bring all his God-given perfection to the surface. Do you understand?"

Teddy lay very still beside her. He didn't want her to feel his wet pajama pants and he was afraid he might smell. Dear *didn't* smell this morning. "I guess so."

"So now, as a reward, your Dear is giving you a day off. To do anything you please!" She pretended to munch on his fingertips, then let his hand go and grew very solemn. "How are your bowels?"

His heartbeat accelerated and he tried not to blink and thereby indicate his doubt. She was nearly reading his thoughts again; number two was awf'ly close to number one. If she decided to help him get up—

pulled back his covers and all—she couldn't keep from seeing the pee. "Well, I haven't been to the bathroom today yet." *Please go away!*

"Why, of course you haven't!" She giggled like a girl, falling forward for an instant over herself. "Your foolish Dear!" That made Teddy laugh too. But her expression turned solemn again. "Do you *feel like* you can go? Is that old number two churning around in there?" She patted his tummy.

"Well, I think it is," he said. He tightened his stomach muscles, experimenting. Right away, they got very tight indeed. It had just dawned on him that he might not go at all that day—that was always a possibility, his bowels were just one more thing he didn't seem to have control over—and failure to grunt inevitably led ultimately to the enema bag.

"A well is a very deep subject," Dear said for the umpteenth time, rising. "I'll leave you to your privacy." She grinned, blew him a kiss before turning to the door. "Since we still have company, I can't come check on you, so just yell down and tell your Dear when you've grunted. All right?"

Sure. He'd go to the head of the stairs with his pants and underpants around his ankles, and *shout* the news so Dear and Niles and his uncle and everyone in school and the German war machine would *all* know about it!

When he was certain Dear had gone downstairs, he sat up, put on his glasses, and bent down for his slippers. Feeling slightly woozy, he perched for a moment on the edge of the bed. The absence of sound—mothersound—was a bit overwhelming if not unpleasant. His PJs were drying to his legs but the word of the instant that frightened him was one Dear

hadn't used that morning. Constipated. That was the word grown-ups used when you couldn't grunt and Dear said once that Hivereves were so full of shit that it was a wonder any of them could keep it *in*. The name—Niles's family name—meant either "winter's dream" or "winter night" in French; "Mengaldt" didn't mean a thing as far as Teddy knew.

His task of going and sitting on the toilet and trying to make something fall out of him seemed already daunting that day. Dear might show up in the bathroom any moment. Ever since he was real little he'd wanted to tell her that it was hard to produce really good number two when she was leaning against the wash basin staring at him. Yet he had to go try. Having enemas was so gruesome! Lying half-naked on the turned-down bed and a bunch of newspapers while other pages of the *Star* paved a footpath to the toilet—"Teddy's stepping stones to a shit," Duane called 'em—Dr. Dear with the red hot-water bottle lofted—the awful *surge*, a sense of losing control of *everything* while his mother swore at him to "hold it"—

He got up, felt pain lurching up from inside, almost fell. Fighting to regain his balance while he stood stockstill, cold all over but sweating, he squinted around the room and at reality with a greater need to bring reality into clear focus. What was the *matter*? The pain left him at that point but he felt nauseous and there was a really rotten taste in his mouth. What was the *matter* with him?

He wended his lightheaded way toward the bathroom with determination. Once inside and peeling off the offending PJ pants, rapidly cramming them into the clothes hamper, there was just a sick sort of

squeaky sensation inside his belly button. Heaving his skinny flanks up on the toilet seat, he prepared to give it his best shot.

When perspiration burst from his forehead and his abdomen became as tender as if he'd been hit, Teddy toed the bathroom door wide open, hunched over with the tips of his fingers pressed into his belly, and made grunting sounds as loud as he could possibly make his noises carry. He wanted Dear to hear his huge effort and, if he passed out, to hear him fall off the toilet seat. There was a downright thrilling couple of seconds of internal motion and roiling action—

Then, as though contorted in a wrestling match with himself, Teddy simultaneously listened to a quiet, unprepossessing *plompf*. . . and experienced a scorch of pain that nearly threw him off the commode to the bathroom floor.

Oceans chased through his body, soul and mind, red rivers of dizziness making estuaries, depositing islands of pain that seemed anxious to remain surfaced but slowly sank from experience. Seeing White River in his mind's eye—suddenly drawn out back to it—Teddy put out both hands to hold on to the wash basin while watery planets whirled round, and round. Even when the breakers calmed and he was able to pull down and count off exactly five squares of toilet paper—the allotted number, unless one had diarrhea (Teddy never had)—Teddy went on feeling shaky, shuddery, and very queasy.

Still, he got to his feet and awkwardly turned his head, impatient and eager to see if he'd made enough number two to pledge the fact to his Dear.

Blood. He looked down at it, unable to comprehend the sight. Threads of *blood* in his grunt. But

blood wasn't *supposed* to be in it, he'd never, *ever* made blood there before. Dear had never *told* him to make blood in number two.

She wouldn't like it.

Teddy whacked the flush handle, biting his lip as he waited for everything to go away. It wasn't like there had been a lot. It was more like some sunshine showing through a sky full of thunderclouds. He wouldn't make any more, uh-uh, no way.

But why did he feel so scared?

He couldn't remember why until he was soaping up his hands real good, drowning the germs. Then he did.

A while back, weeks at least, he'd had to make number one a lot, and fast. Because his Dear had just hurried out of the bathroom, he'd rushed into it and peed without looking to see if Dear'd flushed. And there had been blood at the bottom of the commode when he got through and peered down. Except he definitely hadn't made it. Curious, he had bent over to take a closer look.

And that was when Dear'd come running back into the room and shoved him so hard he'd bounced off the bathroom wall. "Dirty little animal," she'd said, but he hadn't seen any animals around. "You're just like all of them, aren't you?—you can just *smell* it!" And then she'd left the room again, slamming the door shut after her.

A bit giddy, weak, he dried his hands on his towel and shuffled into the hallway for the day when he could do anything he pleased. Niles would be working, but Dear and Duane were downstairs. Vaguely, he sort of wished Niles was there. Holding to the banister while he descended the stairs, he wondered if

Niles had found out what had happened last night. He felt sure his father hadn't known at the time, in spite of the noise, 'cause Niles slept like the dead. Dear always said that—"your father sleeps like the dead"—which was funny since he couldn't imagine dead folks sleeping. But Dear never lied and knew everything about dying, so that was how Niles slept.

Uncle Duane sat in the breakfast nook in the kitchen. He said nothing until Teddy had slipped in, across from him, and not till Teddy said "Hi." Then he fixed cold blue on his nephew above the rim of a coffee cup and said, "How the hell are you?"

"I'm fine." Teddy gave him the short version, the lie. "How are you?"

Duane's throat rumbled as it was cleared. "Did I ever tell you how I helped my high school, Noblesville, win the championship game against Martinsville?"

Teddy said No, telling another lie in the process.

He wondered if that had anything to do with why he went on feeling kind of awful, and did so the rest of the morning.

He wondered it again not long before lunchtime when he suffered his accident.

Unable to find anything that seemed fun to do that day, he had stood on the back porch looking out at the river running by at the place where the family lot ended, dimly conscious of the fact that his mind was spinning as busily as his stomach. It wasn't that Teddy felt dizzy anymore; it was that his mind was trying to fit the events of his last two days into pockets considerably like the bins of his wrecked comic book rack. But the facts weren't like good ol' comic books, they couldn't be crammed in because they

came in a whole bunch of sizes and they had crazy shapes, none of them like the symbols he was tryin to learn in arithmetic. Part of his mind, too, didn't *want* to think about them at all; but some parts of Teddy went on patiently pushing pieces together, shoving them into pockets where they snagged on other facts —

And when he wanted to go outside to the river so badly it nearly hurt, Teddy saw his reflection in the glass panel of the back porch door, perceived that it wasn't wearing glasses and wasn't really his *own* reflection —

And turning away too quickly, he stubbed his toe and fell down on one knee.

Bare (because he'd put on short pants for his day off), the knee was oozing hot blood. Already—even though he hadn't struck it against anything hard—the blood was running down his spindly leg into his rumpled sock.

Teddy tried desperately in the bathroom to stanch the blood, faintly aware of having had stitches sometime in his past. He tugged cotton out of a blue box, pressed it firmly to the wounded knee, and painstakingly wrapped a layer of adhesive tape around the joint and the cotton.

But when he was replacing the round roll of tape on a shelf, he noticed that his stubborn blood was continuing to come out, seeping around the edges of the adhesive and threatening to burst on through.

The sweats came again, because of worry, the dizziness because he felt very ill again. Lying back against the bathroom wall, quivering, he sensed the hysteria beginning to come out too, even if he didn't know the word, and fought it. Down the hall outside the bath,

his mother cleared her throat, took a few audible steps. *Dear might find out!* Chewing his lower lip hard, he got more cotton out and then more adhesive, crisscrossing the bandage with a couple of miles or two of tape until he could be satisfied that *nobody's* blood could break out of such a covering.

Then he slipped softly into his bedroom and changed into long pants.

Maybe he couldn't play piano like Dear, or basketball like Uncle Duane, but he sure had the world's biggest knee!

2

"Aren't you a little pale, Ted?" Niles asked at lunch.

"That's why I had him stay home from school," Dear said across the table. She was busy passing around a platter of coldcuts but paused with an arm outstretched to glance at Teddy. "You look like death warmed over, darling."

"Pass the ketchup, please," Uncle Duane asked from the other end of the table.

"You *won't* believe what happened after you went to sleep last night, Niles," Dear said.

Teddy lost the slice of bologna from his fork and had to jab the tines back in again before he could spear it. Was she actually going to talk about the comics and what she did to the rack?

"I'm absolutely serious." Dear began spooning consommé into her mouth at the pauses in her remarks. "I was really startled. Almost frightened."

Niles reached for what he called "flat meat," re-

trieving the platter where Evvie had left it when her brother and Teddy had helped themselves. "What happened?"

"Well, I tucked Teddy in, then started to come to bed. But I was restless for some reason and came downstairs to be sure the doors were locked."

Duane was building one of his famous Dagwood sandwiches, Teddy saw, but had paused with his wrists resting on the table and an expectant expression on his face. "May I have the catsup, please?"

"This time, happily, Niles, you *had* locked the doors. I was returning from the foyer—passing through the living room—when I heard very *strange* sounds."

Teddy had just folded his bologna on a slice of bread. Now he put the in-progress sandwich on his plate, where it flopped open.

"Well, it was right *there*"—Dear pointed with her spoon, indicating the edge of the dining table an inch or two from Teddy's elbow—"that *somebody* had left a knife and fork. Not carried them out to the kitchen."

Duane growled, "*Pass the ketchup.*"

Dear caught Niles's and Teddy's wrists, suddenly, freezing them there and almost knocking the bottle of Heinz catsup off on the floor. Niles's sandwich, grasped in one hand—two slices of bread, two slices of bologna, ketchup, and two pickles—was marooned inches from his mouth. "I was nowhere near this table. I was standing in the entrance to this room. The silverware, as I said, was right over by Teddy, and I was the *only one* awake in the house."

Teddy wondered why Uncle Duane, who slept on the couch behind Teddy's chair, hadn't heard anything

that was happening, but he was just happy that his wrist was abruptly freed and he could get a bite of his sandwich. Nobody noticed when he put a pickle on it.

"You must understand that the knife and spoon were precisely on the edge," Dear went on, frowning, thinking. "But not *quite* on the edge, if you follow me."

"It was on the edge but not on the edge," Uncle Duane said. "Sure. Now pass the goddamned ketchup."

"And when I merely *glanced* toward them—the silverware—you wouldn't *believe* what happened!" Dear's gaze swept them all inclusively, eyes wide. "They *sprang* into the air, and fell to the floor! Unaided by human touch. The fork *and* the knife!"

"No kidding," Niles said around the big bite he'd taken from his sandwich.

"When they landed," Dear continued in lowered tones, "there was *no* racket. There was this very tiny, distant *tinkle*. Not a clatter, a bang, but a *faaaar-away* sound." Her eyes were immense. "It was nearly as if the silverware had fallen through . . ."

"Evelyn, was it a knife and fork or *spoon*," Uncle Duane said loudly, "and will *somebody* please *pass the fucking ketchup!*"

Wide-eyed and tense, Teddy gaped at his uncle and reached out for the red bottle. The white lid came off, the bottle joltingly struck the table, and one of fifty-seven varieties splattered Dear's table cloth and the top of her hand.

Instinctively, Evelyn's arm swung out, propelled by strong shoulder muscles. Although Teddy ducked most of the blow, her nails grazed his right cheek.

"I'm sorry, Dear," he stammered, feeling warmth spring to the surface. "I didn't mean —"

"The road to hell is paved with good intentions," Dear snapped. "Ask your father."

"How the hell did I get in this?" Niles demanded. Without awaiting a reply, he was on his feet and running to the kitchen, returning quickly with a wet towel. As Teddy, blinking, watched him daub at the mess, he wiped his face surreptitiously on one sleeve.

"Don't *wipe* it *in*," Dear told Niles, slapping his shoulder. The blow caused him to drop the towel on his partly eaten sandwich. "Good Lord, Niles, you're the most helpless son of a bitch I've ever met! Why in hell did I ever marry such an incompetent nincompoop?"

"If you could just take this slice of bread," Duane suggested, "and push it around a little . . . ?"

Niles picked up the towel, then threw it down again in the space between his wife's plate and his. "I didn't notice you going after the dish towel," he said to her.

Teddy looked with horror at towel, mother, father. Mother.

"I was t-trying to share my s-story with you," Dear said. "With my entire, unappreciative, goddamned family. The w-way I try to do, over, and over, and over. Why don't I *learn*?"

"God knows," Niles said, so softly almost nobody heard him.

"Why don't I get it through my head that *my* family knows *nothing* special, can't *do* anything special?"

"Fuck your damn food then!" Uncle Duane said, shoving back his chair. Face scarlet, he began groping for his crutch. "Just *shove* your precious goddamn ketchup!"

"You and your petty, snotty little comments," Dear said. Duane paused, brows raised, but she wasn't addressing him. "You bastard! *I* thought you'd *want* to take off some of my load when we have so much company. But not *you*."

Teddy glanced wildly from parent to parent. He was titanically relieved to see Dear finally face Niles, stare up at him with her pretty face gone livid. The blood on Teddy's cheeks was beginning to run into the corner of his mouth.

"All you Hivereves can do is carp. *Sell* things, or make *paint*. Criticize. *Attack!*"

"Evvie, I'm sorry." Niles knew she wasn't screaming yet and grinned, reaching out to hug her. "I really am."

"Don't *touch* me!"

"Okay." Niles kept his grin in place, rumpled Teddy's hair. "See you later, Duane, gotta get back to work while there's some afternoon left." He stooped to Dear. "Kiss?"

"You're surely joking." She pressed one hand to her bosom.

"Okay." Niles shrugged, started toward the front of the house. He got a wink from his brother-in-law, vanished from sight, then the front door was ripped open, closed just short of a violent slam.

Before anyone could collect their thoughts, the bird flew into the dining room.

"Dear Jesus." Dear saw it at the same instant Teddy saw it, but she was flinging up her arms to point. Horrified. "*Look!*"

An outside thing had penetrated Draden House, a cardinal, clattering its wings in terror as it appeared to head on a straight line for the table. Whether it

had entered when Niles left or had come in earlier and hidden in the balcony above the living room, none of them knew. When it perched on the chandelier above the table, quivering, eyes black and bright, Duane chuckled. "You haven't got some ketchup under a wing, have you?" he asked the bird.

But Dear was on her feet, pressed to the wall. "A bird. *A bird is in our house.*"

Pain clenched in Teddy's stomach like a fist holding his bowels and squeezing. His Dear was more frightened than the cardinal; she was struggling to say more, to speak, but her gaze was cemented to the small red body, her lips working frantically.

"With the smell of flowers," she said at last, not loudly, "that meant only that a relative of mine was going to die. Somewhere." Dear cried, started to sob, but there were no tears on her face yet. "That was terrible enough. But now . . . *now* . . . it means . . ."

Uncle Duane, hopping on one foot, was swinging his crutch in the air over his head. Teddy saw that the bird hadn't moved, except for its eyes. He realized that his uncle meant to knock the redbird off the chandelier, to *beat* it to death with his wooden crutch.

He ducked under Duane's first swing, ran from the room with a small noise starting in his throat. All he wished in the whole world was to get into his bedroom, hide, to be away—somewhere else. He heard the crashing sound of crystal shattering, and above or through or in close harmony with the uncle's attack on the cardinal, he also heard the rest of what his mother was saying.

Because she was repeating it.

"Someone in this very house is doomed."

He'd found himself staring upward—in the direction of the cathedral ceiling of the front room—when he escaped the dining room, and he stopped there, his myopic gaze settling upon the balcony as if his own eyes were not in his control. That second the balcony appeared to be filled with the partly detectable forms of shadow people. *Thing* people with their own agendas and their own times, most of them not Teddy's. He imagined he saw Aunt May-May seated beside Grandma, peering down at him (*Are you still with us?*) and, for a moment, couldn't remember which one was dead and which one was, technically, still alive. He got dizzy looking up at the pale forms on the balcony, momentarily worried that Dear would come flying out of the dining room to his side, and test him to see if he remembered the names of his dead family members. At just the instant he realized he couldn't possibly pass beneath the balcony—thereby ruling out flight to his own room—his sick stomach spasmed and brought his gaze down to the knee of his corduroys.

Blood wasn't soaking through the cloth but he was so afraid it might that he imagined it was, then spun around to run toward the back of the house at a fast limp, shot past the door to the basement, and darting through the back porch, tore open the screen door and stumbled out on the banks of White River.

Nearer to the water, he worked his pant leg carefully up over his wounded knee to inspect it. The blood—his blood—had soaked through the makeshift bandage and gotten on the inside of the cordu-

roy cloth, but you couldn't tell that from the outside unless you got up real close and squinted, and he seemed to have stopped bleeding. "Thank God for small favors," he said aloud with a sigh, then shivered when a chilly breeze washed in from the river. He took a deep breath to steady himself.

Behind him, the rear entrance of Draden House and the whole building just looked old. It needed a coat of paint or, maybe, some of Dear's makeup. Since she was a professional entertainer she prob'ly had enough Max Factor and stuff to paint the whole house. From where Teddy stood, home was quiet; noiseless. Nobody could hear or see Dear and Uncle Duane talking, or picking up the lights Duane had broken, or anything. You couldn't tell dead folks came to visit late at night, that flower smells and birds got inside to scare everyone, that folks got real mad and shouted—or that the prettiest and best piano player in the world lived there, Teddy reminded himself.

Feeling bad about what he'd just thought and aware that he was violating one of his mother's cardinal rules by bein out by the river—"Cardinal rules," like birds that might fly in any old time—Teddy turned back to White River. What was so neat about buyin a house here anyway? Garbage had been dumped all over the white gown of the river along with other stinky things that made his nose wrinkle. Even if the neighborhood had really had lots of swell parties back when rich folks built these big places, as his Dear said, there sure weren't any parties goin on now! Yet even Niles had talked about ice cream suits, and elegant dresses like Dear wore in a real old picture Teddy loved. And something called "bootleg

hootch"—and that writer, F. Scott Something, who Niles read. And Dear'd mentioned summers on the river, "lemonade air," tart as the girls who shimmied and black-bottomed and Charlestoned just the way Teddy's Dear had done 'em all—right before he got born. (*And I'm almost ten . . .*)

Loud voices that were distant but not all that far away carried to him and he nodded, identifying them. WPA workers, Niles had explained; folks who were out-of-work and so hungry the government was making jobs for them. Jobs they had to fight over sometimes, jobs that took a lot of work and made the grown-ups talk loud like Dear. She didn't like them though, Teddy thought; she said they were—he looked at the hazy afternoon sun—"fodder for the damn Bolsheviks," whatever that meant. But Niles said these were "hard times." But that was when he was still at Picturesque, right before they decided to move into Draden House.

No parties whatsoever were going on in the back lots along White River and the river wasn't white anymore. Some of the houses, seen from behind, were empty, everything as untended as abandoned graveyards. No fences separated any of the lots in Teddy's line of myopic vision so it would be real easy to wander away, right or left, and explore them. Craning his neck first in one direction and then another, he thought it was all neat and spooky at the same time. So *still*. Sparse grass showed the brown belly of the earth beneath dank weeping willows—out of work circus giants with bowed heads. He'd believed it would be warm, come spring, beautiful there, come spring. No dogs were in view, no cats, not a sandbox or swing set, not even a basketball back-board.

Maybe the people who had thrown parties on the bank hadn't had any kids. Maybe no one but Niles even swam in the river anymore. Maybe Dear was right and all the waters were filthy—maybe because the people who had abandoned the neighborhood had swum too often in it (or hadn't come up).

Through the window of a porch Teddy thought he saw someone—about his size, maybe—staring out. A boy with sandy hair, grinning. Teddy saw him out of the corner of his eye. But when he turned all the way around, it was his own house Teddy was seeing and it looked devoid of human life like all the others. *Teddy*, a voice called through the weeping willows. *Tedddddeee . . .*

Suddenly dizzy, kitten-weak, Teddy flung out an arm to regain his balance, nearly falling. *Do anything you want today*. Well, he had. He'd gone out back alone.

Now he needed to get back inside in case his knee burst out with blood and he fainted.

He made it to his room without having to shout for help, lay down on his bed, and leafed through a library book, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. He stopped at a rumination of the blond little girl: "Dear, dear! How queer everything is today!" Teddy squirmed onto his side, so his knee wasn't pressed against the mattress. "I wonder if I've changed in the night? Let me think; *was* I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I'm not the same, the next question is, 'Who in the world am I?'"

There was a time that day when Dear reminded him to be a "good host" and they sat with Uncle Duane in the living room. The smudgepot between him and

Dear on the coffee table hadn't been emptied since Duane arrived and the stench from the tray made Teddy's eyes water. Dear had missed "Young Widder Brown" again but was being real nice till Uncle Duane said it was bullshit about the redbird like it was bullshit about making a person out of nothing but thoughts and bullshit that his sister and nephew could do it if they really wanted to.

Teddy definitely did not want to, he thought from where he was perching on his Dear's piano bench. But he saw that the mood between his mother and uncle was different today—not sister/brother playful—and that was scary. Niles hadn't done anything when Dear was yelling and he himself was crying last night, because he was prob'ly asleep, but what had Uncle Duane been doing? He appeared more serious this afternoon, grim; he wasn't playing at all and Teddy knew that Dear saw the same thing.

"Let's not go into all that," Dear said. She pulled a throw lying over her legs up higher, rested her head on the end of her sofa. "I think it's chilly in here," she addressed Teddy. "Do you?"

"Evelyn, why not just admit it?" Duane said. He looked tired, irritated. Maybe folks who drank liquor a lot got more sober than others when they weren't doing it. "You can't *make* anybody real. S'hard enough to make somebody *do* something!"

Dear stirred fretfully. "Wasn't the smell of flowers enough? The redbird?"

Uncle Duane shifted his weight to rest his bad leg. "I suppose so." He turned his icy gaze on Dear. "By 1960, 1970—surely by '80 or '90—*somebody* in the family ought to die."

"You're downright morbid, Duane," Dear told

him. She turned her head lazily, gave Teddy a pretty smile. "Your uncle is a serpent, a viper. An asp."

"What was that one?" Duane inquired.

"He's one of those cruel people who serve Satan by tempting good people," Dear continued as if she hadn't heard. "A temptor. But we mustn't hate him because all things are to God's good. There's a purpose for people like your Uncle Duane." She laughed, and it was so infectious Teddy laughed too. "Only God knows what that *is*."

"You're as nuts as E.H. was," Duane muttered. "At least the old man delivered on his threats. If he said he was going to hit you, he hit you."

"*Could* we make a real person if we wanted to?" The question was out of Teddy's mouth before he'd thought it over and before he could stop it.

It hung in the center of the high front room like the aroma of unexpected flowers. Neither adult spoke for a few seconds.

"Of course," Dear said softly. She was gazing toward her brother. "It says in the Bible that faith moves mountains and we possess that kind of strength, between us. Through the power of love."

"Do it," Uncle Duane said clearly.

"Mothers do not lie, my darling; you know that. And you are the most important thing in your Dear's life. I require every ounce of my God-given power to raise you, to mold and shape you. To protect you from the dark masculine dominance within this plane of existence—that which brutalizes women and all who are sensitive, and gentle."

"I know," Teddy said, running to her from the piano bench when she beckoned him with a little wave of her hand, sitting beside her on the couch.

"Therefore: I shall not waste my precious gifts at a calloused whim. I shall not give in to the temptations of mammon."

Uncle Duane gave her a sharp, surprised look. "Mammon?"

"But I never lie, darling Teddy." She gripped his arms above the elbows, leaning back against the couch, her beautiful eyes grave with her pledge. "Together, we will simply ignore the sins and temptations of the world's *dross*—for as long as we possibly can." Suddenly hugging him to her breast, just as suddenly holding him at arm's length and, beaming at him with tears in her eyes, she added: "Your cousin Cass will be visiting us next week. We'll have music, happiness in this house again!"

The good news came as a surprise both to Teddy and Duane. He was the singing Cass's father but she lived with her mother and seldom even saw Duane. Dear's news broke the tension for Teddy, but he noticed yet another change in his uncle's expression—almost like he didn't know what to do with the news. But Dear went to go start dinner, and Teddy, watching Uncle Duane stare at his departing sister, thought he saw the same strange look on his reddish, rugged features that he'd had when Niles came home the other night. "She's done it again," Uncle Duane said softly to nobody in particular.

4

"Hungry?"

Teddy flinched, startled by his father's hand lying suddenly on his back. The mood he'd had out back,

by the river — his thought of “hard times,” plus the secret he had kept about his bloodied knee and how different he’d felt all day — had returned at meal time. Niles’s question reminded him that he would actually have to eat something now or risk facing a barrage of questions about his health, and he thought that he might start screaming and never stop if that happened.

“Sure am,” he said, looking up with a wan smile while Niles took his seat. Two of the crystals in the chandelier were missing where Uncle Duane had smashed them with his crutch and the snowy light above the dining table shimmered, appeared to drift. “Where’s Uncle Duane?”

“He went out,” Niles replied, providing no further explanation. But his face made it clear that Niles hoped he would *stay* out. “It’s just the three of us tonight.”

Teddy didn’t know what to say about that. He was surprised to find one of Dear’s good cloth napkins on his plate. Was there something special about this meal? He unfolded it quietly while his mother brought a platter of corn on the cob to the table, further surprised that his father simply sat in his usual chair without helping Dear. Teddy loved corn on the cob but his Dear boiled it for half an hour to get the kernels mushy, saying it was less constipating that way.

She gave him and Niles an individual, small steak each, then returned from the kitchen with lettuce. Sometimes Niles made a nice dressing for them but tonight there was just a browning jar of Hellman’s mayonnaise with a tablespoon stuck in it. A bit of food that might have been a speck of Dear’s horse-

radish adhered to the open rim of the mayo jar.

"Aren't you going to dig in?" Dear inquired, smoothing her skirt under her as she took her place. She was wearing a *dress*. Not the lounging robe or slacks.

Teddy did, salting an ear of corn and wishing he could put butter on it. Dear rolled the cobs around on a plate with butter that had been left out all day before bringing corn to the table, however. He knew pepper was forbidden to him.

Niles ate steadily, silently, earnestly, utilizing the startlingly quiet mood of the evening to stock up, apparently. Teddy couldn't decide if his mother's silence seemed exaggerated only because there was no company that night or if there was another reason, another cause, he didn't know. With his sick stomach and a knee that throbbed continually, he couldn't make himself relax and enjoy the quiet atmosphere. Dear liked her steak very well done—"only cannibals and other savages could possibly eat cow practically raw"—so his little steak was fried to a crisp and hard to chew. *Steak*. It was like this was a celebration or something. Sort of.

There was a new bottle of Heinz catsup on the table.

Dear cleared up the mystery, in time. When Teddy was about half through eating, she smiled prettily at him. "Darling," she began, "your father and I are thinking about getting a divorce." She raised one brow inquiringly. "Do you know what that is?"

Teddy answered her by letting his nearly polished-off corn cob drop from his fingers. It bounced off his plate to the table and he caught it just before it fell to the floor. But neither parent said a word about it.

"I think he knows the meaning," Niles said at last. He forked a glob of lettuce saturated with mayo into his mouth, tried to give Teddy a nonchalant smile. "What your mother means," he added as he chewed, "is that *she's* thinking about it."

"Yes, I am," Dear nodded.

"Dear thinks about a good many things, Ted."

"Indeed I do." Dear sat erectly, placed her napkin beside her plate, and quietly folded her hands in her lap. Most of her food was gone so she had timed her remarks for this moment. "I am the only one in this family who *does* think and I thank you, Niles, for admitting it. The events of the past twenty-four hours have only brought matters to a head, Teddy." She focused her gaze on him, and her expression seemed to imply that he surely understood what had happened to her and that he shared her feelings. "Actually, I've been considering separation for ages."

Teddy watched her raise her hands, press the palms and fingers together, and imagined that his life lay between those strong, feminine hands. "*Why?*" he asked.

"Why?" Dear repeated it, mildly incredulous. "Why, because your father keeps secrets from those of us who must depend upon him. Because he connives behind my back, makes little or no effort to be part of the family, and believes that a creative artist whose hands are her fortune should put them *constantly* into water—become a virtual charwoman in order for him to gallivant around the city during working hours, doing *God knows what!*"

"Not a great deal, I admit," Niles said. "It's slow, starting a new job, but I'm trying. Of course I *did* have a single building to work in—regular income—

but that wasn't glamorous enough for your mother."

"And because he criticizes your Dear ceaselessly, sneaks behind her back to curry favor—"

"Curry *favor*? With my *son*?"

"But principally because this may be one of the very last, splendid dinners your Dear is able to prepare for her precious little boy," Dear said, eyes brimming with tears, "because food costs *money*, and Niles has informed me that we won't *have* much of that to spend in the immediate future."

"Ted," Niles said without looking at him, "she means that your father may never be a millionaire, and that surprises her for some reason." His voice was as even as it always was and he rarely flushed, but Niles's face seemed darker somehow. "Get this one fact straight, son: There's nothing I have that you and your mother don't have."

Dear tensed from head to toe. "You," she said distinctly, "are a liar." Her eyes were wide. "*You* have *freedom*! Yet you *settle* for that, like all Hivereves—you're *content* just to hold a job . . . to work . . . to get by! Well, my son and I were cut out for more than *that*!"

Niles dropped his napkin beside his plate. "Then perhaps you'd better get a divorce and stop talking about it, Evvie," he said. "I didn't go to college like your father E.H., I married you instead. Remember? Do you remember *anything* about that?"

"Remember? How could I forget!" Dear snorted, rolled her eyes. "A honeymoon in your family's cottage at Klinger Lake. Oh, Teddy, you would never *believe* what I've endured for this man! The way he speaks to me in company; how he treats a poor crippled man who happens to be my *only* brother." Tears

began to roll down her cheeks. "Your father is completely insensitive, the only man I ever knew who has *no* feelings, none whatsoever! The night my poor E.H. lay dead at the bottom of the steps, his brilliant life ended by a common thief or a paid assassin—"

"I thought the guy lost a case to E.H. and sought revenge," Niles said. "You used to say that."

"You wouldn't even stand up to the police and tell them the truth!" Dear said. Her head whipped in Teddy's direction. What *was* all this, what were they *doing*? "Your father is a coward, too, darling. A moral coward."

"Now wait a minute," Niles said, his voice rising.

"Where will I be?"

Both his Dear and Niles looked at Teddy.

It was happening, all the real bad stuff, Things were coming from the closet to get him, the family *was* going to die in a way. Life itself was a black closet, times were hard, pale shadows lay everywhere. "You're *my folks*," he told them, tried to get them to understand what they were discussing was the only complete unknown he hadn't had to hear about before and that it was worse than anything that happened before it. "Where would I *be*? *Where*?"

Niles was lighting a Viceroy. He put out his hand with the cigarette lighter to rumple Teddy's hair. Teddy pulled away.

"We both love you, honey," Dear said in her soothing voice. "In our own ways. Now, don't you get all worried and upset about this. It doesn't really concern *you*." She arose, stooped to kiss the pate of his head, went out to the kitchen for a moment. "We'd never throw our precious Teddy away like an ol' shoe," she called, laughing. "You'd come with me,

darling. We'd have our own place, an apartment of our very own. Your Dear and her perfect little boy would be together every, single instant! Doesn't that sound wonderful?"

He tried to think grown-up, to find a way to stop this! What was separation? What was an "apartment"? Where was it? If Dear and him had their own place, he knew he might never see his father again—*never*.

"Now then!" She rushed back to the dining table, carrying something brown. Gaily, she edged the Hellman's jar and spoons out of the way, put dessert in the space she had cleared. "A surprise, my dearest! Something else special on this special night when each of us can begin to make many marvelous new plans! And you can eat as much of it as your little tummy will hold!"

Dessert was a homemade German chocolate cake. He loved regular chocolate cake but Dear never had got that part straight. She carved into the mottled icing, cut through the glistening brown body of the creation to the plate, crumbs falling off and landing in ketchup stain. The slice his Dear cut for him was nearly a third of the cake. She put it on a saucer she'd brought and nudged it toward Teddy, knocking the mayonnaise bottle sideways. HELL, it read. The cake slice, layers deep, quivered.

"What do you say, Ted?" Niles inquired. It was a reminder to be polite, to say thanks.

"Don't be upset and ruin things for your Dear." She gave his head and neck a squeeze from the other side, peered down at him with her enormous brown eyes. Shiny now, they were like the German chocolate. Pain lurched in Teddy, and though he was aware of it, he

didn't care. He seemed to see himself from a great distance, to float toward the ceiling and be suspended among the broken crystal lights of the chandelier. His Dear was breaking off a big bite of the cake and lifting it to his mouth. Light from the chandelier warmed but sickened him. He saw his face in one glowing crystal except he wasn't wearing glasses, and he wasn't smiling anymore. "We can get Aunt May-May over once a week—we might even convince your Uncle Duane that he should come live with us, wouldn't that be something? Don't *spoil* it, sweetest heart. This is your childhood, darling, these are *the best moments of your whole life!*"

Mothers never lied.

"Oh, my God," Niles said. He began to stand. "Oh, *Christ!*"

Teddy felt the blood pour out of him.

From his nostrils, out of his ears. Mixing in the German chocolate cake his Dear had pushed between his lips before Niles saw what was happening to him. His whole head was sticky when Dear recoiled, threw up her arms, spreading the mess. Blood drained down the sides of his skinny neck, but he thought it was icing, rubbed some off with his fingertips, and listening to tom-toms beating between his ears, licked his fingers.

Opening his mouth to do so, a cementing crust of blood that had lined his lips when the onslaught of gore began broke, and blood streaked down his jaw and chin freely.

The worst parts were not being able to tell Dear thanks, and the way both his folks stared at him in clear, obvious horror. Closing his eyes to keep from seeing their faces, he attempted to stand. His cake-

and-blood hand automatically groped for his Dear, patted her hand, brushed the hem of her skirt and then her bare toes. "Don't be mad anymore," he told them.

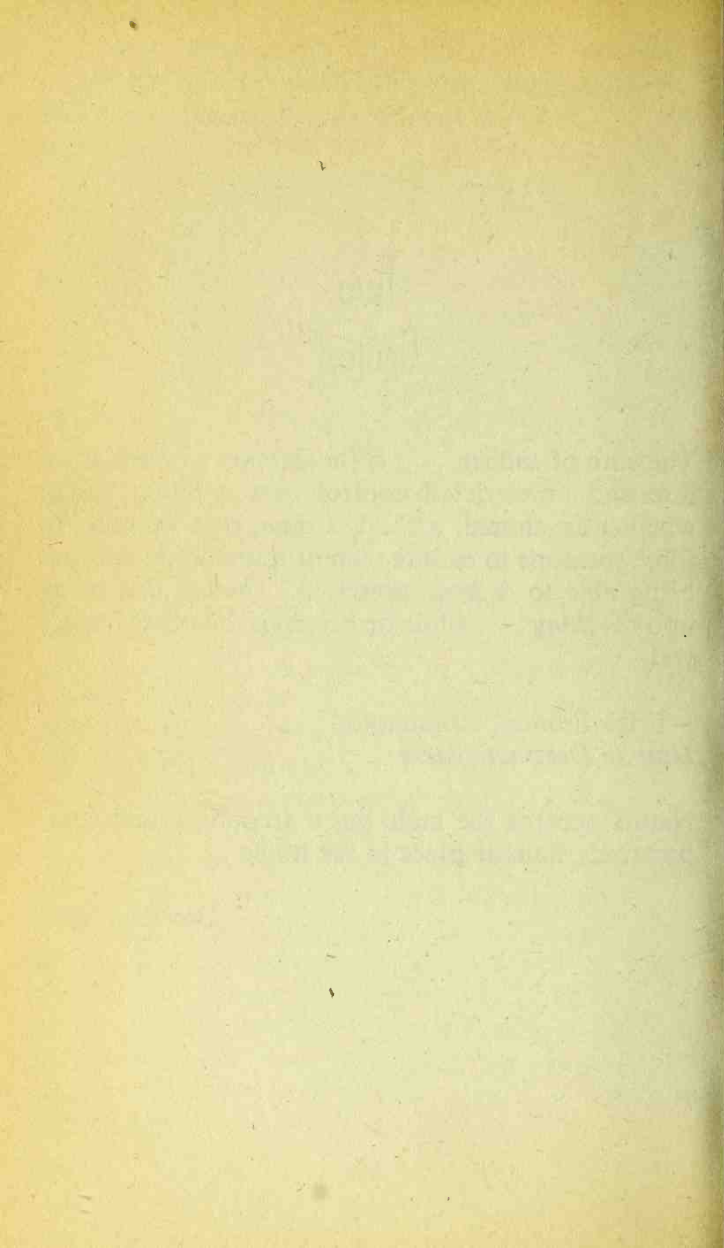
Two Control

The core of sadism . . . is the passion to have absolute and unrestricted control over a living being, whether an animal, a child, a man, or a woman. To force someone to endure pain or humiliation without being able to defend himself . . . makes this being into his *thing* . . . while he becomes the other being's god.

—Erich Fromm, *Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*

Nature accords the male but a secondary and comparatively humble place in the home . . .

—Havelock Ellis



Chapter Seven

1

The coldness of the whole world was condensed to a rubberized bag of ice placed shockingly at the nape of Teddy's neck. Even when he was quite ill, even when Niles and Dear wanted badly to save him, to bring him back to awareness, it had to be done distressingly, frighteningly. Humanly.

When he tried automatically to sit up, his father's firm hand on his chest prevented him. His mother pushed another sack of coldness under his nose and over his seeping mouth, knocking Teddy's glasses askew and leaving him to save them with a frantic arm-waving grab. For an instant he had the impression, lying on Dear's lap in the backseat of their car while Niles jumped in behind the steering wheel, that they preferred for him not to see what was happening, wanted him to be sightless for now. That didn't make a lot of sense but there'd been just one glimpse of light between the time Teddy passed out in the dining room and now, just before Niles slammed the car door shut behind him. Teddy didn't realize he'd been

unconscious. "Oh, my *baby!*" Dear sobbed, terrifyingly. Her warm cheek covered his nose and lips, hurting the places that bled and making it hard to breathe. Niles, making the car careen down the long driveway to the city street, threw Teddy's leg and foot into the air with a resultant sense of absolute helplessness.

"He'll be okay." Niles's pleasant baritone, the words spoken with such hearty conviction anybody hearing them would realize they were a lie. "We should arrive at Dr. Biddle's office just about the time he gets there."

"Thank God I had the presence of mind to call him," Dear said. Her face hung spectrally in the shadows of the backseat as though disembodied. She pulled the blanket someone had brought up to Teddy's chin. A streetlight the car was passing flickered over her pale face, showing Dear without fresh makeup. "We're just going to let Dr. Biddle have a look at you."

"But why?"

"He'll know what to do, dearest." Her smile frozen, she stared through the windshield ahead of her, clasp-
ing his nearest hand hard.

"*Do?* There's nothing to do, Dear—I'm *fine*." He remembered then what had happened, sought to wiggle free and sit. Dear's clutch to him tightened. "I'm sorry I got blood on the rug if I did. Or the tablecloth." He raised his voice so Niles could hear. "You can have my allowance."

"*Hold him still,*" Niles said grimly. He was drivin
real fast yet the car seemed to float through early evening like a boat. When Niles had to stop for a traffic light, he gunned the motor restlessly; it emitted

lion roars. "Everything'll be fine, Ted," Niles called. He showed his face above the front seat, smiling like Dear. "It will be."

"Okay." He answered his father dubiously, heart pounding so hard he was afraid Dear would hear or feel it and get more scared.

He was wondering if getting sick would keep them from getting the divorce awhile when he glanced down and saw a big pile of rags lying all over the floorboard of the backseat. Staring real hard, he didn't think he had gotten any blood on them yet.

He was almost asleep when the car's brakes squealed, Niles's door slammed open, the back door swung back, and Niles was reaching for him.

"I'll carry him," Dear said, her feet shuffling. But Niles simply took him, lifted Teddy effortlessly into the air as his Dear scrambled to get out. "Don't be scared, sweetheart," she called. "Your Dear won't let anything awful happen to you. She won't *allow* it!"

Teddy felt better, then, as he was borne into Dr. Biddle's familiar white-front building. Aloft in Niles's arms, Teddy noticed there were no old ladies seated in the waiting room, how black it was at night. Niles whisked him past the little table with pill envelopes, Dear one swing of a foot behind them, there was a glance of Dr. Biddle's concerned but pleasant face, and then he was being taken directly into the private office.

"I still think he should have been taken to Methodist," the old man said. He helped Niles put Teddy gently down on the examining table with the neat stirrups.

"Evvie doesn't like hospitals," Niles said. He

stepped back while Dear crowded forward to stand next to Dr. Biddle.

"I know," Dr. Biddle said. "Neither do I."

"He's as pale as *death*," Dear said above Teddy.

"Let's jump to no conclusions," the doctor said, pausing to wink at Teddy. "They have a nasty way of jumping back at one."

Teddy giggled.

"Ah . . . Evelyn," Dr. Biddle said, and cleared his throat.

"I'm not leaving," Dear said. "We're both staying."

"Uh-huh," Dr. Biddle replied, closing his eyes briefly, then going to his rolltop desk. "There's so little privacy in the world today," he advised Teddy.

Teddy saw him reach into the old desk and managed only a nod. Then he closed his own eyes and tried—with mixed success—to keep them that way until the examination was finished.

His blood—still *more*; how much did he *have*—was taken. The absence of real pain in Dr. Biddle getting it seemed a genuine miracle. Next he was gently tugged to a sitting position with his legs hanging over the table, the edge of it so cold it was difficult to be still. And then the doctor was facing him.

For a second Teddy believed the old man was praying—divinity in touch with Divinity—because Dr. Biddle bowed his head. But he began tapping with the blunt first joint of his index finger on Teddy's exposed chest. The stethoscope poked into the old man's huge ears made him think of a character in the Flash Gordon strip. When that phase of the ordeal was over, the doctor prodded at Teddy's ears, staring deeply into them as if he expected to find something there in addition to the crust of spilled blood, Dr.

Biddle clucking like a chicken. He straightened.

"Together," he said to Teddy, "we are going to destroy another wooden stick."

"Awww." Teddy spotted the tongue depressor coming, played along with their joke. "Can't I have it when you're through making me gag?"

"You aren't going to gag," the doctor enacted his role. Seeing the lightly compressed lips in front of him, he said thoughtfully, "Say 'All that you put into the lives of others comes back to you a thousand-fold.' "

Teddy laughed, and the tongue depressor fulfilled its role in life. "Dear says that a lot," he commented afterward.

Dr. Biddle peered up at Evelyn over Teddy's head. "I thought she might." He put out his paw of a hand. "Here."

"Gee!" The wooden stick—saliva and all—was rested on his palm. "Thanks."

He glanced back at the physician who, sitting, parted the pages of an enormous black-covered book and looked at what he found there for such a long period of time it appeared he was sleeping. Dozens of tiny slips of paper stuck out of the leather book. Dr. Biddle turned to one or two of them, read what he saw, and lit a Lucky Strike. He yawned hugely in spite of the six eyes staring at him, drummed his fingertips on his desk as the ash of his cigarette grew.

Finally, his swivel chair creaking, he turned to the family but with his eyes only for Teddy Hivereve. He was smiling, he began talking while the Lucky burned from the middle of his mouth, but there was something different in his aged, rheumy eyes. "I'd like you to run down to Hook Drug Store, at the corner, Ted.

For some fifteen minutes. Could you do that for me?"

"It's night." Teddy and Dear spoke simultaneously.

"Yes, it is." Dr. Biddle peered languidly at his wall clock. "Not quite eight o'clock in the evening, to be precise."

"He would have to cross the street," Dear said. "Rural Avenue."

"There's a stoplight at the corner," the physician explained patiently, "and Teddy is not stupid or, for that matter, colorblind."

"Niles, you go with him," Dear said.

"Like hell," Niles said. He handed Teddy a jacket he'd brought with them.

"Ted," Dr. Biddle said as he helped Teddy slide down from the table, "the bleeding has stopped. If you resist any sudden wayward impulses to breaking into the neighboring houses between here and the drugstore — and cross with the light — your chances of surviving this evening are remarkably good."

Grinning, a bit ashamed of his hesitation, Teddy pulled the door of the examining room open.

"Hold," the doctor called. Teddy glanced back. Dr. Biddle was jamming two big fingers and a white thumb into his vest pocket. He drew from it three quarters, and brandished the coins like a magician with three squirming rabbits. "See if you can manage to get rid of these for me. I don't care for their particular dates."

Teddy made the quarters disappear into the pocket of his corduroys. Dr. Biddle had put a new bandage on his knee and he felt fine now. He was through the door in a flash.

"Blood is a great deal like love," the old man said,

his voice carrying to Teddy where he stopped beside the table with the waiting pills. "Which makes it the root of the vampire legend. A little of it seems to go a long way and there always appears to be an inexhaustible supply."

Teddy felt the pressure of the three quarters in his pocket when he got outside, was reassured that they hadn't somehow vanished. He had never taken a walk on Tenth Street, it was dark, and the sense of adventure he'd experienced for a few moments during his walk home from school immediately returned. His knee hurt only a tiny bit, all his nausea had fled, and he was surprised by how much warmer the temperature was than it had seemed to be at home or during the ride to the doctor's office—nearly like spring. Because this was a busy street running many miles from west to east, it was well lit both by street lights and neon lights still burning in the handful of businesses that were closed for the night. It was wonderful to think that electricity could make a whole city block like day; he wondered for a moment how children had survived hundreds of years ago before Mr. Edison was born.

He saw several children playing in side yards as he passed, felt paternally that it was prob'ly too late for them to be up. There was a little golden-haired girl kneeling to a game of twinkling jacks. Near her, a boy of three or so galloped in awkward haste after a red rubber ball. They played behind fences that kept them (Teddy noticed approvingly) from running out into the street. You had to be careful with little kids.

Neither the sister and brother nor the other children Teddy observed on his trek to the corner of Tenth and Rural chanced to glance his way.

Arriving there, Teddy became momentarily frozen to the concrete, painfully aware of instructions his Dear and also teachers (during auditorium) had given about looking both ways. At first, the way appeared clear. He dipped his toe into the street as if it was White River. Instantly, a truck as big as a building thundered past, and Teddy jumped back on the curb with renewed appreciation for Dear. Across the street he saw a woman mauled by age, contorted by it into cameo size; her shoulders were so hunched she prob'ly kept her used years there for safekeeping. A man with a beard of pepper, no expression on what face he had, and a cap tugged over his forehead burst by Teddy and brushed his arm as he darted into the street and dodged between passing automobiles. There was a boy of sixteen, maybe, looking at Teddy across the street, bouncing on the balls of his feet like they were made of rubber—and he was much bigger than Niles! Teddy realized then that he was *colored*, too, a type of person Dear had said to stay away from. He and Teddy started across as the light turned green and the height, the obvious strength, of the older boy dazzled Teddy as they passed. Was it conceivable *he* could be that tall when he was sixteen?

The wood floor squeaking beneath Teddy's slight weight as he entered Hook Drugs added to the notifying tinkle of a bell above the door to suggest something familiar. Each time he'd been inside drugstores with his folks, he'd liked it; the advertising offers scribbled in chalk on the store windows looked neat from inside, the countless boxes and bottles of things that made people feel better held him in thrall. They came in ten jillion shapes and sizes and answered every human need, so far as Teddy could detect.

Prowling the aisles, touching stuff and trying to read the labels, was something he'd prob'ly always enjoy doing.

The jingling bell, Teddy realized, had alerted a man at the back of Hook's—graying, majestically high above the floor, older'n Niles or Uncle Duane but not old like Dr. Biddle—and the pharmacist was peering myopically at Teddy. The man wore talcum powder on his jowls and it had gotten on his turnipy nose. He had a half-moon, black visor on his alopecic head and he seemed to be painted silver by lights mounted above him, like the Tin Man in Oz books.

Then the pharmacist's eyes dismissed him as a threat and Teddy was standing before a magazine display, free to covet a veritable library of things to read! *Liberty*, *Collier's*, *Smart Set*, *Weird Tales*—that one, looking neat, was made of better paper 'cause the pages were fatter, to last—*American Mercury*, *The Bookman*, *Esquire*, *Police Gazette*. Curious, Teddy picked up a copy of the strangely colored latter periodical and opened it.

Drawings of *almost-naked ladies were inside!*

"Grrr-hhmmmp," said the man with the visor, and Teddy put it back hastily.

He located the comic books around the corner of the rack and saw with immense delight that he was beyond the range of the bulb-nosed pharmacist.

Leafing through them, remembering the trio of quarters in his pants pocket, Teddy peeked above the display at the drugstore man. Prob'ly believed kids always stole things. Teddy didn't. He knew God would burn up his hand if he did, 'cause Dear said so.

"There you are," an adult voice said from behind Teddy.

Dr. Biddle, suit coat buttoned over his vest, wasn't looking at him. Mildly interested of expression, he was reaching out to get a comic, as solidly unhurried and uninsistent as ever.

The old man squinted through his bifocals, nodded. "Ah. 'Human Dynamo vs. Captain Midnight.' Should be interesting."

"*You* read comics?" Teddy demanded.

Dr. Biddle seemed amused. "They have words in them; most at least. Stories. Ideas." He scanned an interior page judiciously. " 'Toonerville Trolley' was my speed in the old days. Now, I suppose I prefer 'The Timid Soul' and that dog, 'Napoleon,' in the funny pages. With 'Krazy Kat' for a taste of spice." He turned his head and gaze toward Teddy. "I had to speak with the pharmacist about a prescription."

Teddy understood. "How sick am I?"

Dr. Biddle tucked "Captain Midnight" under his arm, turned in the direction of the man with the eye shade. "Hard to say. We have to wait for your test results." He smiled. "Don't forget to spend those unacceptable quarters I gave you. This comic is mine."

Inference caught up with implication. "Where're my folks?"

"Outside. They were considerate enough to drop me off here, to wait." He peered straight into Teddy's eyes. For a moment it almost seemed that he couldn't find the words he wanted. "Niles wanted to speak with your mother. Privately, for a few minutes. Ted, you could be pretty sick. I think you know that yourself."

He swallowed, made himself nod.

"However, you could just be a bit run-down. Never

borrow trouble, Teddy. It's the one thing in the world you really don't have to give back but it's still a terrible deal. Do you see?"

He thought he did. "Sort of."

Dr. Biddle gazed at the ceiling, just like he did in his office. "Teachers and moms don't like things such as comics—funny pages—because they feel the need to be very serious about the young people in their charge. So they leave it up to the rest of the world to be somewhat more entertaining."

"Okay."

"If you say so," the old man said, smiling. "The fact is, the rest of the world *can* be pretty amusing. But a boy has to obey his mother at the same time he's keeping his eyes open for the fun. You feel sick now?"

"No," Teddy said truthfully.

"Well, people my age find *that* pretty entertaining. Sometimes it's a matter of knowing fun when you see it." He moved his feet from side to side, cast a glance through the window with the advertising on it, turned back to his patient. "I can keep you feeling 'okay' even if your test results aren't what we hope they'll be. It's *your* job—to pay me back for my trouble—to look for a little more entertainment, all right? That will be a much better deal than borrowing any trouble that . . . people . . . offer you."

Teddy got his quarters out of his corduroys, hurriedly selected six comic books. He even had enough left for a candy bar!

"Walk with me back to see Mr. Randall and I'll walk you out to your parents when we've paid for our reading matter," Dr. Biddle said lightly. He lowered his voice to a note of conspiracy. "Put those maga-

zines under your jacket before we leave the store. You can never tell when we might have a sudden shower."

2

Getting a treat after going quietly to see the doctor and being a good boy was a tradition the folks observed whenever they felt they had enough time and money, so they made a late-evening stop at the North Pole after collecting Teddy and his new prescription. Chocolate custard that melted in one's mouth was the North Pole's specialty so Teddy ordered a dish, too, and sat with his parents in the car while they ate it. Niles, who sometimes really seemed to like the white-clad "Polar Bear" curb girls and chatted with them a lot, just passed along their order tonight. He even forgot to stipulate that the girl bring glasses of water for them—something Dear expected regardless of where they went to eat—but she remembered, automatically, leaning across Niles to add the request in her no-nonsense tone.

The three of them waited for and ate the custard without great enthusiasm and in a near silence that made Teddy remember how quiet it had been before Dear said she wanted a divorce. Teddy, eager to go home and read the comic books he'd bought, kept them tucked carefully inside his jacket and was even more careful not to bring up the divorce thing. Maybe they'd gotten so upset about his bleeding that they had forgotten.

Driving home was better than going to the doctor's since Teddy was sitting up, ignoring the rags on the floor. Yet it was like driving through chocolate syrup

stillness; dreamlike. After ten, this part of the city—miles from Monument Circle, the hub of town—had little traffic. Just about all that was said on the way home was Niles's thought: "Teddy won't have to miss much school this time since it's almost spring vacation." Dear said nothing in reply; her neck looked stiff like Uncle Duane's from behind. It was hard to tell if she was worried about Teddy, mad again, or thinking about the spilled blood on the carpet and tablecloth.

Something astonishing happened after Niles put the car in the garage. He didn't turn the key in the ignition at once or make any move to open the car door. When he sighed and finally turned off the motor, Dear took a long look at him, then reached out with her hand to grip Niles's. "I'm sorry," Niles apologized.

And Dear didn't yell or sniff her nose or do any of the other things Teddy was expecting.

She held on to Niles's hand and nodded. And when he sighed heavily and opened the door to get out, light from the car's interior showed Dear's eyes at her softest, her tenderest. They seemed swept by rain and she wasn't looking at Teddy.

It was one of the scariest things he'd seen all day.

Lights were left on in the house that usually weren't. Teddy wondered as his Dear wordlessly assisted him out of the backseat of the car if Uncle Duane was back.

He was. The telltale scent of whiskey sat like a careless rump on the unstirred air in the house. When the threesome trooped into the front room, Uncle Duane was afoot, leaning on his crutch.

The other surprise was that he was clutching a

drink in his meaty hand and making no effort to conceal it.

"I found your note about the kid," he said, his growl of a voice genuinely concerned. "What's up?"

Dear brushed past him, running toward the stairway, wailing a torrent of indistinguishable emotion. The heels of her good shoes on the steps were pistol shots to Teddy.

Partly bewildered, definitely scared, Teddy took two steps after her. He had to go number one bad.

Niles, behind him, whispered a reply as the two men's eyes were trained on Teddy. "It's—not good," he said.

3

Evelyn started to slam the bedroom door behind her, realized she wasn't angry at Niles anymore, and eased it shut, then acted on the wave of anger over her inability to do anything for Teddy by tearing off her best blouse and almost making a rip in the waistband of her skirt. She left it in a pile, stepped out, and kicked it away when her toe caught in the skirt's hem.

What were clothes when her darling little Teddy was sick again and that goddamn old fool of a physician couldn't even give them a *hint* of what was the matter with him until Biddle's precious tests came back from the laboratory?

One shoe fell away as she headed in bra and panties toward the place where she had left her family Bible. Evelyn kicked her leg out again and sent the second shoe flying in the general direction of the first, then

took the dog-eared Bible from where it lay on the top of her dresser with the musicians union magazine and her favorite numerology book. Sitting at her vanity table, she tried to focus her attention on Paul's Acts of the Apostles but the lights in the room were all wrong and she couldn't concentrate. She started to pitch the Bible across the room, caught herself with a consuming but fleeting sense of self-horror, and put it atop her oval box of face powder.

The damn bra straps were cutting her in two, so she removed it, hooked it on the back of her pretty white chair, and checked out Teddy's numerology for the day.

It was *there*, obvious for the whole world to see! Teddy was a Five and liquids in a negative fashion were indicated *all day*, but the good *doctor* didn't have enough sense to pound sand in a rathole so *he* had to depend on the tests with poor baby Teddy's precious liquids of life!

The reflection of herself in the heart-shaped mirror over the vanity showed an extremely pretty half-naked woman who was neither particularly young nor aging in any conspicuously significant way, but the mirrored Evelyn had absolutely no makeup on her god-damn fish-belly-white face and the suddenness of seeing her reflection was like encountering a ghost right out of the blue. Shocked, Evelyn sat down again and began remedying the situation—making herself up—as swiftly as she could. *Nowhere to go but heaven*, she thought, realized what a good name that would be for a nice old-fashioned gospel song, and impulsively made a note of the idea on the surface of her mirror. Top composers like Hoagy always wrote down their God-given inspirations the moment they

occurred to them. It was like angels took over the very mind of a creative woman now and then; they just didn't stay around. " ' . . . But heaven,' " she said quietly as she applied her lipstick to the mirror. To the best of her ability she didn't write the note where she could see her face reflected back to her and she'd copy it sometime tomorrow, probably—maybe yet that night if the music came over her and she wanted to play and create.

Now the damn lipstick was blunt and useless on the end! It wouldn't make even a bit of the Pickford cupid's-bow Evelyn strove to add to her mouth, it smeared and made her lips look big as a colored person's, and no one made anything *good*—to *last*—anymore! Angry, she hurled the lipstick tube at the mirror, tears coming to her pretty eyes.

"They *are* pretty, too," she reminded the red-daubed Evelyn in the glass. "The mirrors to the soul just like Mom and Alexandra said." She sat straight on her white chair, studying herself, pleased by how her breasts rose when she straightened. But she should have used them like God intended and breast-fed Teddy instead of letting Niles slobber all over them, then sweet Teddy might not get sick so frequently.

Slipping forward, the lower portion of her face pressed to one arm, she remembered just what she had told old man Biddle. "My sweet little Teddy is all I have left in this veil of tears, doctor. I must be selective about the things that he does on his own—*that's* why I didn't want him to walk to the drugstore by himself. There are terrible people on the streets; perverts."

"Evvie, he'll be fine," Niles had assured her. The

imbecile! If he'd said that one more time, she would have struck him in spite of Biddle's presence! "He's different from other children," she explained, so patiently. "Special. He's a bright, talented, sensitive, superior human being."

"Evelyn, a grown man in Germany right this minute talks a lot about things like superiority." That old son of a bitch had dared mention Hitler and, by extension, Hitler's mother, in the same breath as he'd talked about her and Teddy! He must be senile.

Yet she attempted to make him see that God had bestowed a truly remarkable life on Teddy, and he had just *agreed*—said Teddy's life *was* remarkable—then changed the subject entirely. "You know, you get more like your father E.H. with every passing week, Evelyn. It's rare to see a daughter take so much after her daddy."

And she'd known it wasn't meant as praise, absolutely not, however great E.H. had been. But there was more than one way to skin a cat so she'd replied, "Thank you, sir, thank you for the first kind words spoken to me this whole week." And she'd asked, "Will you tell us what you believe is the matter with my precious son tonight or not?"

But he hadn't, he'd refused, he'd acted the way *all men* acted when an intelligent modern woman dared to stand up for her rights and seek the truth. "Then we have nothing left to discuss," she'd told him, getting right off her chair, massing the dignity that was so often a poor woman's sole defense in the masculine world. She had taken Niles firmly by the arm, ready to leave—

And begun to weep. Oh God, the *embarrassment* of that instant! Evelyn turned her head from side to

side on her arm, smearing her new lipstick everywhere. Niles and Teddy and Duane and self-important Dr. Biddle had reduced her to tears, obliged her to sit sobbing in the car and try to be comforted by Niles while *Biddle* went into the drugstore to get Teddy and his medicine—

But how could the old fool know what to prescribe for Teddy if he didn't know what was wrong with him? That nonsense about something being *wrong* with Teddy's *blood*, when he just happened to be one-half Mengaldt! Maybe Duane was right and he'd lost touch with reality! Was it even possible he was poisoning her little child, her *only* child? Maybe she'd made a mistake in not having more children. She absolutely couldn't *bear* the thought of *losing him*!

I need to put on something nice, something pretty, frilly, Evelyn decided. The time of the day or night didn't matter; in a house with high ceilings, heavy drapes, and electricity, it could be whatever hour one desired. Jumping up from the vanity, she wriggled out of her panties and returned, naked, to her dresser.

She was so happy her niece Cass would be there, visiting, in a few days. The first thought—the very first consideration—was Teddy's condition, but what he needed as much as anything was the sound of music. It soothed angry beasts or breasts—something of the kind. Music had power. That and prayer would make her darling little boy as good as new!

4

There were clean pajamas for him in the second drawer of his dresser and Teddy couldn't wait to get

out of his bloody shirt and cords, then into fresh PJs—whatever would help him put the ordeals of the evening behind him. He undressed in the bathroom, very tired and aching with confusion, then sat on the toilet and waited to pee.

Discovering Uncle Duane with a drink in his hand had been a real surprise. Just like Teddy, he had house rules he was supposed to follow whenever he visited, and this wasn't the Christmas season, it was spring. Teddy'd never understood why it was all right for Duane to have a drink late in December but had to leave his bottle in his coat pocket the rest of the time, but Uncle Duane usually kept the rules—unless he showed up at the house already drunk and had to sober up. With the bottle he kept in his pocket, of course, the sobering-up process could take days. He supposed the note Duane'd found, from Dear, could have said it was okay to start drinking that night but he doubted it. More likely the note—since it said Dear and Niles were taking him to the doctor's—had scared Uncle Duane. But that would mean he really got worried about someone else sometimes, and that was both surprising news to Teddy and a little spooky.

'Cause it would mean everybody was already real scared about his health even before the folks took him to Dr. Biddle's.

Nobody had told him what the matter with him was, not even Dr. Biddle, but he knew he wasn't supposed to just start bleeding everywhere. Teddy glanced at his knee, bare except for the new bandage; the blood there was staying inside, like it should. Having to take tests for this was sort of funny. Grown-ups didn't just test your mind, the stuff you knew. They expected every single part of your dumb

body to be able to pass, to follow the rules they'd made up maybe a million years ago. How could he help it if his blood got stupid sometimes and wouldn't stay in?

Standing, turning to look into the toilet bowl (no number two, darn it), he realized that he felt okay now. Not really *good*, but not bad either. He flushed the toilet, washed his hands, used a soapy washcloth to bathe the traces of brownish-looking blood from his face, and got into his PJs. Time to tell the folks goodnight, get his kisses, say his prayers, and go to sleep. Tonight's troubles weren't over, he knew that (not till the grades on his tests came back), but it was spring vacation now. He could sleep late if he wanted—prob'ly—and there were six new comic books lying on his bed where he'd put them—under the pillow for safekeeping. Everything would be okay. Fine.

Spirits soaring at the mere prospect of spring, Teddy dashed out into the hall, sprinted to the steps, saw Niles and Uncle Duane in the front room. Something about the fact that they were still standing made him change his mind about going downstairs to kiss Niles. "Goin to bed," Teddy called.

Both men, backs turned to the stairs, glanced around and up. Niles said, "G'night, Ted." He remained where he was. Uncle Duane's amber bottle caught a glint of light as it vanished into his hip pocket. "Yell at me if you need anything," Niles added. And Uncle Duane said, "G'night, kid," his smile lopsided, his face ruddy. "I know you'll be fine."

"I know," Teddy said, heading up the hall toward Dear and Niles's room. He hoped Dear didn't catch

Niles taking a drink of Uncle Duane's whiskey. She had it too at Christmas and when she played music out but she didn't think it was right for little children to see their folks drink. That was sort of funny to Teddy since a glass of booze didn't seem to him to look much different than a glass of Coke. But mothers always told the truth and knew what was right for kids so he guessed he must not understand.

It was dark right outside the folks' bedroom and the door was ajar, not quite closed tight. Dear'd told him many, many times to knock before entering a room but he was thinking about reading part of one of his comic books, just to get into it for morning. If it was a comic book about a brave hero, it might give him enough courage to get out of bed and go turn off the lights again. He turned the doorknob the littlest way, pushed the door back, and walked inside.

He became a staring statue, incapable of motion or speech.

Dear, her supple neck bent, was searching for clothes or something in her dresser, and she was naked. She didn't have nothing on. Her side was to him, across the room, and she didn't see him yet, and he had never seen anyone naked all the way but himself in a mirror, and he hadn't paid any attention to that. She was even bigger without her clothes, more imposing or grown-up or older, and even his most casual glimpses of his own body had been sufficient to inform him, now, that his Dear wasn't just bigger or stronger or older than he was, but unforeseeably, informatively different.

Dear was dissimilar, distinct in her otherness from him, and he could not be just like her when he was big regardless of how hard either she or he tried. The

fleshy bottom was not like his skinny one, there was a faint droop to her belly (his was a bunch of visible ribs and a belly button anybody could see without trying), and the higher portion of his Dear was nothing whatsoever like his own or Niles's chest—it, or *they*, were prob'ly the way his cousin Cass's chest was with no shirt. And he remembered sharply then that he'd wanted to *see* his cousin's chest, a lot.

She sensed his presence, turned very quickly to face him. The female image of circularity beneath the belly button, a checkered pattern of pale round skin and very dark shadow below the topmost pattern of pale, swinging flesh and dual darknesses was one that an assimilative part of Teddy's brain realized he had absorbed forevermore.

"You goddamn little pervert!"

Teddy ducked out into the hallway, one furtive hand catching the door and slamming it shut behind him.

He leaned against it in panic, panting with fright. He'd heard that word from Dear before but never directed at him, always in description of some horrible being that Niles and Uncle Duane and Dr. Biddle and Niles's dead daddy and even President Franklin D. Roosevelt could never be. Instinctively, he knew it applied to men, not women—but not even any of the men in the Mengaldt family! Perverts were prob'ly the worst human beings on earth, and his very own Dear had told him he was *one of them!* Dear Jesus, what did that mean he had done, and what could he do to *undo* it! Was it entering a room without knocking—or seeing ladies naked—or . . . or *what?*

"Just *wait* till I get my hands on you, Teddy Hivereve!" Dear shouted. Teddy heard drawers open-

ing and slamming shut, small feet stomping, the rustle of clothing. He wanted to run but knew there was nowhere to run to. Eyes closed tightly, he waited, needful of prayer but fearing that path sealed to him by his mother's open line to God. Any instant the door would burst wide (then what?).

Then, as though the intention of prayer had opened a very different line, he remembered the boy's face he had seen recently in the coffee pot . . . in the crystal of the chandelier above the dining table . . . in the window of a house that was empty, yet might well be his own house. The boy who'd looked like him, but older, different in ways that were greater than the fact that the other boy hadn't needed glasses for seeing the world. A wide-eyed, happier boy who might know what to *do* about things. If only it was possible to . . . meet him . . . face to face . . .

The door swung open and a rapidly dressed Dear stood in the doorway. His image of the boy who looked like him disintegrated, the force of his loss backing Teddy against the wall.

"Come into this room!"

Teddy went, hanging back. Dear caught his hand and wrist in one of her hands and dragged him to the center of the bedroom where he squeezed his eyelids together, strove to keep them that way.

"Open your eyes!" Dear waited until he did. "My duty is clear. Damn you, Teddy—I didn't know you were a goddamn sneak like the rest of the Hivereves!"

That was some improvement. An upgrading.

His Dear dropped to her knees before him, rolled her eyes back, and folded her hands together—clasped them, one hand crossing the other—and lifted them toward the ceiling. Teddy looked up too

but he didn't see anything except the ceiling.

"Cleanse my little boy of Hivereve filth and corruption, Lord," she prayed, "strip him of the evil which had been passed to him through no fault of his or his mother!"

His heart began to thump hard in his chest again. Praying, too, was an improvement, but he was aware that he was supposed to be a big part of it and he wasn't convinced Dear would present his side of the story accurately. He was certain he hadn't meant to see her with no clothes, hadn't *really* sneaked at all. He said, "Uh-huh," when he saw her peek at him between her upraised arms.

"*Cleanse* him, Lord, your humble servant knows thou wisheth for my son to be clean, and good, and pure in your sight. He's *your Creation*, dear Lord—he's my perfect little darling and your servant, too!" Her pause was minimal but Teddy caught it and nodded. He was starting to sweat a lot, it was getting on his glasses, and he *hadn't done anything wrong on purpose*. "Forgive his loathsome sin, I beseech you. *Forgive him!*"

Teddy said in a small voice, "I just wanted to give you a night kiss."

Dear swept her gaze heavenward once more. Then her hands jerked and spasmed. They remained in the air but she was looking between her arms at Teddy and her eyes were suddenly turning again to chocolate pudding. "He might strike you dead if you are lying to me, Teddy."

Teddy closed his eyes, froze, readying himself for the blow if it was coming. "I'm not." He was astonished to feel tears seeping between his eyelids. "I wasn't t-trying t'do anything but give you a kiss 'cause

I was tired and wanted t'go to bed."

Dear cried too. She put out both hands from where she knelt, enfolded his head in them, and sobbed, "Forgive the two of us, Lord, mother and child, for doubting the power of your gifts of perfection and goodness. Now, dear God, *now*"—she peered past Teddy, again upward, tears shining on her cheeks—"*heal* my poor little boy of the diseases of man and mammon! Send the rays of health throughout his tortured body—"

"Mention the blood part," Teddy added in a whisper.

"The blood part too," Dear added, tears like gentle rain on his forehead. "Make him new again; *heal* him! You *must not* want my Teddy to be ill, You *must not!*"

Teddy said, "Amen." Hopefully.

He kept himself from yawning till after she was through. Exchange of night kisses accomplished, he went into his room, got in bed with the light still on, and stared at the half-wrecked, skeletal comic rack on the other side of his bedroom. He fell asleep with an unclear picture of a boy without glasses who bore a close resemblance to the way he might look. One day.

Chapter Eight

1

Having tried very hard to expunge the Hiverve family's coarse and earthbound impurities from her beloved son with prayer, Evelyn was emptied and lay prostrate on her bed. She knew that she should get up, remove her hastily donned clothes and put on a nightie before going to sleep, but it had been an exhausting day.

Besides, she felt definitely uncomfortable about disrobing after the horrible thing that had happened. Not that it was Teddy's fault; consciously, he had only wished to tell his beloved Dear good night and bestow a sweet kiss. Unconsciously, of course, in spite of everything she had striven so hard to accomplish, he *was* part Hiverve. In the final analysis, nothing on earth could keep that from being the case, and it was plain as the nose on anyone's face that he was sick so much for the very fact that he *was* a Hiverve. They simply didn't have the constitutions of Mengaldts like Duane, like E.H.

The thought of her father, dead on the stairway of his office building—a victim of lesser men, jealous and vicious people who lacked all compassion (and

possessed no more than an iota of his shrewdness or even his wit!)—had its usual effect on Evelyn: a longing to be just like him, an awareness that she could never be because of her gender—and recollections of Daddy coming home drunk, throwing a whiskey bottle in the base burner when Mom asked him if he was going to stay that night (or go off on another toot), slapping Duane, working so hard to keep from losing his temper completely and beating up on Mama again.

But never laying a finger on her. On his little girl. Not once.

Not really.

Evelyn shivered, drew the spread up over her legs and lower body. If Teddy could just wander into the bedroom, who couldn't? When you considered the fact that the grown men in her family—*grown!*—were downstairs getting tight because they couldn't cope with the idea that something was wrong with Teddy's blood and left it up to her to save him—and because getting tight and *running away* was *what they did*—who *couldn't* just wander into the room, and *take* her, whenever they pleased? Ruthless, worthless bullies, the lot of them!

Tears made her eyes smart, but she refused to cry, to let them out. Men *wanted* you to cry and give in, not to fight back, never to be as tough as they themselves thought they were, it wasn't *ladylike*. It made them goddamn *happy* to reduce innocent women to tears—always for no better purpose than because they wanted to be Big Men, wanted to use their *things* on women! *Myyy gawd*, they had no control whatever over a silly scrap of skin and gristle you could hold in your hand—and how they loved *that*, just be-

ing handled, touched, *manipulated* like every inch of a woman was manipulated by their every word and caress. But a woman who knew the ways of the world, of men, had her own weapon—her own *pistol!*—to use in beating them to the attack, if she had the courage (the balls!) to bring out her whole arsenal. It was only that most women were so *afraid* of hurting the feelings of big, brave men, scared to death of being alone and obliged to fend for themselves—frightened half to death because *they* didn't possess a smidgen of Evelyn Mengaldt's talent . . . and they . . .

Vaguely self-derailed in the overlaid and intricate track of her thoughts, Evelyn rolled on her side. She recalled how absorbed she had been as a girl by the wondrous, magical story that Mama's friend Alexandra told her . . . about the tulpa . . . the concept of an artificial man. Someone women could make with their own spirit and imaginations, their powers of religion and mystical belief. Without men's help. Sheer fascination. One had a yearning, a need; the wish, the focused belief—and anything they required in the way of a man was created, perfectly.

And then wished away . . . whenever one was through with him.

Everything could have been so different, Evelyn thought with infinite wistfulness, if Teddy had only been a girl.

Niles was ready to go up to bed but he hated to leave his brother-in-law just standing there. He also hated the possibility of Duane getting really popped

and falling on something, injuring himself or breaking a chair. "I don't know if Evvie really heard what Dr. Biddle said." He leaned against the wall beside the stairs. "She has a way of blocking out things she doesn't want to hear."

Duane glanced at Niles, who was nearly ten years younger, to determine if this was an insult to his sister. "She only hears what she wants, that's for god-damn sure." Duane put most of his weight on his crutch and that obliged him to jut forward somewhat from the hips in order to maintain his balance. He'd become very good at it, for those infrequent times when he was drinking and was obliged to stand instead of sit. "She remembers everything in the past and all the shit you wish she wouldn't remember."

"Well," Niles said with a frown, "she'd better get this thing through her head. Blood disorders can be pretty serious." His two swigs from Duane's bottle left a warm, emboldening spot in his belly but Niles was just as glad Teddy had shown up when he did. As Duane had expressed it, one smell of the cork and he was gone. "Biddle was trying as hard as he could to prepare us in case the test results are really bad."

Duane used his free hand to smooth his red hair back. He'd finished his drink in the glass, and part of him thirsted for Niles to go on up so he could finish the pint in his pocket. The other part—Evelyn's note about taking Teddy to the doctor—was what had made him need a drink immediately. He cleared his throat, stared up from half-closed lids. "Sis is a damn good woman. A good sister."

"I know that," Niles said. What was Duane getting at?

"And I'm an old souse who fucked up the raising of

his own kid." Tears came to his eyes but he let them be. "Cass hates my goddamn guts, and I guess I don't blame her. *However . . .*"

Niles checked his watch, suddenly wanted badly to be in bed. Duane was using his lawyer voice. Every now and then the man pretended he was like E.H., his father. All he succeeded in doing was sounding the same way E.H. did, like a know-it-all.

"Sis is spoiling the crap out of that kid," Duane continued, blinking. "Maybe 'spoil' isn't the word. Do you *know* how she gets on him about his goddamn BMs?"

Niles again looked at his watch but more ostentatiously. "I have to get up early in the morning and —"

"Listen to me, goddamnit! I was like E.H. Never home." Duane wrested the pint from his pocket, uncapped it after pinching the hand grasp of the crutch between his elbow and his body. "But Evelyn goes the other way — she doesn't let the kid take a *piss* by himself!"

Irked, Niles cupped Duane's hand with his own before the bottle could be raised to Duane's mouth. "Evelyn didn't make up Teddy's illness last year. Scarlet fever is —"

"*In the past!*" Duane completed the sentence. He pulled his hand loose, drank deeply. "Like I said, she remembers everything that happened, she *holds on* to it even when it's gone, and *should* be gone!"

"I've gotta get to bed." Niles paused, ready to say something about the way Duane was breaking house rules, remembered they were Evvie's house rules and Duane knew that. "Big day tomorrow."

"To hell with it, then. Go to hell!" Lips working, Duane tore himself around in the opposite direction

mainly by willpower, and started for his couch in the dining room. "It's your house, your wife, your boy."

Niles' low-burning temper stirred. "What're you doing, Duane? Planning to get drunk as a skunk so you can screw up enough guts to face your daughter when she arrives? Don't do it to her, Duane. Or to Evvie, to yourself."

The older but more muscular man stopped in the entrance to the dining room. He didn't turn, he stood straight on both his feet. Light from the ruptured chandelier in the dining room left a shadow lying across his bent, broad shoulders and the rest of him was illuminated. The muscles at the top of his shoulders tensed, tightened.

Duane glanced back with a lopsided grin. "I hadn't screwed up my life entirely until after my wife threw me out, Niles. I didn't want to be a goddamn part-time father; didn't know how to be."

He limped into the dining room and muttered so softly that Niles couldn't be sure if he'd really added, "At least I was a full-timer for the first ten years of Cass's life."

3

He was virtually never seen without his suit coat on, a cleanly pressed white shirt, and a single-color (the shade: dark) tie. He'd been buried that way, too, and had worn the dark-colored trousers that accompanied the suit jacket. Evelyn was certain of it because, having heard a rumor that morticians left a casket open only half the way in order to keep the pants for themselves, she looked. Opened the lid and checked.

In life, Uncle Rob had been a slightly built man—the kind whom the Lord appeared to have made with the last of the material at hand for the week—who was always and in all ways spare and meager. It wasn't that he was parsimonious, willfully tight-fisted, intentionally narrow, or illiberal socially. True selfishness and bigotry demand passion, substance—and Uncle Rob was born without an overabundance of anything. He barely had enough breadth to make a shadow.

It also wasn't true that he was buried in the one suit he wore as an adult. It was one of two, and Evelyn, his sole surviving female relative, had given it to Duane along with two of the remaining, aboveground trio of ties Rob Mengaldt left as his earthly assets. (Teddy got the other and that made two in case he should ever again be stuck with going to a funeral.) Considering that she had fully expected to inherit what she had described to her brother as "a small fortune," Evelyn had conducted herself in an exemplary manner after Uncle Rob was underground. Instead of asking a lot of questions concerning the whereabouts of E.H.'s money—which she had assumed Rob got when her father died (or was murdered)—she had persuaded Niles to help her excavate approximately four feet of the earth where her late uncle had planted his petunias. Rob had never evinced the slightest interest in flowers until E.H.'s untimely demise, and looking for the missing money had seemed reasonable enough—to Evelyn—at the time.

Once again she had gone empty-handed.

Then, when she began to ask questions of all those who had been business associates of Uncle Rob, the entire investigation had consumed a single afternoon

and roughly two hours of the following morning. Everyone who'd called either father or uncle "colleague" appeared to have already died. The grand total of living human beings who admitted to having worked with either brother was three.

Evelyn had abandoned her search then in spite of the fact that merely three years had passed since Uncle Rob's solitary departure from the veil of tears, six since her beloved daddy's death/murder/assassination. But it was incomprehensible to her, nevertheless. Where had all the backers for E.H.'s nine-year-old campaign for the governorship gone to? It had seemed especially mysterious since Robert Mengaltdt had acted as E.H.'s campaign chairman.

Now, Uncle Rob was taking form at the foot of Evelyn's bed. She had no doubt at all that it was her uncle even before the swirling gray mist reconciled itself into a recognizably human conformation, but she was interested in the way this visitation transpired. In the first place, most of the other dead family members who had decided to materialize in Draden House had first given the impression that a great amount of effort and what Evelyn took for ectoplasm were needed to cross over. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, an infant cousin, even a few ex-neighbors who had been nice to Evelyn when she was little had made their appearances amid production values worthy of a Busby Berkley film: clouds of miasmatic but breathable smoke, flashing sparks, and more ambitious bolts of jagged lightning. The occasional heavenly choir singing their hearts out even while they were discreetly offstage, unable to make the journey. Glimpses of disembodied, grinning skulls with bits of white bone brandished on the fringes of the gray cloud. Fre-

quently, organ music or harp music, or both.

Uncle Rob's materialization cloud didn't extend to either side more than half a foot, didn't even reach the bedroom ceiling, and contained absolutely nothing detectable of interest except perhaps for Uncle Rob himself.

Just short of gaunt, pale face mirthless, high cheekbones so prominent that his compressed lips looked only an inch in width, moving toward the bed with such economical steps that he gave the impression of floating—silent as death—Uncle Rob appeared no different than he had in life. Or, Evelyn thought despite herself, in his coffin.

"I'm sorry I had to get help in putting the lid back down," she said.

"That's of no consequence now," he answered. His voice . . . it was (what was that damn word?) sepulchral. *Of the grave*. The only thing familiar about the voice was the way it nearly snapped, bit your head off. Perhaps, in this form, it could. "I came because of the boy."

Evelyn got up on her elbows for the first time, surreptitiously made sure her own form was properly covered. "Teddy?"

"Of course," he said with familiar irascibility. "Would I be here about the Lindbergh baby?" He came no nearer, but something seemed to be wrong with his mouth. Or *in* it. "I came here as well because you keep blithering about the visits from members of the family on the other side. It was my turn." His hand indicated the foot of the bed. "May I sit?"

"Please," she said. She sat up—not too quickly—pressing the covers to her breast. "There's a chair in the corner . . ."

"Thank you, but this calls for enough effort the way it is," he said, descending soundlessly till his skinny flanks were at ease. "How've you been?"

"Well enough, thank you. I've never been the same since Teddy was born."

"Of course," Uncle Rob replied. "You're a mother now. One reason I never married is because most females want children. Never could abide them in life or death."

"But you said you came," Evelyn said carefully, "because of Teddy."

"Doesn't mean I wanted to, damnit. What do you think—we play harps from dawn to dusk? The human kind, alive or dead, has obligations; work to do." He made a hawking sound in his throat. It seemed for a moment that he might want to spit but then it passed. "You know all about work and duty, woman. Duty never ends, Evelyn, remember that. Duty and the obligation to guard against the constant incursions of evil."

"You were always industrious," she said dreamily. "Prudent, too."

"Had to be," Uncle Rob said with a nod. "Someone had to bring in income after your father was thrown out and came to live with me."

Evelyn's cheeks flamed. "Don't you *dare* tell me E.H. didn't carry his share! He was the best attorney this town ever produced." Bravely, she pointed straight at the apparition. "You know it, too—you managed his campaign for governor!"

Uncle Rob rose from the bed two inches. He didn't stand, but he rose. "I dare what I please, Evelyn! I'm a Mengaltdt, I'm dead and beyond your feminine wiles, and—you *dug up my petunia bed!*"

"You kept money that was rightfully mine!" Evelyn said. "You didn't even leave a *will*, you tight-fisted old bastard!"

His colorless brows rose. "There was nothing to leave, woman. It took every red cent I had to pay for that goddamned pointless campaign your father talked me into—and to pay the fines, liquor bills, all the rest of it. You stole all his genius when he created you, Evelyn. Thank the Almighty you also got part of your mother's compassion." He began coughing again—*gaaagh, gaaaghg*—and his pasty face was red for an instant.

Then he *smiled at her*—the first smile Evelyn had ever seen on his face. He put out a bony hand, veins risen from the thin, ectoplasmic skin as if trying to escape. He put the hand on her foot and part of the ankle. "You've got spunk, Evelyn," he said, chuckling in that strangely unfamiliar register, "I'll give you that."

"I am a Mengaldt." She jerked her foot back.

"Who married *and bore* a Hivereve." Uncle Rob folded his arms, clucked his tongue. "Well, well, 'art in the blood' and all that." He stared at Evelyn, hard, giving the impression to her that the upper half of his body—the portion that was publicly exposed in his casket—shot forth the length of the bed. "You're the Mengaldt who got *talent*, Evelyn! And you pissed it away on a Hivereve."

"Don't say 'pissed,' it's a dirty word."

He brushed it aside. "You were the only one of us with creativity—until Teddy came along. Of course, his artistry's mixed with the other blood. He takes a lot of care."

"Then you know how talented my little darling is,"

Evelyn marveled. She had tears in her eyes. "And you have come to save my Teddy?"

He laughed nastily. It almost became a hawk. "I'm just dead, Evelyn, not a healer. The trouble with you living folks is you think we know everything, how to do it all, that we meet everybody when we're dead. It's not all Sunday church. It's duty and being ceaselessly on guard against the forces of darkness. Remember that."

"I'm a mother," Evelyn replied simply. "How could I forget?"

"The point is, there's a rumor that your boy will be joining us one of these days."

"Don't say that!" Evelyn began to cry.

"Stop it! No time for tears now." Uncle Rob was standing without having moved. His form was fading. The suit he wore looked more like the one Duane had now, instead of the suit he'd been buried in. He lifted one arm, made it shake, made the hand point spectrally at her. "You're still fertile, Evelyn. I know; we looked into that."

She blushed. "You're all alike then, just as I suspected."

"Let him do it to you." Uncle Rob's dim form trembled. "The Hivereve man, let him do it again when the time is right."

"Why?" Evelyn asked, reaching down the length of the bed, trying to take her uncle's hand and hold him there. Hers passed right through his. "Is it what . . . *They* . . . desire?"

"Nooo," Uncle Rob said. His strange voice was dimmer, seemed to come from a distance. "It's because you're too frail to take it if your boy dies. You might do terrible things. It's for your *ownnn*

gooobod, Evelyn — because if you get pregnant again, *yourrr taaal-ennnt willl flourish* as never before. Throughout your pregnancy, *nothingg* can keep you back. You're meant for *ggreatnesss*, Evelyn — you're a *MMennngaalllddtttt. . .*"

"Don't go, Uncle Rob!" Evelyn cried, reaching out with her beseeching hands.

The apparition regained substance momentarily, cleared his throat with enormous force.

As he faded finally from sight, Uncle Rob left in the palm of Evelyn's hand — the left hand, closest to the heart — a nearly imperceptible, shining, tiny globule of wiggling moisture.

It was magic. At the proper time, Evelyn knew with all her heart, a *true Mengaldt* would be . . . *created* — right there in Draden House!

4

Teddy turned over on his side in his sleep, facing a window. Because the spring weather was getting warmer, His Dear hadn't put the window down and small breezes raised the blinds, permitted the stealthy ingress of the night.

Bathed by gentle air that stirred the fine hairs at the temples and seemed to waft round the still-blond hair at the back of Teddy's neck, his dream began.

He was in another house; younger. People would die there. *Had* died, recently. Loved ones he could never, ever see again in life and whom he might well see very, very often if he went to join them, to be with . . . Grandma.

For a time that seemed long to the sleeping boy but was not, he forgot her. Could not think of her as liv-

ing, like Dear, like Niles, like him, and could not think of her in a long box. In the ground. Could not think of her in Heaven, with Grandpa E.H., because . . . Whimpering, frowning in the darkness (not complete darkness, for the light where Teddy lay now had been left on), his remembering mind urged him to finish the thought.

He did so swiftly, couldn't block it: because dead people didn't *stay* in Heaven or, he s'posed, in hell. They came to visit you—

Unless there was enough light.

In that other house, younger then, in memory alone, Teddy arose and went to an old wooden porch on the other side of the door at the end of his room. He really wasn't s'posed to go out on it; the fall, if anybody fell, would be steep, would hurt a lot.

But he *didn't* fall, he climbed down to the backyard of the other house all by himself, when the music played.

Pretty music. Beautiful music.

Not Dear playing piano.

Beautiful music played for nobody except Teddy.

Light, out by the back fence. *Light*—his friend.

Littleness. Small person, or persons. Beckoning him. A tiny voice: "Teddddy. *Ted-deeeee* . . ."

A gust of wind jarred his sleep, caused him to half open his eyes, badly nearsighted 'cause of the scarlet fever, incapable of seeing far, seeing much. Truly awake—fully and genuinely conscious but able that second to cling to his memory with total visual accuracy—Teddy looked at the smallness, light, himself, all he'd made himself keep from seeing then—and didn't know what he had dreamed, what might be real.

And did not know in the slightest what had ever been real, and what was dream.

Except for the saving light. Except for that which let him know it if *Things* were coming.

"*Teddy!*"

The voice was in his ears, his head, out by the river and out by the back fence; and Teddy sat up partway, his eyelids squeezed shut for all he was worth—

And saw the other boy coming. And smiling.

Singing the song of light and dark he alone had heard—*his* song only—once before.

He slept soundly and didn't see during the night the shining, almost imperceptible shimmer of light moving on the river waves.

5

Niles couldn't remember the last time he had ever disliked a man the way he disliked Duane Mengaldt. They couldn't be more unlike, more dissimilar. The self-made son of a bitch had no real sense of decency, or appreciation, and said the most terrible things he could come up with to hurt other people without even blinking. The bastard had so much idle time on his hands he could lie around and *plan* what he meant to say, pick out the most hurtful remarks, then *save* them for just the right occasion.

Which was to say, the worst possible occasion.

Niles also couldn't remember the last time he'd drunk out of a whiskey bottle, but it was undoubtedly *Duane's* bottle, whenever it had been.

But he'd sure as hell remember tomorrow, and next week, and six months from now when the last time

this time had been — because he hated feeling woozy, off balance, and vulnerable to anyone and everybody with his brain dull as a dishrag, and that *mocking, critical* son of a bitch had done it to him!

Niles got upstairs all right, impelled by an irritation that always developed when he drank, but had to pause on the second-floor landing. Not to get his bearings but because his legs felt like rubber. Of course, it wasn't true that Duane lay around on his fanny all day; that wasn't fair. The redheaded cocksucker was a damn good shoe salesman, just like Evvie said. As fast as he got fired for drinking on one job he got picked up by another shoe store, and he'd been a lowlife drunk for so many years now that he'd started *retracing* his steps — going back to be hired again by the same stores that originally fired his ass!

The phrase "redheaded cocksucker" amused Niles, starting up the hall to his bedroom, made him chuckle out loud. That was probably a *specialist*, a guy who only sucked other men with red hair. Or other men with red hair round their cocks!

Well, why not? Everybody was specializing all at once. Teddy's doctor was one of the last whatchamacallems: "general practitioners." Newest thing happening was *baby doctors*, for God's sake. Specialists in the care of infants — as if Biddle hadn't learned everything a physician could possibly learn about medicine and the care of infants!

Niles peed, wandered into the bedroom, chuckling silently to himself this time so he wouldn't wake up Evelyn. But the joke that had occurred to him was almost beyond suppression: Who in their right minds would go to a baby doctor — folks oughta wait at least till they graduated from kindergarten!

He turned toward the bed and nearly had a heart attack when he realized a human being was sitting on the edge of it, facing him.

"Evelyn!" She'd startled the devil out of Niles, she was so quiet. And so unexpected, just waiting for him in the dark, saying nothing when he entered the room. "What are you doing up?"

She didn't answer. She simply sat there. Smiling.

She sat there in one of her nice blouses, wearing makeup, her hair brushed back the way he liked it.

He glanced down at her legs. Nothing was on them.

She wasn't wearing a stitch below the blouse.

Then she leaned forward, and the blouse fell away from her arms.

She was wearing nothing under it. She wasn't wearing . . . anything.

After a while, when Niles was wearing nothing either, he said, "You're the most fascinating woman I ever knew, Evvie. You never fail to surprise me."

She turned her head to one side, smiled. "Evelyn the eternal mystery. That's the way it's meant to be, honey. How it's supposed to be for all men. If we ever stopped being mystery women, you might start taking us for granted."

"Never," he swore to her, smiling back. "I'll never figure you out in a thousand years."

Chapter Nine

1

"The game when Noblesville—that was my team—played Martinsville was the only one I didn't start."

Uncle Duane was sitting on a chair from the dining room. He'd pulled it into the front room, according to what he had told Teddy, so his daughter Cass would have somewhere to sit when she arrived. That didn't seem to him to make sense because there'd be lotsa room on the couch. Unless Dear lay down the whole time Cass was visiting, and Teddy knew that wouldn't happen. This was one of those occasions when his Dear would prob'ly sit up most of the time there was company—and on the piano bench.

Cass might be the only person in the entire world who loved music and entertaining as much as Dear did.

Of course, Aunt May-May was already on the couch. Niles had gone and gotten her because she was Cass's real aunt. Or something like that. Family relationships were real hard to figure out whether folks

were dead or living. Maybe Aunt May-May was really Uncle Duane's aunt, since she was Dear's, Teddy mused as he looked at the frail elderly woman. All he knew was that there was a time when he began remembering things and certain people had sort of *been there* since, unless they died — which didn't have to mean that they wouldn't be there *again*, actually.

The old woman had her arms folded and she was holding the elbows like she always did and she looked straight ahead and didn't say anything unless somebody else spoke to her. Why she didn't wear her glasses regularly, Teddy didn't know. It was possible that Aunt May-May liked it that way, of course. 'Cause she could always say she didn't hear what was said, might even tell folks she didn't *see* them unless they walked right in front of her.

When you got old, you could play bein smart or you could play bein dumb, and that must be nice. Some teachers said that if you talked too much people would find out how ignorant you were. But Teddy didn't agree. If you were a doctor, you could say anything you wanted, and folks didn't know if you were right; or if you were someone (like Dear) who said things like they *were* doctors, other people just shut up most of the time and listened. So then, if they *thought* you wasn't real smart, it didn't matter 'cause you got what you wanted. (Of course, Dear *was* smart.)

He liked Aunt May-May and there were times when he thought her harelip was neat. Grandma'd said a long time ago not to talk about it with her 'cause she didn't like it, so he hadn't, but it would be kind of interesting if everybody was divided right down the middle that way from head to toe. If doctors wanted

t'take something out of you; it'd be like a zipper, and they'd —

“Coach had caught me in an ol’ bar out on Sixteenth street just the night before. I’d only had a couple of beers but Coach, of course, he didn’t like it that one of his stars would go against team rules.” Uncle Duane was really dressed up today, Teddy noticed. He smelled of bay rum ’cause he’d gone to the barber for both a haircut and a shave. He’d said there was nothing like a professional shave with nice, hot towels, but Teddy hadn’t known anything about that. He did know that Duane was very, very sober even though it was more’n an hour past lunchtime, very gabby, and very, very pale. His face’s skin was white as snow except where his shave had left him reddish — there were big splotches everywhere, even on his neck — and it occurred to Teddy that even his Dear’s Uncle Rob hadn’t looked that clean in his coffin. He wondered if Dear would get all dressed up when he was grown up, or keep from lyin down like she did for Cass.

Where was Dear? Prob’ly puttin on makeup and stuff. Niles had gone to work after bringing Aunt May-May over but he’d said he hoped to be home before Cass left. Dear’d said she planned to ask Cass to stay for a few days if she could, and Niles’d said Oh.

“Thing is, Johnny Wooden hadn’t left Martinsville long enough for the Artesians to lose any of their team confidence, and none of Johnny’s records had been broken.” Duane kept glancing toward the front door every time he heard a sound outside. “All their players figured they just had to go out for the first center jump and they’d whip our arses without working up a sweat,” Remembering the scene from his past

clearly, Uncle Duane's concentration began to grow again. "Every one of 'em believed he'd go on to Purdue and become an All-American, like Wooden. They shot those two-handed jumpers just like Johnny."

Teddy asked dutifully, "What happened?," and then glanced down at his bandaged knee—where it was, actually, under his best corduroys. He was worried that he might begin bleeding again while Cass was there, but he didn't see anything on the knee of his pants.

"Well, Coach wouldn't start me, because of catching me in the bar—he couldn't have done it, of course, if *he* hadn't gone out for a few drinks—but Noblesville fell way behind in the third quarter, and Coach started just looking at me. Just *looking*." Uncle Duane grinned and turned suddenly boyish. Teddy watched him with genuine interest. He'd never seen a grown-up get younger as he spoke except for the times when Uncle Duane told this story and when Dear played piano and everybody was really listening. "He wanted in the worst way to put me in—the *worst* way, kid—but, well, to be fair to Coach, he was worried about team discipline."

"Team discipline is really important," Teddy said, nodding.

Startled, Uncle Duane jerked his head back about two inches. But his nephew was perched innocently on the hassock, meaning no disrespect, intending no mockery. He had merely remembered. "You listened the last time," Duane said, bobbing his chin. "Good." He glanced toward the foyer, but it was only a Roberts Milk truck chugging by, not the arrival of Cass's taxi. "I'll never forget what Coach said when he decided to put me in, Teddy: They're not looking

for the open man, Red.' That's what he said. 'The little sons of bitches aren't looking for the open man!' "

"What did you do when Coach put you in, Uncle Duane?" He noticed a lot of new sheet music fanned out on the whachacallit on top of the piano, wondered when Dear had gotten it. Maybe Ayres had delivered it. His Dear had played in their tea room before, even demonstrated new songs at Wilking's when she was a girl.

"Wait," said the uncle, "I haven't told you the part about what Coach looked like." Uncle Duane seemed to ponder the matter. Teddy wondered if he'd say somebody besides Pat O'Brien this time. "He looked quite a bit like that actor, Pat O'Brien. Anyway, Coach whispered, 'We didn't come this far to blow it, Red. It's up to you to pull it out, you cocky little bastard.' That's what he said, Teddy."

"Gosh." Was it good for someone to call you a cocky little bastard?

" 'It's up to you,' he said," Uncle Duane repeated. Exciting memories made his face redder, but you could see that his hair used to start lower on his forehead and there was prob'ly a lot more of it. He could prob'ly run real fast back then, too, although an effort to imagine the man in basketball shorts—snapping the old brown ball around, jumping for rebounds—fell short. Uncle Duane could barely walk now. Teddy stared at him with a great number of mixed feelings and, without peering down, touched his own wounded knee. " 'It'll be your shot making that carries us to victory if anything on this earth can.' He told your old Uncle Duane exactly that, kid. 'If anything on earth—' "

A car door slamming shut froze them in place. Aunt May-May looked around with an expression that was partly one of irritation as footsteps sounded on the lane outside the front of the house. Dear called (to nobody in particular). "Is that her?"

Uncle Duane broke out in a sweat. It wreathed his head instantly, turned the boyish auburn hair above his temples wet and dripping. He'd put on a white shirt and a tie that appeared expensive yet old and a jacket that was really sharp (usually worn only at work in the shoe store). Prob'ly he'd gone to whatever place he usually lived this year to pick up the jacket, and prob'ly a bottle, but he was sober today. Sweat was running down into his collar, he was going to get to see the daughter who had come to see Teddy and her Aunt Evelyn, and the game was over.

The front door of Draden House rattled under the drum of knuckles, and Dear was whisking across the cathedral living room and through the foyer ahead of Teddy, laughing a little as she beat him to the door and opened it.

Behind them, settling back into his chair from the dining room, Uncle Duane cleared his throat—*arummpfh*—with paternal dignity.

"Auntie Ev!" There was the briefest glimpse of arms clad in crimson silk thrown out to embrace, well-rounded hips in swirling merry-go-round skirts, the prettily familiar face being burrowed in the nook between her aunt's head and shoulder. "You look absolutely fabulous!"

Then there was an even briefer glimpse of cousin Cass's new hairdo—pulled back so tightly it should've hurt, skinned into some glittery ornamental trinket

Cass surely must trust a lot; widow's peak hairline like Uncle Duane's; hair lighter of tone than it had been (the reddish tint had disappeared)—and a mighty hug clearly awaited him. "C'mere, you cute little shit!" she called, and the flaming arms engulfed Teddy. Heady wafts of perfume rose from her in gusts.

He was overwhelmed with the way her top felt against him when she stooped for the embrace. *She had big chests now.* His discovery was so exciting Teddy had the urge to go tell somebody about it. He'd liked noticing the new little ones before 'cause she hadn't always had them, but now they were like Dear's, maybe *bigger*, and the fact that they had gone *on* growing was a real and rather depressing surprise. She'd been partly a girl, like he was partly a boy, just the last time Cass had hugged him. Now—she was only one more woman.

Pretty, though.

Then Teddy had one other surprise when cousin Cass released him, straightened up, and put her hands on her hips like some actress in a movie. "Is he turning into a giant, or *what?*" Cass asked the world. "And fucking adorable!"

"Cass," Dear hissed.

"Whoops! Je-suss, Aunt Ev, I'm sorry." Cass's eyes opened wide and she batted at her heavily lipsticked lips with her fingertips. "Cass, the bigmouth, does it again. But *really*, Auntie, he's grown so *much* since I last saw him!"

"You, too," Teddy said before he could stop.

Cass threw her head back and howled. "Not as much as you might *think*, sweetie," she shrieked. She put an arm around Dear and hung on as though

weakened. She gave her aunt a wink. " 'That which nature's forgotten . . . ' "

Dear smiled but didn't complete the verse, Teddy saw, wondering how it ended. His mother led the way through the foyer, motioning to be followed. "Teddy's finding out too many things too soon without any help from you!"

"*Realllly?*" Cass trilled, hugging Teddy and dragging him after her auntie. "And I thought *I* was the precocious one in this family!" She gave him a big kiss on one temple.

Then, when they entered the living room, the teenager opened her eyes widely and leaned so far back as she craned her neck to see the ceiling that Teddy automatically put out his hand to her back in case she might fall over. "My *Gawwwwd*," Cass drawled, "it's the gawdamn Taj Mahal!"

Dear stopped walking at the piano bench, her own eyes wide and hopeful. "You really like it?" That was when it dawned on Teddy that Cass hadn't come to see them before in Draden House. "It's an old house, but only ten or eleven years ago —"

"Like it?" Cass marveled. "*I love it!*" She halted in the center of the room, hugging herself. Then she sang a scale from the lower to the highest registers, the higher notes reverberating off the stained glass windows. She ran toward Dear, gave her another hug and also a kiss on the cheek. "You finally got your music room! Of course, you *had* to have this house, Auntie, I understand you *completely!* You *had* to!"

Teddy had been watching when Cass leaned back. Her arms had shot out to the ceiling and the surprise he'd gotten — the impression — when Cass hugged him

was confirmed: She was sweating as much as Uncle Duane.

She turned to where her father sat on the straight-back chair from the dining room and seemed to discover his presence for the first time. "*Dadddddy!*" She went to him at a run but slowed to a walk several feet away. The salutation itself hadn't been quite the same carol that she presented to Dear and Teddy. "You're looking good."

Uncle Duane clutched his crutch in both hands, raised his head and mouth for the kiss. "Hullo, big-shot," he said.

Cass paused with her mouth a fraction of an inch away. Then she gave him a resounding kiss on the lips—

And spun away to discover the old woman sitting alone on the couch. Cass fell to her knees, full skirt splashing in all directions, took Aunt May-May's hand in both of her own. She stared deeply, solemnly, into the old eyes. "*Hiiii,*" she said. Teddy was close enough to Cass to be astounded by the sight of real tears in Cass's eyes. "D'you know who I am, Aunt May-May, *do* you?"

"I think so." Aunt May-May stirred. "You're my sister's granddaughter." As if desiring to get the identification process over and be permitted a return to her protective cocoon, Aunt May-May raised a tremorous index finger, pointed to Uncle Duane. "You're that man's girl."

"Christ on a houseboat!" Uncle Duane raised his crutch, thumped it once, heavily on the floor. "God-damnit, Aunt May-May, you've known me since I was born."

"I know that," Aunt May-May murmured. She

nodded faintly, stared straight ahead, reordering her stoicism the way she once might have gathered her skirts before sitting. "I know that."

Evelyn laughed openly at once. Her amusement grew and drew Cass in; together they leaned helplessly over the piano. Teddy giggled too, then Uncle Duane joined in. His deep, honking laugh was like the sound of a goose, separated from its flock, approaching a row of houses until it hovered above them for an instant. But Duane laughed too long as perspiration ran freely into his soft white collar and he stared at his young daughter until she turned away from him completely and sat beside her auntie at the piano.

"You know what I want to sing?" Cass asked.

"What?" Dear said.

"'Blue Skies,' " Cass said. Already her aunt was playing the first few bars of the Irving Berlin song, not even glancing down at the keyboard. "I'll teach you a patter I heard. It's on the second chorus."

Dear nodded but broke off playing as Cass rhythmically snapped her fingers to indicate she wanted it played at jump tempo, not as a ballad. Teddy watched the two of them from his hassock. He'd pulled it closer, eager to hear this. He wondered as the piano player vamped till Cass was ready about the mystery, the magic, of music, and if the pianist was still his Dear when she entertained. There was a bond he sensed (without knowing any word for it) between aunt and niece that he'd seen nowhere else. Dear was *cooperative* with the young vocalist, absolutely . . . in tune. It had very little to do with the fact that they were related, he thought. Dear was related to lots of people. She was, well, more in harmony with Cass

than she was with her brother. Maybe . . . than with anybody else.

Cass sang the opening lines of "Blue Skies" and stopped. "Drop it down half, will ya, Aunt Evelyn?" she asked.

"This is your key." Dear looked up, not angrily but with surprise.

"Right, but I'm gonna have to torch it up if I'm gonna be Hal Kemp's canary."

"Well, okay." Dear transposed the key without a sign of effort. A tiny line materialized between her brows. "Your voice is beautiful. You don't want to do everything those hotshots tell you to do; your own style is important."

"Just to me and you, Auntie," Cass answered with a shrug. "For now." And she started to sing, throatily, much more huskily than Teddy recalled, of skies that were going to smile at her—from that moment on. The melodic quality he loved in her natural singing voice remained but only 'cause she hadn't gotten rid of it yet, he imagined. Yet the happy beat, the promise of blue skies for good, appealed tremendously to him.

At the beginning of the second chorus Cass sang the patter somebody other than Berlin had written—a lot more words were in it, Cass had to sing them very quickly and did so broadly, sounding a little like girls who sang funny songs on the radio—and Dear instinctively altered her accompaniment to an emphasis on the left hand, bass notes, providing a more rhythmic beat. Cass's eyebrows rose in approval, even delight. When they reached the end of the chorus, niece and auntie collapsed on each other with squeals of hilarity.

Duane Mengaldt clapped his hands four precise times. A definite pause existed between each of them. Before the fourth, there was a hesitation almost a second in duration. Cass and Teddy looked at him, found his face blank. Devoid of expression. Aunt May-May touched her palms together as Uncle Duane stopped. She was smiling faintly.

"Thanyou veddy much," Cass said, bright-eyed. Too bright-eyed.

Dear slid off the piano bench, stood. "Let me show you the rest of Draden House," she offered. "But we can play till time for me to start Niles's dinner." She caught Cass's red sleeve lightly between her fingers. "I need to talk to yqu anyway."

Teddy jumped up, ready to follow them.

"You stay here and be a polite host for Aunt May-May and Uncle Duane," Dear ordered him. She rumbled his hair, laughed airily. "This is girl talk anyway so you wouldn't be interested."

"Yeah, shrimp," Cass said. "Butt out." She bent to kiss the tip of his nose.

Girl talk about my bleeding, Teddy thought, frowning, turning back to the hassock.

"Goddamn bigshot," Uncle Duane said under his breath. He was looking at Teddy but not seeing him. "One more goddamn dreamer in the family, too. New York auditions and she's not even dry behind the ears.' Well, we'll see. Cocky little bitch."

Teddy sat. He wondered if it was time for his new medicine. He didn't feel so very good right then.

After Dear had completed her tour of the house and she'd returned with Cass to the front room, the two of them began to play songs that were the kind Cass's family associated with her. And when she was singing "I Want to Be Happy," and "All by Myself," she appeared to be genuinely enjoying herself and Teddy believed it was possible that Uncle Duane's muttered threats mightn't ruin the afternoon after all.

But then she found Dear's sheet music for Cole Porter's "Let's Do It" on the piano rack. After that, even a boy who wouldn't be ten until his birthday in April couldn't miss the defiance in his cousin's expression. It was like she'd been boiling over her father's reactions to her new singing style, his curt applause; maybe she was upset by what Dear'd told her. Now, the Porter hit's references to educated blood-sucking bugs, people from Finland and fused siblings born the same day might be over his head but he knew they had something to do with sex. He also sensed that Cass, for reasons which seemed crazy to him, was actually trying to make his Uncle Duane lose his temper.

When she'd sung the song, Cass paused, then announced to everybody in the room that she would be taking a train to New York in about a week and meet a man "who may represent me in dealing with Hal." Unexplained was how she had met an agent, whether she was going alone or with her mother, and other questions that might concern a teenage girl's father.

"An *agent!*" It was Dear who replied first to Cass. "You might get a *real* booking agent." Her face was hard to see from where Teddy sat, in front of Cass, on

the hassock. The main thing he heard in her voice was a quality he'd often heard when Dear referred to her dead relatives visiting her at night—wonder; awe—but there was something else in it too. "In *Manhattan*."

"It looks that way, Auntie Ev," Cass said proudly.

"Must you use that name for me?" Dear's face turned. It was flushed and somehow white at the same instant. "You make me sound like that old woman in the *Oz* books!" Annoyed and nervous, her bridged hands played a series of jazzy chords progressing up the keys. She was in minor when she reached the upper octaves. "Like I was stuck in Kansas while wonderful little Dorothy is whisked off to a goddamn magic city!"

"I won't *leave* you stuck in Kansas, Aunt Evelyn!" Cass dropped down beside her on the bench again, her young face apologetic, intent. "I got all my musical talent from *you*, darlin'. You're the one who has encouraged me, taught me everything I know about music." She put her own hands on the keyboard, began playing a plaintive melody in the treble registers. "I'm even trying to learn piano like you. If I make it in New York, I'll tell everybody I meet that the best accompanist in the world is back home!"

"Accompanist?" Dear asked. The tone was sharp, almost but not quite reprimanding. Automatically, she was playing the same song Cass was picking out. "How Deep Is the Ocean."

"Not *just* accompanist," Cass corrected herself hastily. "The best *pianist*—whatever kind of pianist they need!"

Cass began singing in her lyric contralto, sweetly, movingly. The scene mesmerized Teddy. He leaned

forward to watch as well as listen, his illness forgotten, any unpleasant reactions from his uncle slipping out of his mind. They were perfect together, his Dear and his cousin. The beautiful melody couldn't have been better served if Benny Goodman was playing it on clarinet, Tommy Dorsey on his trombone. Cass stood as they reached the bridge and, this time, the expression on her face appealed to her father to understand, even to root for her.

Then Dear began the second chorus alone—solo—as Cass swayed sinuously, listening, closing her eyes. The pianist experimented with modulations, with fleeting segues into other songs, her touch alternately powerful and tender as a mother's kiss. Each time Cass opened her eyes, it was to watch Evelyn, her slightly older aunt, her richly gifted teacher and supporter, with profound respect. And then she sang it out from the bridge—described the anguish she would feel if she ever lost her loved one—and ascended at the end as gently as drifting incense. Teddy's Dear retarded it, allowed Cass to play it out to maximum effect—

Then, silence.

Teddy applauded so hard it stung his palms. Aunt May-May smiled and smiled, touching her hands together several times, a light shining amazingly in her nearsighted eyes.

Everyone turned to look at Duane A. Mengaltdt.

At first he wasn't looking back. Then, he was—from partly lowered lids, dark as a gargoyle. The crutch was between both strong hands, lifted two inches from the floor. He lowered his chin for a moment, appeared to be digging it into his broad upper chest. He looked back up and tears were streaming

down his cheeks. "My God, that was beautiful," he said.

Cass ran toward him, hands and arms extended. "Oh, Daddy," she said.

"You can't go to that hellhole," he said, staring up at her, blinking. "You're still wet behind the ears, they'll chew you up and throw you away!"

Nobody moved but Duane, who tugged himself to his feet with the aid of the crutch. "What the hell is the matter with the women in this family?" he asked irritably. "You think talent is enough? You think the goddamn perverts in New York give a good goddamn for a woman's *talent*?"

"But they *do*, Daddy," Cass argued, starting toward him. "Lots of women make it to the top."

Uncle Duane's head turned. He looked like red leather. "On their *backs*, bigshot!"

"Damn you, Duane," Dear said from the piano, "that isn't fair. Some women look out for themselves as well as any goddamn man!"

Cass was simply through arguing. "If screwing around is what it takes, Pops," she said casually, starting back to Evelyn.

"I'll fight your bitch mother on this one!" Duane shouted. "I'm still your father." He lurched forward, following her. One hand was raised to her shoulder.

"All I've got to say," Cass said softly, passing Teddy on the hassock, "is that you picked a piss-poor time to remember *that*." Her trailing fingers touched Teddy's head and cheek. "I'll do anything I have to do to go, and I'll do anything I have to do to succeed, so you might as well learn to live with it, Daddy. That's what I'll be doing."

Abruptly, Uncle Duane was abreast of them, an-

grier than any man Teddy had ever seen. He'd gotten there by hopping, because he was holding to his crutch with one hand and bringing it behind his back. "Cass!" Teddy shouted. "*Look out!*"

She turned and gasped. Her father stared into her eyes and froze to the spot as if suddenly coming to his senses. Seizing the opportunity, Cass darted around her aunt and the piano and, glancing behind her, ran for the dining room.

"Wait a minute—hold on, goddamnit!" Infuriated, Duane started after her with an alacrity Teddy wouldn't have believed he had in him. Using a combination of hops and wild lunges—almost toppling over repeatedly—he charged after Cass and actually gained on her. "I want to talk to you, Cass!"

Teddy gaped at them, incapable just then of taking it all in. He wanted desperately to hope that Uncle Duane really wanted only to talk.

But his Dear was off the piano bench and hurrying toward the dining room with her lips set in a grim line. Uncle Duane was handling his crutch so wildly and so heedlessly that he might hit his approaching sister without even meaning to!

Instantly, Teddy ran for the closet in the foyer, a clear idea in his mind of his obligations. His uncle had kept his coat in that closet since coming to visit them this time, and the whiskey bottle should've been returned to its pocket after Uncle Duane shared it with Niles. So, if it *was* there, Teddy meant to keep him from hurting Dear or Cass—*whatever he had to do*.

And it *was* there! Holding it by the neck, Teddy spun, raced back through the front room, and dashed into the dining room as quickly as he could.

Uncle Duane had Cass trapped in the corner on the other side of the dining-room table. His meaty hand was upraised to her shoulder or neck; it was hard to tell which, but he still had his crutch in the other hand and his knuckles looked translucent. "I *just* wanna talk!" he was shouting.

But at Dear, Teddy saw, astonished by the sight of his mother trying to get the crutch away from Uncle Duane. She had a mortal lock on the other end of it, and now he was wobbling around so much it was possible he was merely trying to hang on to Cass to keep his feet.

"Let go of it, you sadistic child beater!" Dear shrieked, tugging at the crutch. "Let go!"

Still redder of face, Duane summoned his strength and thrust back with it, hard. Dear's wrists turned, twisted; *pain* showed starkly on her face.

Teddy squinched his eyes shut, clenched his teeth, and running up behind Duane, crashed the partly filled bottle down on top of his uncle's head.

The man hit the floor hard and stayed there. Horror building on horror, Teddy saw the crutch carom off the dining table with a slam, then come to rest an inch from his uncle's outflung hand. The fingers twitched and Cass made a terrible noise midway between a squeal and a sniffly laugh. Teddy looked at Dear. She was smiling.

Then, the blood pooling in the crown of his head, Uncle Duane's eyelids shot back. His body seemed to tense, then he pawed with his hand for the crutch. Cass whirled away in a rising cloud of skirts, ran from the room wailing—

And Dear threw herself to the floor—on her knees—grappling with her brother for the crutch.

"Leave my little boy alone!" she screamed, using one hand to claw Uncle Duane's face. He gazed at her with cold fury and reached for her.

Behind all of them—forgotten—the thin figure of Aunt May-May stood in the entrance to the dining room. Startled, the other three members of the family simply gaped at her, each of them knowing that she was the sister of Elizabeth Mengaldt, that May, too, had read or heard the letters from Alexandra David-Neal.

"*Stop it,*" she said. Her voice remained as soft as absorbent cotton, as distant as wind sighing in cottonwoods, yet they all heard her clearly. Teddy even looked around in time to see his great aunt raise one frail arm to point, waveringly. Instinctively, he glanced back to see what she was pointing to.

The wooden crutch separated from the grasps of Dear and Uncle Duane as if something had gently prised their fingers away. Very, very slowly, it lifted into the air and *floated* several feet before settling noiselessly to the floor.

She went around the table to where her niece sat beside her injured nephew. Duane pulled his legs back, then crept away from her on his knees. Aunt May-May brushed back Evelyn's disarrayed hair with a trembling hand. "Isn't Jimmy coming soon to take me home?" she asked in a whisper.

3

Leaving Dear to help Uncle Duane to his feet, concerned about Cass, and eager to go almost anywhere else, Teddy went looking for his cousin.

He thought he'd find her in the guest room—one of the many features that had made his Dear crave Draden House—and he did. The door was open far enough that someone his size could enter without even pushing it back, and entering, he liked to believe that Cass had left it ajar for him.

She wasn't sprawled on the bed crying, like he'd hoped, but sitting on it with her side to him. She had lost a shoe somewhere so one foot—dangling, with the leg crossed over the other—showed its stocking and seemed touching to Teddy somehow. Cass wasn't wearing bobby sox like she had the previous times she'd visited, but the bare, mussed sole of her stocking gave her back some of the accessible girlishness he had fallen in love with.

He walked quietly closer when she neither spoke nor appeared to see him, saw that most of her makeup had been washed away by her tears. Now, turning her face to him, Cass wasn't crying but momentarily wordless, and painfully like himself in ways Teddy had known only when he glimpsed the boy with his own face. It was the most honest and solemnly intimate expression he'd seen in another face and he walked up to where she sat on the edge of the guest bed as unhesitantly as if she had called him there.

Cass put her arms around him, but the hug she gave Teddy wasn't like her usual ones, wasn't like any of the hugs bestowed by the other Mengaldts. This one needed him, as a person, wanted the proximity of his puny strength, his separateness which she knew, too, was strangely a sameness. She felt, smelled, wonderful; she had a strength too, he realized, a power he was experiencing for the first time.

He didn't remember to notice how her chests felt against his body until she'd let go and was kissing him on the nose. He couldn't see her clearly for a moment because his glasses were fogged.

"I hear you've got your blood all screwed-up, honey-boy," she said, eyes dancing from right to left as she studied his face. "What about that?"

"Uh-huh," he agreed. He wanted to explain that they didn't know yet how bad it was screwed-up but she was too near for him to think clearly.

"Well, look at it this way. Aunt Evelyn will bust a gut to take care of you, get you whatever you want. Ain't that grand cookies?" She smiled lopsidedly.

He swallowed, sat next to her. "She does that already." *I don't want anything*, he thought.

Cass laughed lightly. "Boy, you are young, aren't you?" she said. Then something in his eyes or expression made it clearer. "I guess from your standpoint she's a lot like Pops. Isn't she?"

Teddy shook his head. But he didn't do it fast enough.

"Okay, I get it." Cass's somberness returned and she nodded. "You don't have a lot of room to breathe. Auntie keeps a pretty close eye on you, right?" She nodded, and he nodded. "That's the only place where we're different, honey-boy. Pops was never around much, and Mom—well, she's got her own interests. Stuff." She arched fine eyebrows. "But I guess it works out pretty much the same, doesn't it? I want to get the hell out of this city, this state. It's not even the singing particularly, Teddy." Her expression changed fast, pretty eyes lighting up. "Jesus, I wish I could take you *with me!* Wouldn't that be a ball?"

He nodded hard, smiled with longing. Was it possible he could go?

"But you're just a kid, honey-bunch. So am I, really, but I'm a girl." She hung her head, hair falling forward deliciously over her profiled face. "Look . . . you're not gonna *die*, are you, or anything like that?" Her Duane-like eyes peered at him through the fall of hair.

"Don't think so," he managed.

Cass put her palms around his cheeks and kissed him on the mouth. It didn't last long but it was certainly a kiss.

Then she messed up his hair. "Pops and Auntie aren't really alike at all. You aren't old enough yet to know how great she is, Ted. She's got talent. And she's given up a lot to do what she thinks is best for you, more than my daddy's ever done for me." Her comments and a ferocious firmness in her expression stunned him, numbed him. "Aunt Evelyn is a genius on the keys, Teddy, so you've gotta just *take* what she does — 'cause she's different. No one's ever believed in me, but her . . . and you. She's really *good*, cuz. She's *special*, she's what Daddy calls 'people,' and you mustn't ever forget it." Cass paused. "Besides, honey-boy, she'd never do anything to harm *you*. Right?"

His heart was thudding in his chest, he felt sick at the stomach, and his nose felt like it was filling up with blood. He had to get out of there. Nodding and shaking his head almost simultaneously, he stood, got dizzy again. "I won't forget," he swore, and didn't know what to say to the rest of Cass's remarks. How did he tell her she'd just said the things about Dear he already believed himself and that they meant he was

only in the way, that he was no fit child for his Dear, that he was nothing, really nothing at all? How could he make it clear that he realized she was perfect and always perfectly right because of her talent —

But that *he was there*, he *existed*, and that even if he hated being disloyal — was terrified by it, in fact — he had to find some way just . . . *to be*?

“Hey, Teddy.” He’d almost reached the door when he heard Cass calling. He stopped without looking back. “Maybe I’m wrong and they’ll get us. I don’t know. Hell, we’re the only halfway normal ones in this whole family. And you know something, kiddo?” Cass was laughing and crying at the same time. “*We’re crazy as bat shit!*”

He didn’t care when he slammed the door behind him and it didn’t stay shut.

He was running downstairs and heading for the back of the house as if his life depended on it.

4

It was nearly hot on the riverbank but there was a breeze blowing in that felt great and Teddy raised his face to it, inhaled until the feeling he might throw up passed.

He was thinking of removing his shoes and socks, going wading, when sounds from Draden House carried to his ears and the smells of dinner being cooked were wafted to his nose. Dear, in the kitchen, could step out onto the porch anytime and see him. He realized he had already snuck out back more than once, undeniably disobeying her, and that emboldened him, surprised and emboldened him. If Dear knew every-

thing, she should have caught him, should have done what she called "Raising hell." It would be her duty in a way. And if she really thought it was dangerous for him to be out there, why didn't she know where he was? And why hadn't she come to see if him and Cass were okay instead of staying with Uncle Duane? (And what was that scary stuff about Dear going to New York someday?)

A vivid memory of how brave he'd felt when he was running to get the whiskey bottle—how grown-up it had seemed to save Dear and Cass—sharply conflicted with his recollection of how awful it had been to see Uncle Duane fall, and how scary it'd been to believe for a second that he was dead.

And how good it felt, how *right*, when he'd hit Uncle Duane with the bottle as hard as he could—and it worked!

But that was awful too because it *couldn't* be right to feel so good hitting somebody, it just couldn't. Dear and Uncle Duane talked a lot about stuff like that and he'd heard both of 'em get mad and say they'd kill someone if they did such-and-so, but he'd never *seen* them really do it, really hit *anybody*. Maybe his Dear meant something else when she spoke about "raising hell." Maybe he was so useless and so much in the way and so bad that he himself *was* hell since Dear was raising him,

Teddy shivered all the way down his body in spite of the warm spring afternoon.

Laughter from the house behind him drifted to his ears.

Laughter, and it came from his uncle and his cousin, like nothin at all had happened, *was* happening. He heard his Dear call something to them that he

couldn't quite understand. She wasn't laughing but she didn't sound mad, either, it sounded like a ordinary remark. It was like *nothing bad* had happened in Draden House at all that day. (Like anything Teddy Hivereve ever did wouldn't matter, anything he ever felt was only important for the time it took to do it or feel it. Like he was the boy who brought the *Star* or the mailman or somebody.) And like they were going to live to a hundred—a *thousand*—and whether *he* did too or not, they could always sort of tune it out and notice him, *really care*, only when he came into the room for a second.

He knelt to take off his shoes. Then he took off his socks, folded them, carefully rested them on top of the Buster Browns. Straightened, most of what happened in Draden House sunken so deep in memory that he was only the blank board/sheet of paper/cipher/uncreated and unfulfilled canister that he had (at that age) to be when he was bereft of acceptable memory or experience (*nothing at all*). Walked, hot and cold and virtually unfeeling, out into the water, head down.

Something wet on the river—*differently* wet—wiggled. Shone. Music somewhere played: "All Alone," Teddy knew the song. The wetness separated itself, shimmering. Ankle-deep in water, Teddy stopped, held himself motionless. He didn't know whether his eyes were wide open or closed but he was staring at the shininess, very frightened, fascinated. The wet spot grew at the sides, sprang up, got brighter and brighter. It was as if outdoor lights for the parties folks had had along the riverbanks long before Teddy was born had been turned on again, but from the depthless bottom of the old river; and it reached up,

up, became a part of the forming figure, gave to and partook of it. Laughter came, airily, skimmed like a stone on White River; voices growled and muttered, whined and barked, but sank beneath the waters to be drowned or throttled there, leaving only the carefree laughs of long departed youth.

"Ted-dee. Ted-dee . . ."

Teddy lifted his gaze from the gleaming surface of the river, hesitantly, fearfully.

The boy was bigger, but him. The boy had no glasses, he had strong muscles in his neck, his shoulders and arms, his chest and his legs; but it was him. The boy was as naked as the day he was . . . born.

"I'll handle it, Teddy," he said confidently. He bent, splashed water on Teddy. He laughed and the sound was new to Teddy. He kicked at the water, got it on Teddy's clothes. He made a face and it was a funny one, it turned his features to rubber and it made Teddy laugh too. Spontaneously, he reached down and splashed water on the new boy. Then they splashed and kicked it all over each other. And the counterpart Teddy said, confidently: "Don't worry. Leave it all to *me*."

Chapter Ten

1

Evelyn awoke in a little-girl mood, smiling kittenishly as she rolled over on her back. Lying directly in the center of the bed, covered only by a sheet that came to her waist, she threw out both arms before remembering that she was married now and might have struck her husband as a consequence of her innocent mood and gesture.

Niles was gone, though—the alarm clock told her it was late in the morning—and that meant she could stay in bed awhile longer if she wished. It was spring vacation, Teddy didn't have to get up, and the house was empty except for him. He hated breakfast anyway—he hated *eating*, as nearly as she could tell—and it wouldn't hurt for him to miss one morning meal. Several in succession, yes. You could get scurvy or rickets (or something) if you didn't have breakfast at *all*, but she didn't intend to become a bad mother like so many of them were. Besides, Teddy's preference for artistic things instead of absolutely *gorging* himself the way Niles and Duane did was one

of the many things that made him just like her. The Hivereves—most men actually—completely lacked that kind of sensitivity, refinement. She and Teddy were like Mom, who had grown more refined after E.H. died and she'd come to live with them. (He hadn't ever been a big eater either but that was because he usually *drank* his lunch and dinner!)

Feeling lazy, stretching out, Evelyn wondered what she'd dreamt that had left her in such an odd mood. Whatever it was, she had earned the right to lie abed now and then. God knew she hadn't been permitted a lot of decent rest when she was a girl growing up in Cicero, or afterward, when E.H.'s legal practice took them first to Noblesville, then to Indianapolis. At first it was the bitter arguments Mama had with Daddy, him shouting and cursing her at all hours. Then Duane got big enough that he couldn't keep his mouth shut about Daddy, *continually* egged him on until E.H. had enough and started beating Duane. And even then, Duane went on talking back, began to call their daddy awful names—said he was nothing but a "lousy drunk," accused him of being unfaithful to Mom. That would've been bad enough, but Duane kept going to school with bruises absolutely everywhere on his poor body—and then Mama began to *believe* Duane. About the women. That had even more to do with why she left E.H. at last, after both Duane and she grew up, than the dreadful way Daddy overreacted to her charges. She felt sure of it.

Tears welled up in Evelyn's eyes. There'd been more proof that E.H. was murdered than there had been that he was unfaithful to Mom, and Evelyn was

still certain that her daddy had never once so much as *touched* another woman—but just like Duane, he always went too far in defending himself. Throwing whiskey bottles in the base burner, making terrible explosions, destroying the furniture—and that time he'd picked Mama up off the floor, picked her right up *and lifted her over his head*, thrown her to the floor like she was just an old sack of potatoes—well, he should never have done that, of course. Of course he shouldn't. Mom had a permanent hip problem after that.

But he was always sweet to me, Evelyn thought, weeping. He bought the first piano she ever had (well, maybe it was Mom's too), showed up out of the blue with a pocket full of cash for the little extras every girl needed, came to her graduation ceremonies, and was almost sober. He was the only one who'd ever truly understood her, and she believed with all her heart that she was the only one who'd ever understood E. H. Mengaltdt. He was as talented in practicing law as she was playing piano or composing music—even if Uncle Rob didn't think so!—and he couldn't quite help the way *he* was . . . well, because he was a man. He'd had what *made* men men—in addition to his legal gifts, his oratorical gifts—and the combination was simply more than Daddy could cope with in an unfeeling, calloused world of no-talent drones who punched in their silly clocks every day and forever closed out their dreams! As she understood it, got it from Niles and years ago from Duane, their masculine things were virtually *independent* from them. *They* were men's basic bosses, the ultimate deciding factors in practically

every matter of importance—even at really inopportune moments—and even when a man was creative like E.H. (or even Duane, deep inside), he had to stop every whipsnitch and make sure it was happy.

Which made them a great deal like *children*, Evelyn realized. She had a positive thrill of self-enlightenment and sat up on the edge of the bed without consciously telling herself to do it. Things—penises—were *always* around, for a man (“always in the way” was her actual thought before she could coax her imagination to rush on), making demands that were totally selfish (which could cost one *far* too dearly); they had to be bathed tenderly and regularly (or get stinky just like little boys); they were *insatiably* nosy, poking into things that didn’t concern them; they couldn’t remember anything they were taught about self-control—unless you had them dressed up in their little hats!—so a woman was constantly forced to baby-talk them . . . or just plain *beat* them into submission!

Evelyn rocked back on the bed in near hilarity, clapping her hands, wishing she had written all that down (though God alone knew who would publish it!).

Her next thought momentarily doubled her up on the mattress with her clasped hands caught between her legs and her head back on the pillow, gasping for breath: Penises were also like children because they *never waited* to speak until they were spoken to! And if a girl sorta . . . *waved* at them—

They positively blurted out everything they had in their heads!

Poor Daddy, Poor Mama, and tears ran copiously.

They'd brought so much *unhappiness* to one another and no one, exactly, had been to blame. If she herself hadn't turned out so well, it might almost have made a tragedy and a sham of their marriage. But she had *learned* from their mistakes, mostly Mom's; not in the *direct* sense of doing anything they had taught her—even E.H. was so old-fashioned in some of his attitudes—but in *intuiting* the lessons they had unspokenly yearned to teach. Mama, in particular, even though she'd never said ill of a living soul (including E.H.) (including *Niles!*). Evelyn knew she wouldn't forget anything her mother had told her with her soulful, lovely, oft-bruised eyes; messages that needed no words: "For women, Evelyn, love can be the most destructive influence on the face of the this world." And, "You must learn to control the men in your life, my gifted daughter, for they will surely attempt to control *you*." And "You must develop your talent to the *Nth* degree so that you have something to fall back on when your man is disloyal, even abandons you. When you have children—*particularly if they are boys*—tie them to you until you're sure they can deal with the *slightest* independence. Teach them the truth as you know it, for it will be for their good as well as yours. And then remember that the time *will* come when their things take over *regardless* of what you can do. One day, when their first flush of fornication is behind them, you will once more be *everything* to them."

How right, how true, Mama's guidance—shining from her eyes—had proved to be! Already it appeared that Teddy was beginning to get inquisitive, nosy; already he was buttering up innocent Cass,

trying in his awkward fashion to get *close* to her, and at the expense of his relationship with the uncle he saw nearly every week! Pretending to *care* if a woman, *any* woman, was injured by another male—and he thought she hadn't noticed, wasn't up to his smart-alecky tricks!

Clearly, it was just as well Cass hadn't remained in the same house with her father and Teddy present but had told a lie about having to go home the same night. Evelyn rose from the bed, slipped into her favorite robe, inspected her image fleetingly in the vanity mirror (soiled but serviceable). It was also just fine with her that Duane had gone back to his woman, his floozy, even though Cass and he made up before either of them left—Evelyn made sure of *that*; family was still family.

And it was just as clear that Mr. Theodore Mengaldt was getting a mite too big for his britches and had to be brought down a peg while there was still time. It was obvious that Mom was thinking—more than once; even right before she died—how important it was for a mother to hold tight to her little boy from the very start, and not let up till *he took charge* of his life—because he finally *could*! What else could a woman who'd been half-crippled by a man *think*?

There was no sign of Teddy in the bathroom or anywhere downstairs. Realizing she was famished and really felt *good* today, she slapped bacon into a frying pan—enough for both Teddy and her—and rolled her eyes at the ceiling. He was getting just like his lazy father, able to sleep all *day* if you let him. Perhaps it was that thing with his blood; maybe it

was kicking up again. But she had taken him straight to Dr. Biddle, he'd run his tests and given Teddy a prescription, so it surely couldn't be too serious a problem. (It really *couldn't*.) He was simply weakened from his bout with the scarlet fever and more susceptible now—thanks to his Hivereve blood—to little flare-ups at times. Even Niles understood that. He'd told Teddy often enough that he would be fine.

She thought suddenly of Aunt May-May, turned away from the stove. Was she still there? For an instant, Evelyn was asea, unable to recall the present disposition of her family.

Oh, yes. Jimmy *had* come to get her. Evelyn had told Niles the whole story of what happened earlier in the day—during Cass's visit—about the way Cass wanted to test her bright, young wings and Duane had twisted everything out of proportion. She had left out the parts about Teddy completely misreading Duane's understandable paternal desire to make sure Cass would be safe in New York, that silly tussle in the dining room, and allowed Niles to draw his own conclusions about the bandage on the top of Duane's head. Niles wouldn't have understood it in the least.

But she *had* made it clear that Aunt May-May became quite upset, so Niles had taken it on himself to phone until he located Jimmy and to demand that he come get his mother out of there "while you still have a mother," as Niles expressed it. She had to admit it about Niles, he was always kind to the other female members of her family.

Evelyn tore open a loaf of Wonder Bread, rinsed

off two saucers in the sink, and placed a slice of bread on each of them. On impulse, she got the catsup bottle from the icebox, for Teddy. He'd missed his breakfast, liked catsup on his bacon, and it wouldn't hurt him to have a little. (I must remember to ask him if he made number two, she reminded herself.) Then she paused, leaning against the counter to smile with secret pride. Maybe it was sheer masculine aggression, a terrible deepdown lust for violence, but Teddy *had* reacted with courage in defending his cousin. She couldn't remember the last time her darling boy had done anything on impulse, anything *physical*. It was like a momentary throw-back to E.H.'s temperament, like blood calling to blood. He was getting too uppity for his own good, she had to rein him in, possibly even test the degree of his burgeoning valor, but his little overreaction was definitely more Mengaldt than Hiverewe.

She glanced at the bacon in the pan, smelled it. It had to be thoroughly cooked. Through and through. It was the way you combatted the chance of trichinosis in the pork, and that was more important than whether the bacon really *tasted* good.

Cass, going to see an agent, in New York . . . The thought of it filled Evelyn with ambivalence. Cass had talent, came by it naturally; there was no doubt of that. She didn't understand yet that you *had* to do it your *own* way, practice in order to improve and certainly learn song after song, to build up a good repertoire, but that your own style and your own feelings were what took you to the top. And Cass might very well *make* it, even if her only experience as a pro was singing a few times with local dance-

bands (not nearly as good as mine); she *knew* music, she was *pretty* and *young*—

Evelyn slumped forward from the waist with a sinking heart. Without noticing, one arm brushed the ripped loaf of bread off the counter, silent Wonder briefly filling the air. She lifted her hands, looked at the palms, the backs of them. Red as any Indian's. She flexed them, made octaves, again loathing the relative shortness of her fingers which prevented her from striking jazz chords head-on, obliged her to slur them. But they were still flexible, they hadn't gotten arthritic like Mom's, they played better than that goddamn little Cass would sing if Ella Fitzgerald or Sarah Vaughan *grafted* their vocal chords to her throat! She could still *do* it, she *could still make it* if—

If Cass did. Evelyn leaned over to pick up the fallen bread. Two of the six slices were salvageable by blowing off the dirt and she put them back in the torn package, left the others lying beside the sack of garbage Niles kept in the corner of the kitchen. If Cass's agent knew what he wanted and it wasn't just some young stuff, if she got hired by Hal Kemp or any *other* top bandleader, Cass would come through for her. There had never been a time when she hadn't been nice to Cass, patient, willing to teach the child everything she knew—

So when Cass had been with a name band for six months, maybe even just a *few months*, it would be possible to pack up and go to Manhattan *in style*—to show Teddy and Niles the sights, become completely in control of her own affairs at last; and *oh*, the glorious times they'd have, jamming at all the

spots, sitting in with the finest jazz combos in Harlem! *She'd* show E.H. and Duane why she'd learned to play what *they* called "darky music," the bigots! Why, she could teach those colored piano players a few tricks *she'd* learned (goddamn little-bitty fingers or not!)—show them *all* that a little oofay woman from Cicero and Noblesville could cut the mustard with *Duke*, with *Count*—

The phone ringing seemed so shrill to her that it was too high to make her jump. It planted her feet to the linoleum for a moment and sent weird vibrations charging up and down the petite length of her.

The telephone was mounted on the wall across the kitchen, just round the corner from the dining room, and she marched briskly to it, snatched up the receiver. "Hello!" she snapped into the black mouthpiece.

"Evelyn? Dr. Biddle."

For half a second Evelyn found it necessary to travel inside her head at the speed of whispering voices from Harlem and Manhattan across the mid-west to the capacious but indisputable kitchen of her home. The call seemed from her distant past, or another time. "Yes, doctor?" What could he want? Had Niles forgotten to send him his goddamn blood-money?

"I wonder if it might be possible for you to stop by my office yet this afternoon." He sounded nicer than he usually was to her, his voice appeared to contain the unctuous quality of a salesman. "Whenever it's convenient for you to get here. You don't need an appointment."

"I don't." She knew her answer was dumb but she couldn't do better just then. She had an idea of what the old man might want to discuss, who, but that *couldn't* be, and now it was like she had something in her ears and couldn't hear him clearly, couldn't think.

"No," he replied, all kindness. "There's no need to bring Teddy."

Evelyn cleared her voice. "But it's *about* Teddy. Correct?"

"Evvie, bring Niles." He hesitated. "All right? Bring your husband."

Evelyn nodded, said nothing. She replaced the receiver on the hook. An instant later she raised it again, listened. The connection was broken.

It *was* about Teddy.

She found herself staring at the kitchen floor by the cabinet a few moments later, on her knees. "Please, God," she said with her lips. Her head was swimming, the waters were deep enough to drown in; she discovered a slice of bread, bent in two, part of it leaning against the wall. Insecticide Niles had painted on the linoleum reeked killingly, shone like the smile of death. The Wonder bread seemed heartbreakingly wasted, and sad, and she picked it up with infinite care, held it to her bosom.

Seeing her only child with raging fever, seeing the sweat pour off him as if he was bleeding it away, seeing and hearing and smelling his sickness when he was *so little*—uncomprehending, bravely smiling when she shared his hurt with all her soul and wanted *so much* to make the awful bug get out of

one who was *her* flesh, *her* spirit too. It had been the most terrible experience she had ever endured. She had been obliged to watch Niles go off to work at Picturesque every morning (except for emergencies), hating him and the world that made it necessary for him to leave her alone with her precious boy. Alone, and unable to do enough to help him. Helpless to do more than mop his brow, get cough syrup down his throat to ease the constant pain he had in it—to rub his little back and put lotion where the rash made him itch until she itched, too, wept and even screamed with him. Unable to do more than pray with him—make little jokes in the effort to fetch a rare, pale smile—listen to the radio with him for countless hours, sharing her programs with him—play the most magnificent piano of her life for an audience of one, when he could be left alone and felt up to it—knowing all along that he *could die*, but forced to grin and bear it *while that careless, experimental son of a bitching son of Dr. Biddle's positively pumped sulfa into her baby and ruined his eyes!*

What had Biddle *meant*, being somewhere else while *Teddy* was ill—allowing that immature *lunatic* of a son to use *unproven drugs* on her perfect little boy? She could never forgive Dr. Biddle for that—*never*.

And *now* he wanted a mother to subject her *same* darling son to further treatment, *further* experimentation with God-knew-*what* drugs for God-knew-*what* hideous disease?

How could anybody expect her to go *through* the nightmare again!

("Turn on the light before you leave the room, Dear, please." "Sweetie, it is on." Panic, black as midnight, the need not to sound hysterical. "Can't you see it, Teddy?" "Yes, but it isn't very bright. It's all . . . shadows, like. Would you turn it up more, Dear?" "Of course. There! Is that better? Brighter?" No answer. He just fell asleep. Sweated. Moaned in his sleep. Made her wait till he woke up, made her mad, said he didn't "remember" it had been dark. So she'd turned off the light completely for a moment . . . and he'd begged her, begged her—"Don't take away the light, Dear. Please! Don't take away the light!")

Mom came to live with them shortly after—to help. And Teddy'd needed glasses.

Sometimes she thought he'd changed somehow, during the long and feverish months.

Sometimes Evelyn thought Teddy saw things even she could not see . . .

Evelyn went into the cathedral living room, sat before her piano, tickled the ivories with her memories, her fancy. Over a year spent getting Teddy well and losing the band because the sidemen couldn't wait. A year in which to be forgotten; unwanted. "A Pretty Girl" was the song that came to mind, and she played it. Straight and with frills, firbillos. Off-hand, casual creativity as bright as the sun, as any light. Sheer genius. Cass with Hal Kemp? Let her go, Kemp was a square, all he could do was play for dances, he had no talent—no real talent. "Let the canary sing," Evelyn sang, fitting it into the song. Evelyn Mengaltdt still had it, more than the lot of them. She'd still *prove* it, too, it wasn't too late.

Who could tell when the break could come, on *her terms*! Bacon smell, strong as a house burning down, seeped into her nostrils. Fine, let it burn, what did that have to do with playing pretty for the people? *I'll call some people at the union, get a few gigs under my belt just to let 'em know I'm back, be ready for Cass's telegram. Look out, New York, here I come!*

"Dear."

Small and thin, dressed for the day, well-shaped head with neatly trimmed hair, horn-rimmed glasses adorably too large for him—making him appear bug-eyed—the boy called to his mother from across the room. "Teddy darling." Dear smiled.

"You want me to turn off the stove? Somethin's all burned."

"Please," Dear said graciously. She peered down again at the keys and her powerful hands. From where Teddy stood he thought it was if a dark ol' cloud passed over her face. The passage of the tune she was playing, with no apparent fluffs, yielded no clue of what was disturbing his Dear in some manner. "There are two pieces of bread on the counter. Eat them real quick like a good boy, all right?"

"All right." Teddy paused. "Shouldn't I have some milk or something?"

"Do as you're told, darling," she replied. She glanced back at him with the composure of the most veteran musician, hands moving, finishing the melody. "We have to go for a little ride. We'll take a taxi! Won't that be fun?"

Getting a taxi to come to their house—climbing into a car with a strange man driving it, him sitting up front while Teddy and Dear sat in back—*was* fun. Except for Dear's anxiety, after phoning the cab company, in waiting for it to arrive.

It stopped being fun after they'd slammed the door and gone about a mile or so, when his Dear told him where they were going.

"Why? I'm not sick. Why isn't Niles going with us?"

"Your father's working, you know that," Dear said from beside him. She used the tone of voice grown-ups always used when other grown-ups were around and you didn't know 'em. Maybe it was because they might do something awful, or maybe it was just 'cause they wouldn't care. "That's why we had to call a cab." She turned her head to look out the window. "You know your father's never around when we need him for anything."

Teddy stared at her. He was unable to think of what he might say to make his Dear tell him what was wrong. He'd just gotten up, he'd even gone number two, and then he'd had to eat some bread and go to Dr. Biddle's office. Dear looked all funny, she was dressed wrong or something. She'd run upstairs and changed clothes faster than he'd ever known her to do it and now she had on her ripped blouse, a pair of slacks she'd said she was going to give to Goodwill, and high heels. She had put on makeup in the bathroom mirror and sort of missed part of her upper lip, but that lipstick was nearly up

under her nose.

If she had been crying right now, he'd have prob'ly been even more scared than he was.

There was a bitty picture of the cab driver, with numbers stamped onto it in black ink, and his name was either Morton Fry or Mortify. He looked meaner in the picture than he did in person. He'd even gotten out of the cab car to hold the door open for them, and he didn't have his mustache anymore. With it, in the picture, he still didn't look like Niles with his mustache.

Dear'd made him leave the house so fast he hadn't had a chance to say goodbye to Coop. Teddy had asked the bigger boy with his face what his name was, and he'd said, "Who d'you want me to be?" Teddy'd told him he didn't know the answer to that except the other boy looked a lot like him, and the other boy said, "You can't call me Teddy 'cause you've already got that name." So, when Teddy'd asked him a bunch more questions and the river boy hadn't said a lot more than that to any of them, Teddy'd asked him if it was okay to call him Coop. After Gary Cooper, the movie actor. Cooper didn't say nothin much either.

"That'll be okay," replied the other boy.

"Don't you think you better get some clothes on?" Teddy'd asked.

"Yup," Coop agreed. He followed Teddy toward the back of the house. "I'll wear some of yours."

"You'll be too big," Teddy'd told him. "You're a lot taller. Stronger."

"They'll fit," Coop had drawled. Then, when he'd showed he was right and put on some pants and an

old shirt Teddy hated a lot anyway, Coop had tapped him on the shoulder sort of slow-like, and grinned. "Not here to answer questions," he said. "Here to ask 'em."

You had to like a guy like that. 'Specially when, after they'd talked awhile and Teddy had explained how he felt about a buncha stuff, Coop kept sayin to 'leave it to me. Just don't worry no more."

Teddy wished he'd said goodbye to Coop. He wished he'd asked Dear if he could ride with them. But Coop'd told him that their friendship was a secret. "Nobody'll ever know about it. 'Cept you and me, prob'ly."

"You won't have to go in to see the doctor this time," Dear said.

Teddy looked up. "Is it all about my tests?"

"I don't know, darling," Dear said. She took his hand and held it on the seat between them.

"Well, whadda *you* think? Did I pass?"

"I don't know." She had her compact out and was trying to fix up her lipstick. She was so very *quiet*. Her big eyes looked like she hadn't cried much in the last coupla hours but might decide to do it again anytime. "Dr. Biddle said that he wished to talk with me. Now you know everything I know."

Teddy sighed. Not in a zillion years.

Mr. Fry or Mr. Mortify nearly looked like a bad guy in some Western saloon. Not in his cab now, but in his picture. Restless, trying to tune out bad things, Teddy drew his index finger up from his lap. Stealthily. He aimed it between the cabbie's squinty little photographed eyes. "Kkkkkk!" he shot at him, spraying a little spit in the process. One bullet

wounded the man but it was only a flesh wound and now he was going for his own gun. "Kuhkkkkkkk!" the Lone Ranger fired a second round and Mortify Fry hit the dirt, one eye blown clear to heaven by the silver bullet. Teddy smiled happily. He'd have to remember to tell Coop about his showdown. Coop had done this hundreds of times but it was new to Teddy.

"For the love of God, driver," Dear said, drumming on the back of the man's seat with the fingers of both hands, "can't you drive any faster than *this*? Didn't I tell you this is an emergency?"

"No, ma'am," Mr. Whatever-it-was replied truthfully. But he drove faster.

Teddy ate the word his Dear had spoken like it was nasty medicine, only it didn't go all the way down.

3

They went through the little hallway and right up to Dr. Biddle's office without Dear even glancing, as Teddy did, into the waiting room. He saw a number of old ladies—mostly—sitting so quietly and motionlessly that they seemed carved from stone. What he and his Dear were doing really impressed Teddy. Doctors always had too many people who wished to see them and you waited your turn, even if you had an appointment. In his mind, he and Dear had waited at least two days or more lots of time, so the idea of just walking up to Dr. Biddle's office made him feel real important for a moment.

As Dear knocked on the door—and especially

when the old doctor himself opened it so quickly Dear hadn't even stopped knocking—Teddy's self-importance faded. Vanished. This wasn't Dear's doing, Dr. Biddle had *said* they wouldn't have to wait. There must be something truly terrible about his grades on the tests.

"Why isn't Niles here too?" The old man didn't have a cigarette burning in the middle of his mouth, white beard hairs were stabbing out all the way around his chin, and he seemed different. Like an annoyed porcupine. He glanced down at Teddy. "Why did you bring the boy?"

"Niles couldn't get off work." Dear drew herself erect, tried to be as tall as the doctor. "I couldn't very well leave Teddy at home."

"It's spring vacation, that's right," Dr. Biddle recalled. His nod was almost too small to see. "No comics with you, Ted?" He smiled but the twinkle was gone from his eyes. "No books, nothing to color with?"

"We left too fast," Teddy explained. Reluctantly, he started toward the waiting room. "I'll be fine."

"Can't he come in with us?" Dear pleaded.

Dr. Biddle's face hardened, Teddy saw as he glanced back, hopefully. "By no means." He extended an arm to pat Teddy lightly on the shoulder. "Make yourself at home, Ted; you know the routine. We won't be too long."

Dear looked doubtfully at Teddy, then followed the doctor into his office.

The waiting room wasn't full. It never was. There were hundreds of old ladies stacked like artifacts on exhibit around the room, but at the doctor's, there

was somehow always room for one more. He spotted two unoccupied chairs, one in a corner and the other by a window. With no hesitation he went to the second one with the impression that eyes followed him each step of the way. He kind of wanted to run but Dear said not to run inside. The elderly patients didn't move anything but their eyeballs yet they were immensely interested in him, for reasons he couldn't figure out, raising their heads from peering at laps or nothing, from the task of turning pages in old magazines, and pressed their bespectacled or cataract-ridden or weeping eyes on his youthful distinction.

And even after he sat in the chair by the window, a few of the old folks continued to stare. Not like Dear watched him, but in their own ways, two of the people—one female, one a man so old he looked dead and mysteriously reanimated—not even pretending to be watching anything else. Did they think they could *get* something from him by staring? Was he just as funny-looking as he thought he was, or did he remind them of their own kids, or were they just hoping he could show them the way to be a little kid again? It was spooky. *Nice* spooky when two old ladies smiled at him—until they turned to one another to talk behind hands and lifted magazines, and eyes studied him over fingertips and covers of *Life*.

He wished real bad he'd gone up to his room to get paper to draw on, or a book.

Sunstream filtered through Venetian blinds, taking off some of the chill he'd had since entering the place. If Dr. Biddle'd just adjust the doodad, the slats would let in more sun and folks wouldn't have

to sit around like they were waiting for an ambulance or something to come get them. Once, he'd twisted the doodad himself, and before his Dear could even say "No" and close the blinds, a few old people had done something that really scared pee out of him: They'd raised their faces and the palms of their hands till their eyes almost popped out of their heads, and gasped. *Gasped*—sucked in air like the light was trying to take it away from them, like it really *hurt* or something.

Then with that nice light absolutely filling up the ol' waiting room, shining it like it was bein *polished*, all the old ones present had looked like—*babies*. Tiny but grown-up babies just come into the world only that day, because they were more than pale, or white. They didn't have any color at *all*! Their wrinkle-things went away while their mouths made big Ohs, and you could see *through* their hair, and they covered up their faces with their hands that showed all the *bones* and *veins* and everything—

And nobody, not a one of 'em, could say a word. Just like babies.

Or anyway it had looked like that to Teddy.

He stuck his fingers between the venetian blinds to peek outside more and saw a bluejay sitting on a telephone wire in Dr. Biddle's yard. At least, he thought it was a bluejay; he didn't know birds really well. It was a fat bird anyway, one that ate too many worms and prob'ly never even washed before he ate 'em. Several other birds were on the phone wire, too, but not close to the jay. They were singing like a chorus or maybe like the Andrews Sisters, not paying any attention to the bluejay, who just stood on

the wire with his little black-bug eyes darting around. Now and then, it did a sort of bird *dance*—like the 'lectricity made him do it. He could fly away if he wanted, but he just hopped on the wire like it didn't bother him, and neither did the birds who wouldn't have nothin t'do with him.

"He's listening in to people on their phones." Coop, seated in the chair across the room, *Coop* had come with him after all! *"He wants to find out who owns cats."*

Teddy grinned. He started to speak aloud but Coop had said they shouldn't let others know they were friends now.

"They have bluejays on all the telephone wires in the world." Coop, wearing the clothes Teddy didn't like, looked sharp in them. Big and real strong. He had an expression on his face that said he didn't care what folks did or what they thought about him, 'cause he was smarter—stronger too—and he scratched down between his legs a great deal. "If they didn't have 'em," Coop said, "nobody in France would know what anybody in Germany was saying. Bluejays change languages for people."

Teddy nodded, impressed. That made a lot of sense.

"They can go where they want to go, too," Coop continued. It was so neat hearing and seeing him when no one else in the waiting room was paying attention at all! "Think about that, Ted. Birds don't have people tellin 'em to get down from places, or come inside, or nothing. They eat when they want to, what they want to."

"The other birds don't like him," Teddy said to

Coop in his mind, knowing Coop could hear him.

"He doesn't care," Coop replied. He drew Teddy's wondering gaze. "He doesn't *give a damn*, Ted!"

Teddy looked around to see if anyone else had heard Coop swear. They hadn't, he guessed, and he smiled admiringly at the other boy.

Then he remembered something else and told it to Coop: "But bluejays can't sing. I guess."

Coop folded his arms in Teddy's shirt, rested his head against the wall to reflect. He closed his eyelids languidly. Then the slowest flicker of a smile worked at his already manly lips. "You don't *have* to be musical, Ted. You don't *have* to have talent." He scratched under one armpit, yawned. "*You only have to be free enough.*"

4

Collapsing into his chair, the old man clasped his big hands over his considerable belly as Evelyn, even before sitting, fixed her attention on him. There was no need for her to familiarize herself with the inner office; she and Teddy knew it like the backs of their hands. He craned his neck briefly to review several official-appearing colored forms on his desk—not unlacing his fingers—and she knew they had to be Teddy's tests. Then he rambled on in his ponderous, reiterative manner for a minute or so—discussing his study of blood, his analogy between it and love—and Evelyn waited with the sudden conviction that she could wait forever before she heard any more bad news.

"Unfortunately, in the cases of both blood and

love," Dr. Biddle murmured, "it is sometimes more important for the general practitioner to concern himself with quality, not quantity."

"Are you telling me Teddy's tests are back or not?" Seated just inside the office door on the sturdy chair beside the physician's desk, Evelyn maintained her unblinking gaze on Dr. Biddle with such effort that she was beginning to feel dizzy. It could've been a mistake not to notify Niles, bring him along. "Please; get to it. Are they positive or negative?"

"Terms such as those are rather relative, I think, Evvie." He sighed, experimented with a smile that slipped off like ashes from a smoldering cigarette. "It tends to depend on the questions that were asked. Being more responsive, though," he droned on, his eyes observing her with equal care, "*most* of the tests are in, and they aren't good." He nodded. "You and I would regard them as negative."

"Dear God," Evelyn said, tears brimming, "what it is this time? I refuse to permit my wonderful boy to undergo the slightest experimentation! He needs love, music, a mother's care, not—"

"Wait." He raised his left hand, drew her attention without speaking harshly, loudly. "*Please*, listen to me. You must hear every word I tell you, my dear. It is very important for you to understand."

The tears stood in her eyes and she stared through them. Anger she had attempted to muster as a defense turned to cold embers. "Go on."

"At *no* time today shall I tell you Teddy has—without question—fallen prey to another disease." He lifted his brows and waited till she nodded to show her understanding. "Until *all* the tests are

back, I cannot give you and him my full diagnosis nor prescribe a course of treatment."

"I don't—"

"Nor shall I do so," he finished. "There are a few other . . . illnesses . . . which could prove to be the problem."

Evelyn felt her chest flame. "Then why in the name of God are you putting me through this ordeal?"

"Truthfully, I feel today that I *am* acting in the name of God. I suppose we physicians should experience the feeling more frequently." He worked a Lucky Strike from his pack on the littered desk. Before putting it in his mouth, he thought to extend the pack to Evelyn, who took one. She cursed the way her hand shook. Quietly, ponderously—at his customary pace—Dr. Biddle lit her cigarette with a match. Solemnly, he lit his, then shook out the match. "Evelyn, I've known you since you were only a little girl."

"Yes, you brought me into the world. Thanks a lot. But it *is* why I keep coming to you."

"More than any other patient of mine, Evvie, you hold your people *close*. Cherish them. That's wonderful—but when any of them seems to be at risk, well, you're inclined to get . . . pretty emotional." He puffed on his Lucky to be sure it was burning properly and to wait out any irascible denials. "I feel that you unfailingly *mean* well. The fact remains that the things you do aren't always in their best interests. I think you know that, at heart." He blinked rapidly. "You're not a bad person, dear, I'm convinced of that. You get . . . confused. I'm counsel-

ing against that, this time."

"Go on," she said tightly. A tear trickled down one round, reddening cheek.

"If the final tests confirm my suspicions about Teddy—please notice once more that I said 'if'—you and your entire family must be prepared. To deal with it." She was angry, he knew; he was botching it. Coughing, he removed his cigarette, replaced it while he thought. "I've rarely done this for any patient but I like Ted, I really do. It makes me angry to think of the possibility of his being needlessly hurt."

"What do you *think* Teddy has?" Evelyn asked as evenly as possible.

Biddle sighed. "An ailment that goes far back in history, though its intriguing past can't possibly redeem it. It was first observed by an Arabian doctor named Albucasis. During a time when medicine was little more than an offshoot of alchemy—magic."

Evelyn's brows raised. "Magic?"

"Let's try to avoid any tendency toward glamorizing it." He chuckled around his Lucky. "People did all they could, and there was a lot of innovative advancement made, but no modern person would care for the pestholes that served as medical surgeries back then." He shrugged. "Naturally, it seemed to Albucasis and his colleagues that their patient was afflicted by some variety of terrible curse."

"A curse?"

"One that attacked the young," Dr. Biddle nodded. "They also feared that this illness of the blood might prove to be disastrously contagious or infectious." Again he lifted one palm cautioningly. "That

did *not* prove to be the case.”

She felt suddenly faint, fought it off. Mengaldts didn't faint. For the first time she found herself appreciating the care the old man was providing, to prepare her. But if he didn't stop his damn *explaining* soon, she might begin to scream.

Then, he said it: “If the other tests confirm my suspicions, Teddy has hemophilia.”

She shot her hand out to brace herself on the desk and chair. *No*, her lips argued without voice. Her heart raced as it had never raced. She could not have risen.

“*If*.” He took a breath, hesitated to continue for fear of giving her false hope. “Von Willebrand's disease looks quite a lot like Teddy's symptoms. So do a couple of others—including one called Christmas disease.”

“*Christmas?*” Worse was building on worse. What a ghastly name for a disease!

But the old man missed the point, merely bobbed his head. “That one is due to the lack of factor IX, however, so it's not a very strong candidate for Teddy's problem. Yet there are a few specific characteristics.”

“*Is hemophilia fatal?*” She got the hideous question out without a break between the syllables, on one breath—a simple string of words, but they made her literally spasm and ache from head to toe, gave her the impression that she aged even as she spoke them.

“It can be,” the doctor confessed.

Her vision—indeed, her whole skull—blurred and swam and reeled. It was virtually impossible to think

then, to focus on what the old horror seated just to her right was saying. Execrable, unspeakable *ifs* that boomed across time at her like the echoes of an ancient world that should have had only one dark, short night, not a thousand and one of them. What was Biddle *saying*? Alchemy? *Curses*? These were modern times, almost half the *century* had passed!

"But hemophilia, if that's what Teddy proves to have, can be *controlled*. That's why I'm attempting to prepare you before any real or final diagnosis, Evelyn. Because it will be the task of you and your husband—I wish to God Niles could have gotten off—to break the news to Teddy with compassion and care, and then to stand beside him. It will be worse than scarlet fever."

Evelyn looked at him with her eyes and saw mostly a blank and featureless blob. *Worse than scarlet fever*. Four words to be heard deep in her memory again and again.

"What will be required of you is a spirit of commitment within the family, of mutual cooperation. Of love that is considerate of your son's feelings and needs, never gets him upset enough that he might injure himself. That commitment can pull Teddy through. And"—Doctor Biddle smiled—"if it turns out not to be hemophilia, what I'm suggesting today will certainly prove to have been of very little harm!"

"I always put Teddy first," Evelyn said simply. She did not need or seek advice in mothering. Suddenly, she sat straight. "You have my blood type on record, don't you? Teddy and I are so close we probably have the same type." She bared her pale arm. "Take

my blood today for a transfusion. He may need it. Take all you want."

"I have both your blood types on record," Biddle nodded. "But you're jumping the gun. It's much too soon for that. The medication he has been taking may be promoting the clotting factor already. We'll learn about that when the other tests have come in. Now, about the particular *way* with which you always put Teddy first, I—"

"What was all that about that Arab doctor?" she interrupted. (*What could conceivably make this worse than scarlet fever?*) "That crap about a curse?"

Dr. Biddle paused, watched the woman inhale deeply on the cigarette he had given her. Was she getting it? Did she understand in the least the message he'd been trying to convey, or should he risk offending all of them by phoning Niles at some point? "You're right in calling it nonsense, Evelyn. However, I'm aware that people can be unintentionally cruel and I was afraid you might hear about it from some woman friend of yours."

Women friends? What was he blathering about? "Hear about what?" she asked, frowning.

"One of the origins of the concept of hemophilia as a curse stems from the fact that Queen Victoria passed it along to several descendants." He peered thoughtfully toward the ceiling. "A Russian czaritsch and a prince of Spain, as I recall. Quite inadvertently, of course." He stubbed his cigarette out, touched her wrist as if thinking of taking her pulse. "Don't concern yourself about it."

His intimacy was unexpected and startled her into

turning her hand over, catching his wrist in her fingers. "I don't even understand what the hell you're telling me."

"Mothers transmit the disease," he said with an effort of will. "To their *sons*."

Evelyn stared at him in shock, incapable of speaking, crying out.

He pried her fingers from his wrist as gently as possible. "Our primary concern is Teddy's illness. Once again, I caution you against misinterpreting my words. However"—he flexed his hand and wrist—"whether hemophilia is established as the culprit or not, I want to recommend that you and Niles make quite sure that Teddy does not bleed internally without discovery. I regard that as essential."

"You're saying," she managed, "that Teddy could . . . *bleed to death? Inside?*"

"Possibly." He braced his big feet on the floor, got ready to stand. He'd done what he could. She'd either accept the truth, the facts, or she wouldn't. *And if she can't accept them*, he pondered as he hauled his old bulk erect, *I have another problem entirely to deal with*. "Continue his medication; use cold compresses with judicious pressure applied if he suffers any little scrapes. Don't get too overwrought with a scratch, but don't shrug it off either."

"Doctor—"

"It's rather astounding how much blood a human being can lose before there are particularly dire consequences to face. Later, I'll prescribe thrombin; something more appropriate. Oxycel, of course."

"Give me the exact definition of hemophilia," Evelyn said. She'd drawn a pencil from the imitation

leather purse she'd brought, had a pencil and small notepad ready. "For Niles," she added.

He stopped at the door, his hand on the knob. "It's a hemorrhagic disease caused by deficient coagulation. Insufficient factor VIII." She was a marvel. The way she appeared to compose herself, needed to make a record in order to force herself to believe it. "I have not said that Teddy has contracted hemophilia. By the way," he added as the fact occurred to him, "it isn't transmitted to female children."

Evelyn snapped shut the cover of her notebook and nodded. All that the terrible man was saying was revolting; vile. She had to get back to the house. She opened the cover again as another thought occurred to her. "It's hereditary? Always?"

He nodded ruefully. "It is. It's primarily a masculine disturbance with symptoms of spontaneous or traumatic bleeding, subcutaneously or intramuscularly." Look at her write it down! Did she understand any of it; was getting it down for Niles her only reason for the questions? "Don't think of it as anyone's fault, my dear," he said with as much compassion as he could find. "Women provide an unwitting channel for the disease. That's all."

"A channel," she said in a whisper. "I've only been—a channel."

He gave her a warm smile and pulled the door open. "That's all." He patted her shoulder. He started to follow her down the short hall to the waiting room, to speak to the boy and collect his next patient, but Evelyn was already on her way. Still, he watched until the two were leaving the office, mother and son, then went back alone into his pri-

vate office to get his thoughts together.

He heard the taxi when it sped away from the curb and bowed his head in silent, wordless prayer.

5

She found Teddy slumped in a chair in that old bastard's waiting room, simply gaping at nothing across the room—but grinning!

None of the men she knew, inside the family or outside, were going to rest until they had turned her perfect little darling into a goddamn *vegetable*!

She'd see about that, she'd just see about that.

"Come along, sweetheart, we're going home," she told Teddy in her put-upon, endearingly commanding tone. She reached down and took his hand, then turned to the patients who were waiting their turns. "If any of you have enough sense to pound sand into a rathole," Evelyn informed the old women and men, "you'll get out of here while the getting's good! All Biddle can do is find things wrong with you—he can't do a thing in hell about it!"

She didn't speak loudly but tugged Teddy after her. Before departing the room and office, she glanced back at the people who were staring open-mouthed at her. "Now that I think about it, he can't even make a decent diagnosis!"

They exited the building without either of them looking back. Not desiring to wait for the cab company to dispatch a driver again that day (or any other day, when it came down to that), Evelyn had instructed Morton Fry to wait. He was dozing when

she rapped on the window part of the driver's door, then thrust Teddy inside and quickly climbed in after him.

"Don't say a *word!*" she instructed the driver and leaned exhaustedly back against the seat. "I don't want to hear another man utter a syllable of *shit* till I've had an opportunity to recover from the last one! Just take us home!"

There was a pause before Morton put the hack into gear and drove off.

Evelyn read what she had scribbled on her notepad, then crammed it back into her purse. It was all too *incredible* for words, she couldn't *believe* the insensitivity of the old quack! To try to lay *all* the blame off on her for Teddy being sick again was simply too much to bear. He had been a fine, healthy boy until the weak Hiver eve system permitted one tiny virus to get to him. *Then* she'd nursed him back to health virtually alone, taken him to the doctor's time in and time out, spent God-knew-what on medicine and countless *hours* of time that she could have spent in practicing piano—and Mr. Big-shot Dr. Biddle blamed her for being "a *channel*"!

What else did he think a woman was in a Godless masculine society except a channel?

A channel through which Niles's and generations of useless, spineless Hiver eve genes could pass a disgusting male weakness!

Teddy rode quietly beside her. He wondered what Dr. Biddle had said to his Dear to get her upset again but he didn't think he would ask her. It was too bad, and all, but she didn't look unhappy or anything so he supposed she was just mad about

something and it didn't mean he had flunked his tests.

It was more important to him how his pal Coop was going to get home. It didn't occur to him to wonder how Coop had gotten to the office in the first place. But then, he hadn't expected to see Coop in the waiting room. Now, since he *had*, it seemed like a logical question to wonder how he'd return to Draden House. Prob'ly he didn't fly, like Superman, but Teddy hadn't seen any silver horses around so he didn't think Coop got wherever he was going by horseback.

For the first time Teddy realized Coop hadn't stopped growing—changing—after he climbed out of White River. Scrunching down in the backseat of the taxi, he tried to get a clear picture in his mind of how Coop looked so he'd notice it right away if he changed some more. Because, while he closely resembled Teddy in most respects, he was becoming a little bit different every day, maybe even every time Teddy saw him. And it was real important that big ol' Coop not change so much that Teddy became unable to *recanize* him. Just thinkin about that was scary, 'cause he didn't have a lot of friends—

And 'cause Coop had said to leave everything to him, and not worry. Not worry the way he was right now, at the instant he saw the tears appear in Dear's eyes. They were rimming them nearly like the junk old folks at the doctor's office had in their eyes. She wasn't mad anymore either, he thought, and all his terror of what might happen if he failed Dr. Biddle's tests was tryin to come right back inside him.

"Dear," he said softly.

"Sh," she answered. It was real secretive and she took his hand, cuddled against him. It wasn't impatient with him. "I have to think."

"Okay," he agreed, squeezing her hand back.

"Lady?" Mr. Fry in the front seat.

"What is it?"

"Lady, I'm just as sorry as I can be about this, but I don't remember where in Christ's name you live."

"*You watch your language!*" she hissed, striking the seat directly under the back of his neck. Then, sighing loudly, she settled back. "If you expect to get a decent tip, just keep going the direction you're going until I tell you differently!"

"Okay, right," the driver said hastily. "Sure." Under his breath, however, Teddy heard him mutter: "*Jeee-sus!*" Now Morton looked as mean as his picture.

It definitely is not my fault poor Teddy isn't a girl, Evelyn thought. *It's the male of the species—who else?—who decides the sex.* Of course, they *always* decide *that!* She was a mere channel, no more than an *opening* and a *tunnel*, for their stupid goddamn seed.

Trying to remember exactly what Coop looked like, Teddy realized that the first time he had gotten to know his new friend at all—or to learn he was coming—was really just the other night. When he'd gone to bed the night before Cass visited, he'd been sort of partly asleep . . . when he'd *heard* Coop (not that his name was Coop then, that had come later when they got acquainted). Well, Coop had been getting different in little-bitty ways all along—taller, his chest getting wider, the part of the arms above

the elbows lookin stronger and stronger—now that he thought about it. He still *looked* like Teddy, acourse, 'cept he never had to wear glasses, and he certainly was *not* a grown-up—

But Coop's legs looked quite a lot like Niles's looked when he was swimmin—not big; kinda okay, with hair on them and all (but the color of Teddy's hair)—and his arms were gonna get powerful muscles like Uncle Duane's (*better*, even!) if he kept growin . . . and then there was the hard part for Teddy to think. Back when Coop'd been naked, before he got Teddy's old clothes to wear, his *thing* had been biggern'n Teddy's already. Prob'ly it was bigger'n Niles's, Uncle Duane's, maybe *anybody's*! If *that* kept growin, ol' Coop was gonna have to get clothes from somewhere else, even if that shirt and pants Teddy'd given him *did* appear to go on fitting!

Queen Victoria's family! thought Evelyn. What was the old fart thinking about, dredging up bullshit like that? If it was true, that German man she married was probably just *waiting* for an opportunity to *dump* the diseased germs he had down the poor woman's *channel*! There was no justice in blaming Victoria, no fairness whatsoever!

"None at all," Dear said aloud.

"What?" Teddy asked, glancing up.

Evelyn hugged him to her. "Nothing, darling. Your Dear was just thinking out loud."

Well, Teddy couldn't have that disease, he absolutely *couldn't*. She just had to pray more—a *lot* more—because there was a *great deal* of work to be done by the two of them. Together, she and Teddy could lick anything, they could *make anything hap-*

pen just the way she'd told Duane. She might have known something awful like this would come up, Uncle Rob had even *warned* her of it during his visitation—he had almost *predicted* this dreadful day! He'd said she was too frail to handle it if Rob and God and the holy angels decided to call Teddy home. In exactly the same breath that he'd predicted she would have new opportunities in her career—and Cass *was* going to New York, Cass *would be* the key to the successes Niles had denied her—Uncle Rob had also advised her to become pregnant.

Which was the only part of that inspired message that gave her pause. Of course, Uncle Rob *was* a man—or *had been one*; that had to be taken into consideration. After all, how could any living woman judge whether a man was able to rise above his state and become trustworthy after he was dead? Well, her primary concern was Teddy, of course. Yet if everything Rob had said was truly a case of looking into the unalterable future—

Then the one thing she could conceivably imagine he'd meant by hinting that there would soon be a *true Mengaldt* created, right in Draden House, was that she would be getting pregnant whether she wanted to or not . . .

"Teddy. Hey, Ted! Over here!"

Teddy twisted his neck to the right, startled if not precisely surprised to hear his name being called, and his mouth dropped open as he squinted through the growing twilight.

Because the hearty shout had come from *outside* the taxi cab . . .

And there was Coop—*riding on the running*

board!

Coop, his pal, his good buddy—shirt open to where it showed his belly button, pounds of sandy-colored hair like Teddy's whipped behind him by the breeze as if he was ridin *real waves*—his face already as tanned as if he had been at a for-real beach in California, knees stooped so's he could hang on to the open crack in the window with one hand—signaling wildly but joyously to Teddy with his other arm—*Coop* who-wouldn't-be-left-behind, *Coop*-the-adventurous, *Coop*, the bold, brave, and free! *Coop* who-couldn't-be-stopped, *Coop* the great—*always there* for his pal Teddy!

"Turn left at the next corner, driver," Dear said. "Sit back, sweetheart," she told Teddy, "you look flushed."

"I'm fine," he said, craning his neck.

As the cab driver did what he was told, ol' Coop did something amazing: he threw both legs out behind him just as the taxi was whipped to the left and *clung to the window by his fingertips like an Indian!* His bare feet were in the air, dirty as sin and toes wiggling. "*Whoopee!*" he yelled in excitement and delight. "*Whoooopeeee!*"

"Don't go so fast," Dear told the man at the wheel. "You'll get your tip." She looked down and rummaged in her purse in preparation for paying him.

"Ya gotta *try* this sometime, Ted!" Coop shouted. "I'm gonna show you *lots* of neat stuff!"

Okay, Teddy agreed enthusiastically on the breath of his mind. *Okay!*

"But listen Ted, I hitched a ride to tell you some-

thing *real important!*" Coop pressed his familiar face so close against the window that it was like looking into a mirror. "Can you hear me okay?"

I can, Teddy said with a nod. At that instant there wasn't really anybody else in the world.

Evelyn began to cry. The very notion of carrying a baby for nine long months while she was simultaneously trying to nurse Teddy back to good health again seemed intolerable to consider. Only the thrilling prospect of winding up with a one hundred per cent Mengaltdt, a beautiful little one that was truly one of *her kind*—with the absolute artistic blood of her very own family pumping unimpeded and unfiltered in its little veins—made the prospect of carrying and bearing a child in the least palatable.

But in the cruel real world, how could that happen, how could that *be*? She stared restively out the righthand window of the taxi, saw darkness sweeping over them. She experienced an almost apprehensive shiver and some strange quality of the fading light made her look away. Darling Teddy had tried so hard. He was almost everything a mother could desire. She caressed the back of his neck, so like E.H.'s, found it clammy with sweat. She swallowed hard. If anything actually happened to him, worse than what he'd already suffered through, life would become unbearable, hollow. So lonely. The truth was that if Uncle Rob spoke the Lord's own truth, though, matters were entirely out of her hands whatever she preferred. And besides, her inborn powers, though admittedly somewhat undeveloped, *were real*. She'd learned all there was to learn from Mom's correspondences, and she *did* have the gifts

of psychic insight into nature's warnings (she'd had the feeling *someone* was going to die, she had witnesses!) plus an openness to callers from the Great Beyond that was bestowed only every other generation. It made sense that Niles *surely* had to be . . . involved . . . *had* to perform his masculine deed in order for her to get pregnant again—

Although the truth was that she didn't know anybody who possessed such *fabulous* creativity as herself. "Up the block, driver." The man was driving too fast again, couldn't the idiot see that? Teddy squirmed beside her, the poor baby was always a nervous wreck when he had to wait in the old fool's office, the back of his neck was absolutely tied up in knots, maybe she shouldn't keep him in the dark about his condition, maybe he had the right to know what was happening to him. "Do you see the long driveway with the stone post and the sign saying 'Draden House?' "

"Yeah, I remember the place now, Mrs. Draden."

"Turn into it when you get there, please." Weary, exasperated, Evelyn again glanced at Teddy, shook her head, and gave him a wan smile. He looked as if he had a little more color in his face than usual. At least half of him *was* Mengaltdt. "We won't forget riding around the city with you very soon."

Mr. Fry didn't speak loudly enough in reply for Evelyn to hear him over the sound of the engine. Teddy heard him say, "That goes double for me." The cab began to slow as he eased up on the accelerator.

"Ted—you *listenin*?" Tapping on the window, Coop was pressing his face against the glass so hard

that his nose was smooshed. Teddy started to cock his head to hear, sensing the urgency of what his friend needed to tell him. All at once, though, he had a feeling that he didn't want to hear it at all. He sat forward on the seat, watched the driveway coming up. Teddy knew that it arched up over a rolling spot before leveling out 'cause Niles had kind of bumped their car up the slope till he got used to it. "Teddy, you *ready?*"

Teddy ignored Coop for another second. Mr. Fry was slowing down, but maybe not enough. Shadow from burly oak trees along the street dripped darkness over the entrance to the driveway. Teddy caught a glimpse of his pal's face from the corner of one eye and sighed. "*Go ahead,*" he thought despite a premonition that made it hard to say it. "*Shoot.*"

"Ted, she's tryin to get up her nerve to tell ya about your tests." Coop's face was only a few inches away. He was whispering even though he knew grown-ups didn't listen to him and his nose looked funny, like it was bent in two. "I don't think it's good news, man. I listened to what they was sayin in Dr. Biddle's office, and got *some* of it. Ted, I think it's gonna be real crummy."

"*I don't wanta hear it,*" Teddy whispered, pressing his eyelids together as hard as he could. "*I won't listen.*"

"Ted, *look at me,*" Coop hissed. "Open your eyes and look *just at me!*"

He did. It was almost dark out now, but ol' Coop was easy to see.

Light from inside him—a flare of illumination made of everything Coop truly was—made the face

just like Teddy's as bright as the sun. "I tole ya I'd handle things, didn't I? Well, Ted—I will! I'll fix it so you *don't* have to hear the bad news!"

Evelyn put out an arm and hand to pull Teddy back to her; the hand just touching his shoulder. "Oh, my sweet darling baby, Dr. Biddle asked us to come in because your tests came back and it's *not good*, my darling. It's *not good news!*"

Coop moved faster than Teddy had ever seen anything move in his whole life. One second he was outside of the car—hangin on the running board—next second he was *in* the car, in the *front seat*, jumpin *right at Mr. Fry!* "Teddy, precious," Dear was saying, blind to what was happening, "*I'm afraid you're going to—*"

Out of control, headlong, the cab smashed shudderingly into the stone post in front of Draden House. For a timeless moment, no one inside the taxi moved.

And no one was sure if the awful, abrupt collision had hurtled Teddy into the front seat where he tumbled under the dashboard unharmed or if he had thrown himself there just before the impact.

Prob'ly the driver had his own opinion. But it was obvious to Niles and the neighbors who rushed to the cab a few minutes later that he wouldn't be expressing it. Not with his neck bent that way.

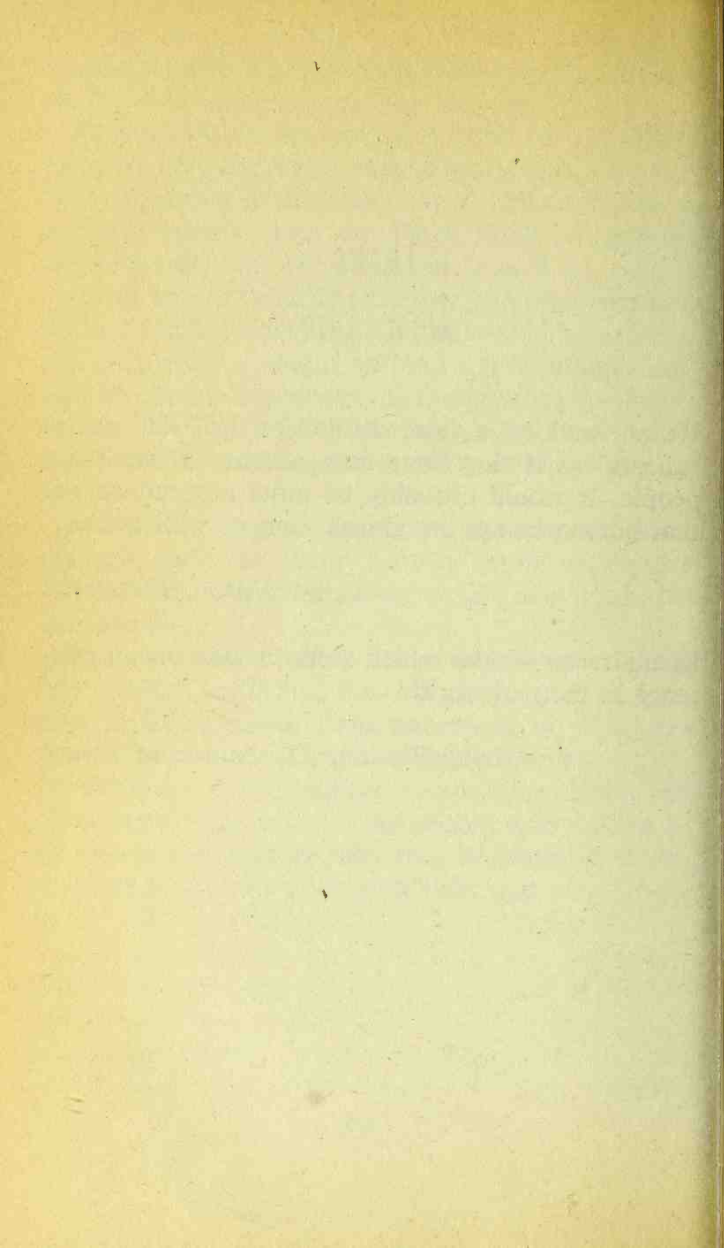
Three Dear Life

We are making a false distinction [to] talk about "ghosts" as if they were quite distinct from living people. It would probably be more accurate to say that human beings *are* ghosts—ghosts with bodies.

—Colin Wilson, *Poltergeist*

Metaphorms—ideas which seem to take on an existence in the real world.

—Lyall Watson, *The Nature of Things*



Interlogue

It may be possible for an idea, particularly one that is strongly held or generously housed at an unconscious level, to manifest its own independent sort of physical reality.

—Lyall Watson, *The Nature of Things*

Quietly closing the door to the house, the ten-year-old turned back to the foyer, satisfied that there was no sign of the mailman or anyone else approaching, and looked down at the foot he was clutching carefully in his hands.

The foot was bare. The boy used his index finger to trace the prominent blue veins of the slight arch, ran it all the way up to where the ankle should be and . . . just *wasn't*.

The extremity was very interesting to him; fascinating. In spite of the absorption, however, he kept his wits about him, divided them at least three ways: One part was alert to any indication that his father might wonder where he was and come looking, another part was keenly attuned to the slightest sugges-

tion of his mother's approach, and the third part listened raptly to the music of rain slapping steadily against the sides of the old house.

That third distraction of his intelligence enjoyed itself because he liked the noise rain made when it hit on things and no one protested against the slap. Like all water, rain did whatever it wanted and nobody could tell it to stop. Nobody asked it *why* it was striking, or if it really meant to do harm, or if it realized by hitting things often enough it was possible to wear anything anyway until it was gone. Anything at all. He had always liked water, largely without being aware of it, whether it was coming down out of the skies as if nature detested people (and hungered to wash them away), or lying motionless in a bathtub—

Or swirling deep in the whirlpools beneath the sybaritic surface of a river or sea eerily responding to electrical charges in the air. The sea, or river, where it sometimes formed *other* things. Because it could; because some people were careless enough to wonder what life was, and to envision the shapes it might assume. Things alive had come, always, from the beating, mutating water womb because of desire, curiosity, need, and dread. Some, but not all, had been human . . .

The boy turned the naked foot deliberately, slowly, in his hands, toes to stump. Kissed and tasted it simultaneously. When no lightning struck him and no grown-up appeared in the foyer to take his toy away, he dropped to his knees and, with the earnest effort common only to children, went to work. Uncaring of his pants, he began to creep his way over the

width and length of the entryway, propelling the favored foot and the other body parts ahead of him with little nudges.

The other toys that were temporarily but illegally in his keeping included the majority of extremities that gave any human being his or her particular physical identification as a member of the species. Hands, white and brown and almost yellow, some with the fingers curled, partly closed in relaxation, other hands with the fingers appearing to reach out—splayed as though their owners had died suddenly in terrible shock (perhaps of amputation). Individual toes and fingers (lumpen things for the most part, although there was a single, slender woman's digit with a brightly painted nail). The thumbs seemed particularly gross to the boy and, therefore, especially fascinating. He had two of them—both white—to play with and he liked working them at the joint, listening to the little popping sound they made (very much like dime store crickets you pinched together) when you pressed the thumbs till they went almost all the way down.

So he made them parade around the foyer like parts of toy soldiers, playfully slapping the soles of the feet on the floor, forcing the fingers to crawl forward and drag the connected hands with them, like big pale bugs. Or crabs. It was difficult for his imagination to come up with sensible methods of locomotion for the ears and noses. Finally he basically swept them forward with one of the only two arms he had there—one that went all the way up to the shoulder joint, the other stopping at the strange-looking elbow—and enjoyed the way the ears spun

and the noses sort of flopped over and over.

After a while, when the rain shower subsided and it was easier to listen for the grown-ups elsewhere in the old house, the ten-year-old tired of creeping around on his own hands and knees, but hesitated to decide what to do next.

The tenth birthday party had come and gone, in April, without the presents that were given to Teddy sticking much to his mind. There'd been such concern over the accident out in front of Draden House—a lot more than made any sense to him because neither Teddy nor Dear had been hurt in the slightest, and the man who'd driven the cab had been an outsider, of no importance whatsoever to him. A great deal of the concern, of course, had been because of Teddy's tests. He'd realized what his mother tried to say (just before the crash) in spite of everything, and after that, the past few weeks had been very hard for him. Probably the reason he didn't remember clearly what Teddy'd gotten for gifts was because Teddy had been too upset to pay a lot of attention.

He got up on his knees real straight with some body parts in his hands and decided that if people kept on making things awful he'd have to stop them. Any way he had to. And he kind of thought he might have lots of ways.

The thumb he'd been pinching together snapped in two, the tip with the fingernail bouncing out of sight into a dark corner of the foyer.

Niles wouldn't like that. He wouldn't like having his prosthetic samples destroyed.

That was okay, it didn't matter.

Just in case, though, he put the rest of the thumb (which included part of the heel) in his mouth and began chewing on it. It was tough and tasted like crap but then he made himself gulp real hard and managed to get it down.

Nobody'd look for the rest of it in the corner. No one ever swept up or even ran the Hoover anymore.

Unhurriedly, the boy started replacing the body parts in Niles's leather sales kit. He had observed quite closely when the father, practicing his approach to the physicians who were his customers, sometimes took them out and he was able to put most of the prosthetics where they were usually kept, where they belonged.

Until they were sold and got stuck on real, human people.

He sat down in the corner where the joint with the nail was and waited. He would have to be real alert in the days and weeks ahead. The people were bothering Teddy a lot, so much so it was hard to imagine whom he might have to handle—for Teddy's own sake—next. Not that Teddy thought so 'cause they'd talked. Right now, the house was still. They all worried about Teddy, loved him, but they didn't do it right and they might even kill him unless—

Acourse, Dear was the *main one*. She prob'ly loved him most, and he loved her, and it was difficult to figure out what was to be done with her. If he did anything right away—protected Teddy against her immediately—that might break Teddy's heart. The other ones didn't even know he was special, that he was God's perfect little child.

But he'd know what had to be done when the time

came. He didn't doubt that at all. He, after all, was real, *real* special indeed.

He was a true Mengaltdt.

Yawning, he stared down at his long legs and smiled approvingly at them.

"Yup," he said.

Chapter Eleven

1

Niles Hiverve insisted on very few things in life, aspired to fewer still, and in the realm of his beliefs and convictions, maintained the same carefully limited but quietly steadfast standards that he applied to daily life.

He saw no reason to object to it if other men were powerfully driven by ambition, and didn't hate or even envy the rich; he intended to be polite to anybody he met, whatever oddball beliefs (religious or political) they held to; and he thought to himself that people were making grave mistakes when they cheated on their mates, lost their tempers and struck other people (or worse), or became noisy and boisterous in public. By the same token, though, the things those people did weren't of much interest to him unless he or members of his family were their targets, and he saw no reason for one human being to decide that another human being should go straight to hell if he *did* step out on his wife a couple of times, beat up on

somebody his own size, or got a little rowdy in public. Hell, he'd seen his Evelyn get so pissed off at pianos that were badly out of tune that she tore the hammers out and "made goddamn sure no other poor piano player will ever have to play a job on an instrument like that"—and *that* was okay, that was *understandable*. Most of his problems with Evvie just happened when he *couldn't* understand what the hell her motives were!

The war that Hitler was starting in Europe now was an example of how he felt. He could understand how the leader of a country might decide they needed more room, if the German population had grown a great deal. Human beings had gone to war since the start of time over things like that, and other nations, like other people, just stayed *out* of it if they knew what was good for them. There was no reason the United States had to get bent out of shape over it until the little snot decided to begin taking pot shots at *this* country. Then you did what any man would do (since a country wasn't anything more than a big group of people), and beat the shit out of him. It wasn't Adolf's fault or even Roosevelt's if the nations in Europe hadn't had enough sense to try to make friends with some of the other nations over there, so they had some buddies to shout to for help. The thing was, too many of those people were backward as hell, they thought it was still the nineteenth century; they had kings, for God's sake—they made goddamn *human chains* across their borders, and were *surprised* when modern generals thumbed their noses at legal borders and cut through the fields to get at them!

And the real thing was, Niles admitted to himself as he put the morning paper aside, finished the coffee

he'd made for himself, and rose to get ready for work, those backward countries *were* over there. The damn Nazis didn't have any planes or bombs good enough to start anything with America; they *couldn't* involve us. Which was just as well for the goosestepping little dictator with the fairy mustache since Niles could call up Cope and Gootee and Caplinger at Picturesque Paint and get enough good men together in twenty-four hours to whale the crap out of Germany. The Germans were only a hair better than the rest of the European nations because of their *Luftwaffe* pilots. From an American point of view, they weren't going anywhere.

And maybe I'm not either, Niles thought with a frown, putting his coffee cup in the kitchen sink and running water in it. It wasn't that he was selling nothing; he *was*, and he'd gotten close enough to a couple of doctors that they'd promised big orders. Right after the first of the month. The problem was that he was trying to make his family survive on commission only—no weekly income—and it took a while to build a foundation, a base, with nothing coming in regularly.

If there was, Niles thought as he started back through the house to the foyer to collect his sport coat and sales kit, he might be able to put together enough money to take Teddy to some hotshot specialists—the Mayo clinic, maybe. It was god-awful just to take Evvie's word for it that there was nothing they could do for Ted. But that was what Biddle'd told Evelyn: "there's nothing more to be done." Except keep the kid still as much as possible and make sure he didn't get hurt enough to bleed. To judge from what Evvie'd reported the doctor as saying, even the

slightest bruise or scratch "could open Teddy up like a stuck pig."

Niles paused with one arm in the sleeve of his jacket, deep lines forming between his brows. Evvie hadn't told him what the old man thought about Teddy's future, however limited that could be, whether the medication Dr. Biddle originally gave Teddy might take hold and reduce the seriousness of a minor scratch, a pinprick. She also hadn't explained why, after Dr. Biddle diagnosed hemophilia, he hadn't come up with a new, stronger or more . . . exact . . . medicine. Something designed *specifically* to deal with Ted's disease.

And it suddenly seemed clear to Niles that there was no way old man Biddle had made a reference to Teddy bleeding like a stuck pig. Biddle was from the old school; he was a decent, considerate man. It was impossible to imagine him being crude like that.

But what did he, Niles, know? Evelyn was right, he wasn't much force as a man; he was a lousy damn provider. He couldn't even make enough money to pay the bills, pay for Draden House, so it was probably a horrible blessing in disguise that he didn't have to add costly modern cure-alls to the list. And he had probably better let his wife go on bearing most of the burden of raising a child since he didn't really know the first thing about it—it came naturally to women, not men.

Yet he did wish he had not let Evvie get by with wrecking the comic book rack he had made for Teddy—and he should've told her off, then gone and built another one. He was pretty sure ol' Ted had liked it a lot and it was one of the few things he, Niles, had ever done—entirely on his own—for the

kid. Hell, his own dad had been a big, bluff, jovial kind of man whom everybody liked on sight. The kind who gave the impression he could do just about anything and was born to be a grandpop. (Pop would have found a way to provide everything his family needed; Pop would have done *more* . . .)

On impulse, Niles turned around and went back to the telephone to call cousin Lou at Picturesque.

While he was waiting for his former boss to pick up, Niles found his heartbeat accelerating with resolve, with renewed determination. Damnit, working at a paint company had been something he liked, sweat and stains and all! And he'd been a damn good mixer, too; he'd gotten to be expert at it. Nobody there would *ever* have fired him and he *would* have been promoted eventually. He was a duck out of water as a salesman, but was that so awful? The Lord made different kinds of people; could he help it if he enjoyed working with his hands and with other people, was it a terrible thing that he'd *like* to go down into the basement right then and begin work on another rack for his boy—a better, more durable one? If Lou would only take him on again, part-time, he could tell Evelyn—

What? He could tell Evvie *what*? That she would have to be alone almost *all* the time, do *everything* for Teddy with no help from her husband, keep house, prepare *all* the meals, take out the trash, wash the dishes, run all the errands?

Niles hung up. It would mean the end of the marriage. She couldn't do all that, she had to have time to practice piano, she didn't know *how* to organize her time and *wouldn't* learn how. She didn't have to, because she was creative, talented.

And all *he* had to do was earn a living, and he didn't even do that well.

Grim-faced, Niles went back to the foyer and opened his sample kit to check it, making sure he had replaced all the prosthetics after his own most recent practice session.

It didn't look right. Inspecting the contents of the bag thoroughly, he discovered that all the parts were there, poked into the proper pouches, except a thumb. Now, what the hell happened to *that*? Niles checked again, moved bizarre little pieces around in case the joint had stuck to a complete hand, an ear; didn't find it.

Peculiar. A lifelike rubber-based thumb was missing (*Did I leave it in Dr. Gregory's office?*), as if it had just hopped out of the kit and jumped away. *Peculiar*, a hen-pecked paint mixer standing in the foyer of a house he couldn't possibly buy ransacking around in a leather bag for a phony thumb!

For a moment Niles merely stood flat-footed where he was, leaning on nothing, arms not outthrust, legs not tensed, neither tuning out nor listening.

But he heard the quiet. The state of quietude.

Duane wasn't there that week, Aunt May-May wasn't visiting either, Evvie and Teddy were still in bed asleep. Warm out, it might get hot by afternoon, he had to keep his jacket on, his pants fresh, he didn't dare sweat, and if he got something on his clothing, he'd have to come home to change. Change and go back to doing this work that he loathed and performed so poorly. (*Then come home again. Where his son, and his marriage, were dying slowly.*)

Bobby—his mother—did a painting once of an American Indian, an oil; copied it from some work

of art that'd probably made the original artist a fortune—or maybe the poor bastard just wound up broke, and lost—like Fitzgerald's damn generation (*Duane's*, now that he thought of it). It didn't matter. Bobby's painting was just as good. And she had told Niles not that long before Pop died, even though he himself was a grown man now (thank God Teddy'd got to know Pop a little before the end), "You're going to have to be my brave little Indian, Nilesette."

Well, he had been, he'd always tried to be the way Bobby wanted—but why? Aside from the fact that his mother had asked him to be and his wife Evelyn always *expected* him to be—*why?* Who said so? He just didn't feel brave this morning, or any morning, and he didn't feel much like just *taking* it anymore, so . . . *why* did he have to be, *why did he have to?*

Because that was what men did, American men at least; it was what made them Nazi-proof probably; he had learned growing up that Taking It was what made the America of everyone's dreams invincible, kept the foreign hordes from invading, and made the American Way of Life the envy of the *whole world*—was what could let any American boy grow up to be President.

But Indian men had worked the land hard and were dead, so was Pop, so would Duane be if he didn't lay off the hootch (*because his wife kicked him out!*), getting elected to the presidency was about as likely for Niles Hivereve as it was for *Geronimo*—a ten-year-old *boy* was dying (*because his mother and his doctor said so!*)—and they were all going to go fight a war in Europe whether Niles, his late Pop, Teddy, Duane, Dr. Biddle, Tom Dewey, or Clark Gable thought they should or not! It was as plain as the

nose on Henry Wallace's face—men would be the ones to go do it, and die like dogs—while American *women* lived to be seven years older than their husbands, on average!

And except for teachers and nurses, damn near *none* of the helpless little things even went out and sweated their balls off on an eight-to-five grind day in, day out! *Weaker sex?* Bull!

The difference between the sexes was that simple, Niles figured, catching a breath along with his temper: Ladies didn't have any balls to be sweated or shot off, and they wouldn't be contented about a damn thing until no one had them.

Two people could have taken his thumb. Not one, two: Ted was just one possibility—although what in Jesus' name either Teddy or Evelyn would have *wanted* with it, he had no idea. The fact remained, and it had two sides: Teddy was a boy, and Evvie was Evvie. No other possibilities existed since Duane and Aunt May-May hadn't been in Draden House for a while, and a burglar wouldn't have busted in and stolen one thumb. (What he might have wanted with whole hands, arms, and feet—or the rest of the thumbs—Niles couldn't imagine. But burglars were burglars, too!)

He considered waking Evelyn up to ask her if she knew where the thing was, immediately abandoned the idea. How would it sound? Then he considered awakening Teddy and gave up on that plan even faster. What sort of monster went around waking up dying children and demanding to know what they'd done with their father's—

He turned his eyes heavenward, then closed up the sample kit. He must have lost the part himself, some-

how. Pursuing any other possibility seemed utter insanity and meant he was conceding the fact that he didn't really live in a valuable old mansion, he lived in a looney bin, a madhouse.

Niles tightened the necktie he'd picked out in the darkness of his and Evvie's bedroom that morning, hating the wearing of ties so badly that it hadn't mattered to him which one he put on.

It's not just quiet here, he thought as he took the handle of his bag in his hand and turned to the front door, *it's weird*. Faintly perspiring, he stared into the corners of the foyer, felt sweat trickle down the back of his neck. Bobby's brave little Indian, he didn't feel particularly stoic today, he felt—well, apprehensive about his future, Teddy's, Evvie's—everybody's. *Anything might happen to any of us, now—us Americans*. The times were changing, everywhere. The people of a world that honestly expected to go to war believed a lot of things that even Evelyn couldn't quite believe. Had the sense not to. He only wanted a hamburger now and then, sex, Lum 'n' Abner and Jack Benny on the radio, Casper Milquetoast in the funny papers, a job that paid enough, somewhere to sleep, his family, and a nice Christmas. Fancy ideas and beliefs—conquering the world—disease that came out of the new medical books . . . they were for some other ordinary Joe, not Wimp Hivereve.

And wanting what he wanted, Niles realized then, made him everyone's enemy during times like this. Regardless of how much he minded his own business, or how hard he worked.

I suppose I need more faith, Niles thought as he was climbing into his car.

"Faith" was the name of the new girl—Doc's new

blond secretary—in the office. Niles had met her a couple of weeks ago when Doc hired her, and her name was Faith.

She was very pretty to Niles but the idea of needing “more” of her had only occurred to him by accident.

2

The closing of the front door was not loud or even unconsciously unexpected, but it brought Teddy awake nevertheless, made him sit up in bed, blinking.

Where's Dear? he wondered.

A moment later, slightly (and secretly) ashamed of himself, he lay back against the mattress with the realization that he had reacted from habit.

He was puttin that little-kid stuff behind him now. He was ten, after all.

And he had Coop to take care of things.

Besides, he'd been wakin up all at once—his mind and body instantly alert—ever since the accident with the taxi cab.

Tryin just to stay in bed and sleep a lot, like Dear wanted now that he was dyin, was the hardest thing he'd ever tried to do. It got boring.

And at those times when he strove to deal with the concept of a world without him even in it anymore, it could get even worse than boring.

The possibility that his Dear might get a phone call from Cass and go off to New York to play piano for his cousin had bothered him a lot since the accident on his birthday—somewhere around then when he'd realized what Dear was saying when Coop jumped into the cab and made Mr. Fry crash. He couldn't get

mad at Coop for not doin it faster, but worry over what Dear might do now was makin him real nervous. Back when he figured he'd be growing up, he had been pretty sure Dear wouldn't leave him, but now, well, why shouldn't she? If Dr. Biddle didn't even want to see him in his office—'cause there were patients he could make well—then Dear might just as well return to the career his bein born had ruined. Why not?

Coop was the one who pointed those things out to him. It'd made Teddy real mad and he'd told Coop to shut up and leave him alone, so Coop had done just that! Oh, there were glimpses of his steadily growing friend with the big muscles and Teddy's own face—Coop sulking in a corner of the dining room during dinner, Coop standing in the doorway to the basement, Coop outside his bedroom window on nights when there was thunder and Teddy was afraid Things might be tryin to come in and get him—but mostly, Coop wasn't speaking to him.

Which worried Teddy, too, since he hadn't been sure up until then that Coop was one hundred percent real, and had any feelings to hurt!

Still, spending most of his time in bed without visits from Coop while Teddy wondered if his Dear might be packing her bags to leave, and then the times of relief when she came into the bedroom for a few minutes to take his temperature and she was just wearin her favorite yellow robe, got pretty boring.

The funny thing was that he didn't feel sick no more! Well, not much; not often. He hadn't done any bleedin for ages, and he couldn't *ever* remember bein so rested up!

But life was better in some ways now that he was

dyin, he had to admit that to himself. Although Dear said longer nighttime prayers with him than usual and asked him about makin number two in the morning, she didn't seem as interested in his bowels as before and hadn't given him an enema for a long while. She seemed a little different to him in many ways, lately. When she played the piano, she wasn't doin songs she just wanted to play at the time; she tended to play the same songs over and over, ran a bunch of scales and stuff like that. She hadn't had her feelings hurt by Niles for at least a week—the talk of divorce had passed the night they took him to Dr. Biddle's and it hadn't been resumed, not so far as Teddy knew—or at least she wasn't *shouting* at Niles much. Which might've been 'cause he was working even longer hours and wasn't always home at dinner.

Niles was different too. Teddy sat on the edge of the bed and turned the dial of the radio, nodding to himself. The radio wasn't on but it was fun sometimes just to turn the dial around and around. Niles didn't have much to say to Teddy at all, and when he did, his eyes got big and shiny—then he just got up and washed the dishes or something. Maybe, Teddy thought, it was 'cause Niles didn't want him to die. But since Teddy never really saw any tears in his father's eyes or heard him cry, it was hard to tell.

He'd finished reading *Alice* and had been trying to read *Robinson Crusoe*, but it had been slow-going until he read: "My father went on to say that if I did take this foolish step, God would not bless me . . ."

The line stuck in Teddy's mind because he had assumed it was only his Dear who knew exactly what God thought or, if not just Dear, just mothers.

Now there was evidence that Robinson's folks had

not only known what was best for their son—even if it made him miserable, made him be happier livin on an island—but they had also known what God wanted for their son.

It occurred to Teddy for the first moment that Niles, too, might have a direct connection with the Almighty. How that could work, since Niles and Dear didn't agree very often about him or anything else, he didn't understand; but it might mean Niles was doin God's work by not sayin how sorry he was that Teddy was dyin and then crying a lot and stuff. Maybe men weren't ever *supposed* to show the way they felt. That *could* be! He'd seen Dear hit Niles a coupla times, usually on the arm but once in the chin, and Niles hadn't hit her back or even showed tears in his eyes!

Then if he, Teddy, wasn't going to grow up and yet he would be a man if he *did*, it got real important to know when the man part of him was supposed to begin happening, growing in him. Would it start before long, so he could quit acting like a big baby about things like his new disease—

Or did men have to be twenty-one and have their own kids?

3

Evelyn took longer than usual sitting on the toilet that morning. Though she experienced no difficulty in making either number one or number two and didn't really think she felt exactly *bad*, she was aware of how quiet the house was today and it was getting on her nerves. By night, a house this devoid of sound meant anything from the imminent arrival of her cre-

ative muse to an opportunity for her to tune in to nature's secrets (as she had done in knowing what it meant if a bird found its way into the house) to the vague but persistent premonition that a family member on the Other Side was about to pay her a visit. Midnight silence was pleasant, educational; fun!

Daytime quiet—particularly in the hours before noon—was very different indeed. Often, it meant thunder and lightning might start whooping it up like a percussion section on reefers (the well-known “silence before the storm”). It could mean that a pivotal phone call might interrupt her reverie, or it might mean the world was holding its breath in wait for her to go out, innocently bring in the mail, and learn that someone near and dear to her was dead, suddenly dead. Once, on a morning just like this, the horrible news about E.H. being clubbed to death on the steps to his own office and rolled like a common drunk had been her terrible lot.

Houses were supposed to be filled with the laughter of children happily at play. Oh, how she'd loved children's games! She had been absolutely expert at hopscotch (if she did say so herself)—but of course, you had to play that outside, and poor little Teddy . . .

She wept noisily for a full minute, then counted off five squares of toilet paper, blew her nose, and felt a lot better. She had to be brave for her little darling, put on a brave front, try to treat him (to the very best of her ability) as if that monster Dr. Biddle hadn't stuck his nose into their family business and decided to “prepare” her for the dreadful news and thereby placed her in the perfectly *awful* position she was in. At first she had only wanted to warn Teddy—obviously, he'd be so happy when he found out from his

very own Dear that he wasn't going to perish after all (if he wasn't) and he'd only be a stronger person for having withstood the test—and to make Niles feel guilty that he was never there for either of them (a major crime on his ever-growing list of paternal and husbandly felonies). It was possible she might have made a mistake in blurting out the news to Teddy just before that poor (but indisputably reckless) cab driver drove his taxi to his early demise on the post out front, but then she'd had to tell Niles the same white lie—Dr. Biddle really hadn't held out much hope for the final test—but there was no lasting harm in that. He'd be just as pleased as Teddy when she'd found out from old man Biddle that Teddy was going to be all right, and she passed the marvelous news on to her grateful husband—

And in some ways, deep in her heart of hearts, she'd never doubted for a moment that her little Teddy *was* going to be fine, just fine.

A mother knew it when her precious child was very, very ill. She didn't need a family doctor older than the sequoias out in California to "prepare her for the worst"—*that* crap was like the things she heard Dr. Anthony Loring telling young Widder Brown!

Evelyn got off another five squares of toilet tissue and folded them carefully. She was getting an attitude from Niles of late, she knew that too. He hadn't said a word but it was clear to her that he was showing his disapproval of the way she had told Teddy about his condition. Well, that was all right, even *he* had a right to his opinion—but she suspected it was more than that. There was no doubt that he was having trouble getting doctors and clinics to order those funny limbs and things he sold for Doc (and that was no big sur-

prise, she'd wanted him to quit clinging to his cousin Lou but to get a *real job*, not just look for another relative or friend to work for!); but she sensed it was something else. A woman, perhaps. Well, that wouldn't be a huge surprise *either*, Mom had warned her frequently enough during her growing years that no man could be trusted (except Daddy, she'd go to her grave believing E.H. had been the exception that proved the rule) and Niles had probably *already* been unfaithful to her, she simply hadn't caught him at it. (And in all fairness, he had never gotten pie-eyed and then brought home some two-bit floozy, and *flaunted* his infidelity at her.) At least her Niles wasn't a god-damn tomcat the way some men were, she had trained him better than *that*.

Not that she would merely sit back and cry if he did, simply *take* it, the way . . . other women sometimes did.

For heaven's sake, Evelyn thought as she was standing and pulling up her panties, *I still haven't had my period*.

She flushed the toilet and stood there, watching the more or less unsullied water churn away, thinking—not worryingly, not stewing about it, just thinking.

When she was only a girl, her periods had come exactly like clockwork. You could tell what part of the month you were in just by asking her. The phenomenon had amazed her so much that she really hadn't minded the curse (except for times when she was somewhere public). It had seemed to her that it was a mark of womanhood and a small enough price to pay for having a new, deeply private world that was simultaneously shared with women everywhere and entirely Evelyn Mengaldt's. It was like belonging to a club

and, sometimes when it was really heavy, rising to the leadership of it! Oh, it was inconvenient, but everything was!

After Teddy, during a process that appeared to Evelyn to worsen microscopically month by month, she had grown less regular. The birth had been difficult, arduous and far more painful than Mama or anyone had let on, Dr. Biddle had forced her to get back on her feet no more than eight or nine days after the delivery, and she had simply never been the same since then.

One more deadly blow from the *male* side of the equation! (Two, of course, counting Niles. Three with—)

(Noblesville, just before E.H. moved them to Indianapolis, Evelyn isn't quite sixteen, she sits on the front porch on a summer's afternoon with Mom, mother and daughter rocking the lazy afternoon away, she's playing "Alexander's Ragtime Band" on the Victrola Daddy gave her when he won the case against some big Democrat over in Terre Haute and came by; and she's not even playing the piano or pretending to be a flapper like the big girls, she's contented with Mama's company—and the music—and then the lightning comes OUT OF THE BLUE, summer lightning that hits poor Mama's glasses and RUNS ALL THE WAY ROUND! And Mama, smiling, says nothing at all for a moment, does nothing at all, she just WAITS till the lightning plays itself out; and she says, "I'm fine, honey, I guess God didn't want to take me home yet," and Evelyn just stares and stares at her courageous mama, more frightened than any other time except when Daddy threw the whiskey bottle in the base burner AND BEAT THE SHIT

OUT OF BOTH DUANE AND MOM; and Mama says, "God is good, Evelyn. He's the only one you can trust." HE'S good.)

Maybe she was pregnant already. It was possible; she and Niles had done it not long ago. And there was Uncle Rob's visitation.

Along with a funny feeling that there were more people in the house than her and Niles and Teddy. Or, just now, she and Teddy only. But she would *know* it if one of the relatives was around and wished to come through to her. So if there *was* another soul present these days in Draden House, it could only be a little one beginning to grow *within her* . . .

After she had thrown on some clothes, Evelyn started to go wake Teddy up—if he was asleep—and let him get some exercise. Enroute to his room, she remembered suddenly that she'd had Niles stop last night on his way home and buy a present for her darling boy. He'd be so pleased! Then, after she had given it to him, maybe she could think of something the two of them might do together. It was *spring*, a child his age shouldn't spend *all* his time in bed, maybe they'd plan a picnic for the coming weekend!

Running downstairs, she felt her cheeks flush with color, with anticipation. It was a beautiful day, she didn't feel sick after all, and if she was, it would just add credence to the likelihood that she was expecting. It was probably too soon to share the news with Teddy—definitely not with Niles—but she couldn't conceivably be far along yet and there would be ample time to prepare for Cass's phone call from New York. Besides, if she got a radio gig after she got to New York and she *was* pregnant, what difference would it make that she was going to have another

little darling? No one could see you on the radio anyhow!

How long had it been since Cass left for the big city to meet her agent? Weeks, anyway! It shouldn't be much longer before the phone call or telegram came. Of course, she would tell Teddy—and Niles—*all* the facts Dr. Biddle had given her before she went out there, and it would be wonderful to watch their faces light up with so *many* exciting things happening in their lives all at once!

She'd picked up the gift she had for Teddy and was headed back to the stairs when the telephone jangled.

How grand it would be if that was the call on such a lovely spring day! She ran to the phone, scratching herself on the arm with the cactus as she snatched up the receiver and said: "Damnit! Hello?"

"I see that I haven't lost a bit of my good timing," Duane said in Evelyn's ear.

"Duane, I'm *sorry*," she apologized, laughing. "It isn't *you*."

"As a matter of fact, it is, Evvie," he corrected her. He cleared his throat. "I'm calling on my lunch hour so I've only got a minute."

"Lunch!" Evelyn repeated, pretending astonishment. "No wonder you're so hungry when you're here for dinner if you have to have lunch *this* early!"

"Look, Molly threw me out." He paused to cough, lowered his voice. "It's all a misunderstanding, I wasn't nearly as tight as I pretended to be—but I wondered if I could come out to your place for a few days. Till Molly comes down off her high horse."

For a half second Evelyn couldn't remember which one of Duane's women friends Molly was. "Duane, I may have some really *exciting* news."

"Can I come?"

Evelyn laughed. "Of course you can, don't be silly. Duane, I've missed —"

"Thanks, sis. I owe you one," Duane said, and hung up.

You certainly do, Evelyn thought, replacing the receiver and working at staying amused but miffed. *So does the whole world.*

Holding the plant for Teddy carefully, she started upstairs, plans for her day and his abruptly up in the air.

At least she had the good news for him that his Uncle Duane was coming to visit for a few days. A real family gathering was probably just what Teddy needed now!

4

It was an article of faith with Niles that whenever he had to lose a day of work he was letting down not only his boss but Evelyn and Teddy, and a guy named Niles Hivereve. He'd been raised to believe that any real man rose above illness, exhaustion from a family squabble, personal grief or loss and simply went to work.

Today, driving to Doc's office downtown, he passed breadlines of unemployed men on Ohio and Pennsylvania streets and knew that regular attendance at one's job might also be a matter of obligation to one's country. Sometimes it seemed that half of America had been crammed into parades of disaffected and spiritless, straggling human lines apparently incapable individually of making no expression on their

faces other than one of stunned shock. Parking on the street, Niles had to walk back past them and the truth was, they scared the hell out of him. Here and there he saw—only for a brief instant—faces that looked familiar. When he tried to focus on this man or that, the fellow unfailingly glanced away, taking the shared memory with him. Seldom conversing with one another, disposed toward letting yard-long gaps form between them and the people ahead of them before shuffling forward without haste, they seemed like ghosts to Niles.

Ghosts, if he didn't cut the mustard with Doc Greene, of Niles's future.

Doc had called an early meeting of his staff, and attendance was mandatory. It had turned out that Niles's old high school acquaintance considered himself a man of foresight and vision, using that opinion of himself to structure a sales force that included something that Doc called a "pyramid." All Niles had managed to understand of the plan was that if he sold X number of prosthetics contracts to the clinics and hospitals that were assigned to him he could hire other men from whose sales efforts he himself would earn a small percentage of the commission. He hadn't bothered "to figure out how many more contracts he needed to sell because he assumed Doc's women employees were keeping the figures and because the plan disgusted him. It was bad enough having to "go out in the field," as Doc Greene called it, with a bag full of phony anatomical parts to peddle, without thinking about his old "friend" putting part of his earnings in his pocket. There were only three reasons why he hadn't quit and returned full-time to Picturesque Paint: The *potential* for making a really tremendous

commission on one exclusive contract for the company's complete package—*Anatomically All*, Niles called it—

The terrible thought of facing Evelyn and telling her he had failed—

And the phantom breadlines in the streets.

The indignity of the way Doc strove to goad the salesmen into better performances, his casual and often cruel references to "gimps and freaks" who would benefit "down the line" from what the sales force "sold to those sawbones," was also becoming intolerable to Niles.

At least there was the pleasure of passing Doc's secretary, Faith Brady, to join the other men in Doc's so-called conference room, and she smiled at him this morning—really smiled. He almost forgot to smile back because he'd recalled the sudden thought—the pun—he'd had before going to work that morning. *I need more faith*. So he felt slightly embarrassed when he met her warm gaze, then passed into the room that only seemed a bit larger than Doc's personal office because it was lined with folding chairs.

But the secretary's singling-him-out smile sustained Niles through the mercifully brief meeting. In fact, the image of her nearly royal-blue eyes wouldn't leave him, wouldn't let him concentrate on what was being said. And when he realized he was thinking about the color of her hair (so blond it appeared white with sunlight from her window lying on it) and her bust-line (bigger than most men had liked a decade ago, they looked sort of rolled into place in one round bulge beneath the fabric of her black silk blouse), Niles had to remind himself that Faith wore a ring on her fourth finger, that she was *Mrs. Brady*.

Nothing much was new in what Doc had to say that morning. Niles made dutiful notes with the Shaeffer fountain pen Bobby had bought for his high school graduation gift, gave it to him even when her "Nilesette" dropped out of school to marry Evelyn. The tie clip he wore had been Pop's. *Hell*, he thought when he realized he was chewing on the end of the pen, *if Evvie hadn't bought this jacket for me for my birthday a couple of years ago, I'd practically have to go to work naked!*

He and the other men had to watch a training film on the company projector, and when he came out of the meeting, he was almost blinded by the burst of sunstream in the outer office.

He also almost walked directly into Faith Brady! To keep from doing it, Niles had to raise his hands and catch her by the shoulders. "Gosh, I'm sorry!" he said immediately, lowering his right hand. The left one remained on the blond's shoulder of its own accord, the heel resting inches above her right breast. "Doc had the curtains drawn in there and I can't see a thing!"

"Don't apologize," she said without backing away. "It's been a long time since a man was this close to me!" Then, as if thinking better of her remark, she turned with a light laugh toward the file cabinet.

"I thought you were married," Niles said. He didn't move except to turn his head, follow her with his eyes.

"The ring?" She lifted her hand, peered at Niles over her shoulder. She had amazing directness in her gaze, her expression, Niles thought. She was real. "I tend to forget it's there. Yes, I was married."

But you aren't anymore . . . "Well," he stalled, "I'm sorry I ran into you."

Faith faced him fully, openly curious. "Do you do

that all the time? You're the 'sorriest' man I've known in my whole life."

The double meaning of what she said made them both laugh aloud, and suddenly, blushing, it was her turn to apologize.

"You're absolutely right," Niles said, "I'm the sorriest son of a bitch you ever met — pardon my French."

"No," Faith replied, that direct, disconcerting quality of her blue eyes blazing once more, "I think you may be the nicest man." She stepped toward him half a foot. "Niles, may I be honest? I need a friend at court."

He pinched his dark mustache thoughtfully dubiously. "If you mean Doc, Mrs. Brady, I don't think I'm much force around this place."

"But you *will* be wanting to hire some people, for sales," she said. "People to be under you."

Niles thought of Evelyn, thought of things other than earning an income. "I don't think I'll have to worry about that for quite a while. If ever," he added.

Faith showed him the file folder she hadn't yet put away. "That's not true." She turned the folder so he could read his name printed on it. "Niles, you're *almost there*. You underrated yourself. One more decent sale and you move up the pyramid!"

He stared, astonished, at her. He didn't even dare accept the news, or smile. "You're kidding."

"I'm not!" Faith answered, and leaned her forehead against his chest in amusement. "I swear, you're the most — the most —"

"I told you," Niles said, impulsively catching her arms and allowing himself for the first time to believe what she'd told him, "I'm the sorriest son of a bitch you ever met!" Then he did smile, glanced down at

the pretty woman with a feeling of accomplishment he couldn't remember experiencing before. "I'll be darned," he said, thinking of Evvie, thinking of the bills they could pay if he hired the right people to be . . . under him. "I'll be darned!"

5

Teddy heard Dear rustling around in the bathroom, imagined she would come into his room soon, and felt very ambivalent about it when she just went downstairs without saying good morning.

Time was strange these days, everything was strange. This wasn't like none of the other illnesses he'd had. Staying in bed so much made all the days the same and he kept forgetting what shows were on the radio when. A year ago, he'd decided that Saturday started the week so he could begin it right with Billie Burke's "Let's Pretend" show. Later there'd be "Mr. First Nighter," about the "little theatre off Times Square," with plays and all. Sunday afternoons were great with "Nick Carter," "Counterspy," "Boston Blackie," and his favorite (that day), "The Shadow."

The programs during the week were mostly Dear's kind of shows, but even then there were neat commercials. Teddy leaned back against his pillow to sing squeakily to himself. "Pepsi-Cola hits the spot, twelve full ounces, that's a lot; Twice as much for a nickel too—Pepsi-Cola is the drink for you!"

Then he tagged on, dutifully, the funny part the singers in the commercials always did: "Nickel nickel nickel nickel nickel nickel; trickle trickle trickle trickle trickle!"

Teddy laughed. Then he waited to see if Dear (or Coop) had heard him singing and might come and laugh with him.

No one came.

He started to sing "Cream of Wheat is so good to eat, That we have it every day"—the theme song for "Let's Pretend"—but soft-boiled eggs and oatmeal were the only things he hated more, so he subsided. Every *day*?

Sat in silence, hands folded in his lap.

"Mr. District Attorney" was good. He had a nice, deep voice and he was the "defender of truth; guardian of our fundamental rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

His show also wasn't *on* then, and he probably didn't do anything much for kids anyway.

The door of the bedroom swung open, Dear appeared in the doorway, and Teddy was so pleased to see another human being that he managed not even to guess what his mother had behind her back.

"I have another little friend for you, darling," she said.

Now he couldn't keep from guessing—worse, knowing.

She showed him the cactus Niles had brought home for him and, reluctantly, he put out his hands to take it. (If you wasn't *very* careful, you could stick your finger *bad* on it.)

Donald Duck—so white he prob'ly should've been in a casket—was imbedded beside a cactus plant, looking up at Teddy so angrily he made the boy think of Uncle Duane. Dear'd got him another one of the darned potted things!

Their kind already lived, abundantly, across the

bedroom by one of his windows—souvenirs of his earlier illnesses. Appreciated but unasked-for survivors of them. Cacti in manifold ceramic forms, most of them denizens of what Teddy saw as Disneyland—and saw also, with his beginning-cartoonist's eye, as bad fakes. The first few Dear'd gotten for him (during his interminable battle with scarlet fever) he'd rather liked and *really* appreciated. Then it had occurred to him that Grandma'd liked plants, Bobby liked plants, *Dear* liked plants—and he'd never heard of a *guy* who liked them at all!

After that, they had just been reminders of the way he felt like he'd been sick his entire life, and each and every one of the things went on thriving regardless of how much he ignored them—mice with hard-eyed stares, gruff purple dragons, jaunty puppies with lolling tongues (they looked stuffed), aqua-furred cats with eyes like contemptuous jewels, creatures of unguessable origins (like a clown that felt so cold to the touch that Teddy was ready to believe it was real—just dead, and shrunk). He'd considered peeing on them to see if that would kill the cacti, but it might have made them live even longer and that was unthinkable—

Especially now that he wasn't going to be around as long as they would be.

"I know how fond you are of them," Dear said. Now that he had a gingerly grip on the plant, she was rubbing the back of his neck, talking in her low, loving tones. He wanted to say No, he wasn't, he yearned to tell her to take it back—to get him some comics or something instead—beg her to begin carrying the prickly reminders of how puny he was outta his bedroom.

But he remembered what she had taught him—it's the thought that counts—and it didn't seem like anyone was thinking about him at all; not Niles, not Coop; not anybody but his Dear.

"I gave you life, my Teddy," Dear whispered above him, and partly behind. "And I'd do it again if I could."

I don't wanna be little and tiny, I don't wanna cry like a baby, Teddy thought, tightening the muscles of the neck he knew was just like her daddy's—

But it was *still his neck!* Where was *Coop?*

"I'd tell you a wonderful secret if it wasn't too soon," Dear crooned. The strong fingers pressed, twisted, ever so gently. "It could make you feel better—make you happy—but it would spoil the really *exciting* moment when your Dear can tell you so *many* marvelous things that they'll leave her precious darling breathless with joy."

He was s'posed to ask her to go on, tell him now. He knew that, it was his cue.

He just didn't think even Dear could make the kind of magic that would keep him from where the rest of the family'd gone—

And coming back, to Draden House, like the relatives all did, sooner or later.

That was the part that was keeping him from thinking—*really thinking*—about dying.

He never wanted to come back home dead even if it was to see Dear and Niles.

She withdrew her hands from his neck. "What do you say?" she asked, facing him. This was her patient face, and voice, but she was really mad 'cause he hadn't coaxed her right.

He stared down at the duck he held carefully be-

tween his small hands. "Thank you, Dear." He was working hard, now, at bein firm, bein more a man like Coop.

Then he looked up and saw that in spite of the way she had her arms folded across her bosom, a tear was wending its way down Dear's right cheek. A real ugly, deep brown tear which frightened him for a second.

But it was only the Argyrol she squeezed sometimes into his eyes, too—Teddy didn't know why—and the murky brown tear was almost as feminine, stark, and exquisitely near-immortal as the cactus plant. As Dear herself.

She spread her arms generously open and he went into them with a short, oddly furtive cry, allowed himself to be embraced and to let the distance that had been building between them melt to the dimensions of an innocuously staining Argyrol tear.

"How did I ever d-deserve a mama like you?" he asked his mother as he'd already silently asked himself a thousand times.

"Your Uncle Duane is coming back for a little visit," she said, hugging him near. "He wants to see how his brave little nephew is doing."

Teddy burrowed deeper between her chests and bit his lower lip until it almost bled but his own tears came anyway.

Chapter Twelve

He had a sick stomach, his temples hurt like the devil, and he had begun to find it very hard to concentrate with the feeling of incessant sound being droned into his ears all day.

But finally she and Niles were going to bed, early, and Coop sighed with enormous relief. Teddy was already asleep.

If *she* only *stayed* in bed until morning!

Now that all of them were lying down for the night, Coop's task was considerably easier for him. There was less need to move with absolute stillness from room to room and no need to remain in one place, such as the foyer corner, or Teddy's closet. If he lurched into something and knocked it over, even broke it, the blame would fall on someone else.

The strange, subtle way of his existence in Draden House would always be a trial for Coop, that was obvious now, and there was nothing whatsoever he could do about it. His primary job, till tonight, was to protect Teddy from grievous physical harm. Teddy, after all, was his best friend (and vice versa) and Coop had explored the obligation no farther. Just

how that had come about was a mystery, but he no more thought of questioning his task than Teddy'd thought of asking how he got his particular parents. Life happened. Life was. You didn't exist for a very long period of time and then one day, for a while, you did. While you were there, you did your best to live up to the expectations of those who'd given you life—to show appreciation to those who not only housed you but shared their faces and forms with you—gave you substance—at least until you grew up.

But one of the things troubling Coop that night was the way that he was growing up much faster than his best friend Teddy.

Growing up so fast that Coop was extremely clumsy now and lacked the coordinational skills to keep from bumping into things, any instance of which might draw the attention of Evelyn or Niles, who couldn't see him. Only his pal Teddy was allowed to see Coop. It wasn't strange. Ordinary humans couldn't see microorganisms with the naked eye. Only Teddy could see him.

For now. Till he'd grown up more in other than sheerly physical ways.

He stood now at the kitchen window, peering out at inky, silent White River. For him, it was rather like seeing X-rays of a mother's womb. The sight was incomprehensible. He felt a distant sort of gratitude to the river, the smooth nocturnal blackness, yet had no idea in fact how it played a role in giving him life. He knew only that it had. And that, now and then, he'd like to return to it—reverse the process, achieve nullity.

Not because he'd learned already to hate life but

because—now and then—he found existence so enigmatic and blank that he forgot to believe.

Turning toward the front room, the large place the family referred to as a “living room,” Coop automatically wandered in search of understanding, something godlike that appeared to scribble a few meaningful words on the blank slate (if not actually the riddle, the enigma).

The Steinway, the grand piano, loomed in the dark silence of the room with the cathedral-style walls and windows like an altar.

Coop stared at it from the hallway entrance, frozen by a feeling he hadn’t had when Teddy’s mother played it. She played it wondrously well so, in all probability, he’d simply have to grow a little bigger and smarter to be able to feel it.

An impression of having found a source of understanding. A holy relic, filled with a wellspring of beliefs, emotions, explanations, dreams to be shared and answered or shared and lost—but always with a sensation of magic. Latent *magic* . . .

Coop couldn’t move from where he stood for several moments. Still clad in the cotton shirt and old corduroys with holes that his buddy Ted had given him, grown so swiftly that not even the bond he had with Teddy had served to keep the garments from ripping—still barefoot, the soles grimy with Mengaltdt and Hivereve soilure—he studied the magnificent musical instrument like a scarecrow discovering a crow who might love him.

Was it possible he could have been wrong in believing that a woman who possessed the gifts necessary to supplicate such a magnificent shrine’s gods—to be-

seech them to produce such extraordinary and ineffable musical sounds—was the primary person from whom he had to protect ol' Ted?

Coop padded to the piano, stopped, put out a hand with his index and middle fingers extended, touched the keyboard—and drew the hand back quickly.

The great instrument made a *sound*. Dimly, barely audibly, it said *Plink*.

Alarmed, Coop jumped back a couple of inches and stared through the midnight shadows at the stairway.

When no sign came to him that he had awakened anyone, Coop brushed his sandy hair from his eyes, took a deep breath, and moved forward to lower his posterior to the piano bench. Once there he paused, both hands raised above the keys, heart racing at a fearful speed. Did Teddy ever try to play it, he wondered—would Dear allow it? Had any other living soul *ever* touched a single one of the countless black and white slats that were the magical entrance to—to—

To the gods who gave me life, Coop thought, and tentatively pressed down two adjacent keys with the index and middle fingers of his right hand, a few additional keys with the fingers of his pawing left hand.

The resultant noise was not only much louder than he'd expected but a terrible yowl of sound! It conveyed to the tall boy's highly imaginative but wholly uneducated mind an image of several faceless gods deep in the wet depths of White River muttering murderous imprecations, sending up killing curses of vast disapproval.

Then there were other sounds—from the front door—and Coop was jumping away from the piano bench with boyish athleticism, running from the room into the short hallway to the kitchen.

When he recovered a small measure of his nerve, he peeked around the kitchen wall into the living room and saw a well-built, red-haired man emerging from the foyer. The man didn't see Coop, who pulled his head back in time—didn't see anybody—and drew a bottle from the pocket of his coat. Then he removed the cap, upended it, let the fluid inside the bottle flow into his mouth. *Duane*, Teddy's memory informed Coop. *Uncle Duane*.

He heard the man clearing his throat—then he was heading toward the kitchen where Coop was hiding!

Losing sight of the fact that only Teddy could see him, Coop whirled around and, discovering the stairs leading to the basement, trotted down as fast as he could. A protruding nail scraped the bare sole of one foot, hurting like crazy; but Coop ran the rest of the way to the basement floor and didn't stop going until he collided—in the darkness—with a solid object that rammed into his thighs and brought another flood of unexpected pain. Tears stinging his eyes, the tall boy ducked down beside the offending workbench, tried to hold his breath until Uncle Duane found whatever he was looking for in the big container Teddy called an icebox, and returned to the front of the house.

A few rays of light filtered into the basement from windows the height of Niles, or Coop, and there was a chance to inspect the object that had given him pain. Even as he looked at it, ran his fingers along the edge of the bench and then stood, curious, Coop re-

alized what he was seeing through the shadows. It was there that Niles had crafted a . . . comic rack (Coop had to sift through his shared memories, had no idea what the words meant, knew just that Teddy had loved it and Dear had destroyed it).

Now Coop's head ached all over, and he knew ambivalence. Loathed it upon encounter.

The woman who made the gods sing destroyed an object his pal Ted adored.

It made no sense. He stood at the workbench, feeling it, eyes slitted under a fall of running-wild sandy hair, trying to think—to *understand*.

And two thoughts—realizations—surfaced in the inventive mind of the tulpa:

Niles had nearly *rebuilt* the comic rack that morning. He himself had hidden in the corner of the foyer and watched Niles's thoughts—watched them literally, a skill of his he just realized he possessed—but Niles had *decided to go to work instead*. Decided *not* to please ol' Ted.

And Coop also realized for the first time that while he had risen from the river at the back of this house to be little Teddy's buddy and to protect him, there was a deeper truth about his life that had completely escaped him until he had tried to play the piano and failed:

The woman was *his* Dear, too. He *wouldn't be* except for her.

Dear wasn't just Ted's mom; she was also *his*.

And he seized the tools lying atop the workbench, began to gouge out great holes with them, flailed away at the object on which Niles had not fulfilled his friend Teddy's desire—struck and bent and cut and

carved off bits of the bench until it was really ruined, a useless mass—

And then he took each tool in turn in his remarkably powerful hands, and *twisted* them. Bent and warped them out of shape, destroyed them as little Ted's comic rack had been destroyed, smiling happily, joyously, shredding things that were Niles's and dropping them to the floor of the basement so that he could dance upon them, *kick* them into nothingness!

At no time did he move to the *other* end of the workbench where Dear's possessions lay. He left them alone; he left them intact.

Panting, happy—even proud of himself—Coop stared down at the wreckage at his naked feet. It occurred to him with rising pleasure that he hadn't known at all that he was so *strong*, so *powerful*.

And now that he thought about it, he supposed he was actually . . . perfect.

A perfect Mengaldt.

When he found that Uncle Duane was unconscious on the couch in the dining room—the person who'd made him run down to the basement and hurt himself, create Coop's first pain—he tiptoed upstairs without a single noise and crept down the hall to the first bedroom. There, he peered fleetingly inside.

Dear lay asleep, next to Niles, serene and pretty.

Coop walked silently to Ted's bedroom, decided not to awaken the kid. Instead, he just stood in the closet for a while, being protective. Things were there, according to Ted. Bad things that might get his little buddy.

Around 4 A.M., though, Coop was convinced that he was the only thing in the closet. The rest of it was

just the little boy's imagination. The precious little boy.

So he went back to his Dear's room and stood guard beside her till morning. Thinking how she was the prettiest mother in the whole wide world, how she knew everything there was to know.

Hating all her enemies as well as Teddy's.

Chapter Thirteen

1

After discovering that all his tools and most of his workbench had been destroyed, Niles inspected the damage only briefly, drew in a sad breath, and gave up on another hobby.

He cleaned up the mess, went back up to the main floor of his house, and drove to work without saying anything to anybody about it.

In fact, he kept it entirely to himself until the noon hour when he met Mrs. Faith Brady at the lunch counter of the nearby Ben Franklin five-and-dime.

They had arranged yesterday to meet for lunch—"Dutch treat all the way," the fair Faith had insisted—because (she said) she had a favor to ask him.

"I'm not content to be a secretary for Doc Greene," she told him without preamble.

"Okay," Niles agreed. "What's the problem?"

"The problem," Faith explained patiently, "is that the only jobs available to women are secretarial positions or in education or nursing. I don't have a teaching license, and can you imagine me as a Florence

Nightingale, running around with a bedpan and taking sick people's temperatures?"

Niles turned his head to appraise her more closely. He had wanted to do so since arriving early for lunch and managing to look as if he'd really been interested in the coal scuttles that the ten-cent store had on sale. "Yes," he replied honestly. "I can't say I'd want you to empty my bedpan but I'd certainly be happy to let you take my temperature."

"Oh, Niles!" she chided him, blond head momentarily resting on his shoulder. "What I'm trying to tell you is that I have more ambition, more desire to make something *special* of myself, than those things. Or transcribing sales pitches for Doc and making copies for the salesmen on the office mimeo."

Niles dipped into the bowl of chili he'd ordered, paused to add more crackers. "I guess I'm being vague as hell, Mrs. Brady, but—who's holding you back?"

She looked away, shook her head in wonderment, looked back. "You really don't understand, do you?" she said, astonished. "*You're* holding me back, *men* are holding me back. Women are only supposed to work certain types of jobs."

He put his spoon in the saucer supporting the chili and met her steady gaze. "I'm sorry. I'm used to Evvie—my wife—playing out. Piano, professionally. It didn't occur to me that other women had trouble doing what they please." He added, *Evelyn certainly doesn't have*, but only to himself. This woman was the most appealing one he had seen in years; since Evvie was a girl. It wasn't that she was beautiful or anything like that; her nose was longer than Evvie's, she was just a bit heavy through the middle, and she

had an ass that didn't stop. He thought she was pretty gorgeous. "How can I help, Mrs. Brady?"

"You can stop telling me you're 'sorry' every other minute—and you can quit calling me by my last name. Call me Faith." She squeezed the top of his hand impulsively; not hard. "I'm a natural for a sales position like this. Calling on male doctors . . . describing what prosthetics can mean to a child, a woman . . . would be right up my alley." She squeezed his hand again. "You could help by making me the first person you hire when you've qualified. You wouldn't regret it."

"You're saying Doc won't let you move to sales? Stop being his secretary?"

"Not in a million years," she answered. Fleetinglly, she turned to the chocolate soda she was having after a bowl of vegetable soup, prodded the chocolate ice cream in the bottom with a straw. "He can't—get to me—if I'm out on sales calls."

Niles studied her a moment. "He's a wolf, then. A masher." Niles nodded. "Can't say I'm surprised to learn it." He gave her a grin. "Okay."

"Okay what?" she asked.

"Okay, you're hired," Niles said with a shrug and a flashing grin. "If your figures aren't wrong, and I'm *really* gonna move up the stupid pyramid."

Faith kissed him on the cheek. Part of the smooch slopped over to the corner of his mouth and he stopped moving, looked down at his chili, found himself wondering how many years it'd been since a woman other than Evvie or Bobby had given him any kind of kiss. "It's that easy?" she went on excitedly—"just 'okay'?"

"Faith, I'm no salesman," he said quietly. The tip

of his tongue came out to taste lipstick residue. "Whatever you sold that added to my earnings would be marvelous. Not that I won't still think the damn system stinks!"

"You're quite a guy," Faith murmured, drawing in chocolaty seltzer water. "Thank you."

"But I'm not," Niles said. He had hesitated only slightly before volunteering information that she hadn't even asked for. He sighed, frowned. "Last night, somebody destroyed my basement workbench and all my tools, and I didn't do a damn thing about it."

"Why not?" Faith was puzzled. "I know you have a son who's sick—"

"I don't think it was Teddy," Niles broke in. "Whoever smashed my tools was strong, had powerful hands. My brother-in-law drinks, came to visit us late, after we were asleep. It had to be him . . . or Evvie."

"But why would—"

"I don't think it was Duane either," Niles said before he could think of the implications of his remark. Then he had to explain, say more. "Duane has the muscle for it—so does my wife, you wouldn't believe how strong a woman's hands can get after years of playing the piano regularly—but it's not his speed. If he's crocked and loses his temper, he'll strike anybody. I don't think," Niles added on a bemused note, "my brother-in-law is mad at me right at this moment."

Faith had been staring at him, Now she twisted her head in disbelief. "Your wife?" she said. And let it go.

"D'you have any time off coming?" Niles inquired. "Like a few hours?"

"Yes," she said. "Why do you ask?"

He picked up their two lunch checks. "If you're going to work for me, you might as well have some idea what it's like. You can go with me on this afternoon's calls, to get your feet wet."

Faith tried to get the checks away from him but Niles was already walking toward a heavyset woman who stood waiting at a cash register. "I'll get the tip," she said, leaving a dime and a nickel and following him. "I'd love to go if you don't think I'll be in the way."

"If you are," Niles said calmly, handing the large woman a five and accepting change, "I'll tell you about it."

Maybe I can get some other things off my chest, he thought as they headed for the street. Maybe another woman's angle is just what I need.

He was holding the car door open for Faith when he finally realized that he hadn't said anything last night to Evvie about the possibility of moving up the ladder and acquiring his own sales team.

Maybe he wouldn't, for a while.

2

Even if it was tough going when the book described places and things Teddy had never seen, he was continuing to read *Robinson Crusoe*. He was identifying with Robinson, and the stuff about Robinson's folks kept reminding him of Dear and Niles.

Just before dinner, he had read the part where Robinson's father informed him he was real lucky to be an average middle-class son: "He told me that I might judge of the happiness of this state by this one thing,

namely, that this was the state of life which all other people envied; that kings have frequently lamented the miserable consequences of being born to great things, and have wished that they had been placed in the middle of the two extremes . . .”

He was like that, Teddy thought, nodding; right between two extremes, like Niles and Dear. Like livin and dyin.

Then Robinson wrote, “He pointed out to me that if I was not very easy and happy in the world, it must be mere fate . . . and that *he* should have nothing to answer for, having thus discharged his duty in warning me against measures which he knew would be to my hurt”—at that point, starting to grasp the rhythms of the outdated speech patterns, Teddy had paused in wonderment. Like young Crusoe, he wasn’t “easy and happy” and his folks really felt the same way old Mr. Crusoe used to feel: that they always warned him against stuff that would hurt him.

And according both to Crusoe and Hivereve parents, something called “fate” was what really made him and Robinson unhappy. Uneasy.

He was still thinking about such matters when Dear said to go down for dinner. She was in the bathroom but wouldn’t be long.

There were, Teddy saw, two people present in the dining room who weren’t always there for the evening meal. His Uncle Duane—

And the missing Coop, his buddy, standing over in a corner by Dear’s hutch, saying nothing to announce his presence but wiggling his fingers in greeting as Teddy entered the room.

Where have you been? Teddy asked his friend in their minds.

Around, Coop said, slumped against the wall. He was grinning, friendly and all, but he gave Teddy the impression that he was keepin things from him. That was all right, he s'posed. Coop's job *was* keepin Things from him.

"You okay?" Uncle Duane asked.

"Uh-huh." Teddy slid onto his customary seat, peering at his uncle from the corners of his eyes. His appraisal was reassuring; Uncle Duane looked sober. "Feelin okay." He guessed that Dear was in the kitchen and Niles wasn't home yet.

"I guess all the time you're spending in bed is getting you down a little, huh?" Uncle Duane said.

Teddy glanced at Coop, who was more or less behind the redhead. "Some," he grunted. "But the folks just don't want me to take measures"—he paused to get it right—"to my own hurt."

Uncle Duane amazed him by bursting out laughing, his honking bark of hilarity sudden and startling. "That's from a book, right?" he demanded when he could stop chuckling. He tilted his head in lengthy reflection. "Could it be *Robinson Crusoe*?"

Teddy's astonishment doubled. It hadn't ever occurred to him that his uncle might read books, might really have been a kid. "That's right!"

A thought appeared to wipe away Duane's smile, though. "I hope you can find a good friend like Friday sometime, kid. I'm still lookin'."

"Well I *do* got one in a way," Teddy said.

He almost pointed behind his uncle, at Coop, then blushed and looked away.

Niles came home then, whistling until he passed through the foyer and front room to enter the dining room.

"Hi," he told Uncle Duane and Teddy, smiling at his son and then glancing away. When Teddy ran up to him, Niles didn't pick him up but stooped to him, kissed his cheek, and ruffled his hair. "How's my boy?"

"Fine. Feelin okay." Still there, even if Aunt May-May might have been surprised by it.

Niles, to his surprise, remained on one knee a moment longer. He looked to Teddy as though he was going to say something important, or ask him a question, but he just went on kneeling instead. Very near, and very distant.

Finally he stood, asked Uncle Duane where "Evvie" was.

Duane's eyes had the cold, self-contained look that Teddy never saw in them except when he stared at Niles. He s'posed they didn't like one another but that seemed odd since Niles let him come to the house and Uncle Duane came.

"She practiced most of the afternoon," Uncle Duane said shortly. "Played the same damn songs over and over." He glared down at his crutch. "Then she took a nap."

"So where is she?" Niles repeated his question.

"Left me alone all afternoon," the redhead grumbled. He glanced up. "I just heard the john flush so I guess dinner'll be late."

Dear swept into the dining room. "I wouldn't talk about anybody else taking naps," she told Duane airily, stopping between Teddy and Niles. "I started dinner hours ago, we're having a nice roast." She handed Niles a bottle and a spoon that already smelled of the bottle's medicinal contents. "Make sure Teddy takes

this," she said as she kissed Niles on the cheek. Then she hurried on into the kitchen.

"I don't suppose you remembered to buy ketchup," Uncle Duane called to the door as it swung shut. It was so routine he probably didn't expect an answer.

"Okay, open up," Niles told Teddy, pouring a full spoon and turning it in the boy's direction with care. "Get on the outside of this. It'll make hair grow on your chest."

Teddy giggled but managed to keep most of the medicine in his mouth. He liked it when Niles gave him the stuff. He didn't pour more if Teddy slopped any.

"Why does he have to keep taking that crap?"

Niles turned his head toward Duane. "It's his medicine." Then he saw what his brother-in-law was implying and glanced protectively down at Teddy. "He's my responsibility, Duane. And I'm always here for him, whether you think so or not."

"You've got a little lipstick on your collar," Uncle Duane said. His unmoving eyes were trained on Niles, cold and remorseless. "Just under your right ear."

Teddy looked from Niles to Coop, who shook his head and made a don't-say-anything motion with one hand.

"Niles." Dear, shoving the kitchen door open an inch, peeking out. "May I see you a moment?"

"Sure." Niles went expressionless. He'd removed his tie in the foyer but slung it loosely around his neck now, casually, before joining Dear in the kitchen.

"Don't come back without the ketchup," Uncle Duane called, and winked at Teddy.

Teddy stared at him without returning the wink and without quite mustering the smile he'd ordered up. It

was awful bein a kid. Something was happening again—more than one something—and he just didn't know what. Robinson'd said, "I began to look around me, to see what kind of place I was in, and what was next to be done." But there wasn't *nothing*, 'cause he could barely hear what the folks were sayin and even the way Uncle Duane had fallen silent so *he* could eavesdrop didn't help.

Coop pushed away from the wall, straightened up.

Teddy hadn't seen him all day and not much of him for the past few days, and it was amazing how his friend had grown! Stepping into the light from the chandelier with the broken and unreplaced bulbs, Coop was at least Niles's height now—taller. Bigger, too, across the shoulders, with arms even bigger than Uncle Duane's! All that remained now of the shirt Teddy had given him was the open collar, the circles of the armpits, a strip of cloth down the back. His hair of a hue similar to Teddy's appeared shaggy, leonine—Tarzan's, it was like *Tarzan's!*—and Coop wouldn't have to take medicine or eat spinach 'cause he *already* had hair on his chest! It was nearly the dark color of Niles's, a forest of curly hair, and it trailed down his belly to his navel, kind of broke off there, resumed its growth under the belly button and disappeared into his pants—

Teddy's pants, but Teddy would never be wearin 'em again. The buttons had popped off from the waistline to the last couple, and the pant legs not only stopped well above the knee but were torn down the outer seams. Coop's big feet were so black with dirt that Dear would never've let him into bed with them; they were *filthy*.

But there were other surprises about the change in

his pal Coop's appearance that were far more noticeable to Teddy: He had the biggest and palest hands ever, maybe almost a foot wide and nearly two feet in length, and yet the nails were chewed to the quicks like Teddy's. The hands seemed heavy, unwieldy; you could get real tired just lugging them around.

His eyes weren't Teddy's anymore. That was the real surprise. They might be the same *shape*, individually, set the same way in the sockets—

But Coop's eyes were *huge*. Soft and dreamy. Brown-black, like chocolate; *like . . .*

Things are happening, Ted old pal, Coop said. *Yup, things. In the kitchen.*

Teddy swallowed hard. His fingertips clutched the table. Across from him, the red-haired man was oblivious to the very big boy at his back. Duane was lighting a cigarette he had extracted from Dear's pack, humming to himself in his harsh, raspy voice, a melody Teddy recognized as "Darktown Strutters' Ball."

You wanta know what they're sayin, kid? Coop whispered.

Teddy nodded hesitantly.

Niles asked: "Are you sure?"

Dear said: "Not absolutely, but it looks that way. Isn't it wonderful?"

Niles said: "My God." Moment's silence. "Well, congratulations."

Sound of kissing. Dear laughed, said: "Is that all you can say to the news that I'm pregnant?"

Teddy gaped at Coop. Duane tapped cigarette ash in a tray. Coop stared at Teddy, their expressions identical. Neither pleased.

Dear said: "How could we ever be so lucky?" Her

voice sounded muffled by Niles's collar or maybe the tie he had around his neck. "And at a time like this!"

Niles said: "*My God, yes . . .*"

Dear said: "I mean at a time when this awful thing has befallen our Teddy."

Niles's pause. Niles said: "Okay; sure. It's — almost like magic."

Dear said: "It's *just like magic!*"

Coop said: *She means she has a baby — growing inside her.* His pudding eyes were wide open. He looked like a kid again.

Dear said: "What's happened to precious Teddy isn't anybody's fault. But — it happened, there's nothing more to be done."

Niles said: "Shhh, I know."

Dear said: "And now we've been blessed with another little darling! It's God's will, Niles."

Niles said: "I suppose it is. Shh."

Dear, nearly crying, said: "We can only be g-grateful that we'll have . . . someone . . . to — to take Teddy's place . . . if the worst really happens."

Niles said: "My God . . ."

Teddy and Coop said to one another: *I'm Dear's precious, perfect little child. I am. Not some other kid.*

Robinson Crusoe said in their minds: "I soon found that I had had a dreadful deliverance."

Duane said: "Christ, your parents are inconsiderate! Where's the *meal?*"

Dear said: "Oh, Niles, Teddy has always meant the world to me, you know that. But this can be the answer to all our prayers."

Niles said: "I can see that." Moment's silence: "Ted is going to have to be told."

Dear said: "He's been so miserable but now he can be s-set free. And we have another chance at happiness."

Niles said: "Of course, there's the cost. I don't have any insurance with Doc."

Teddy thought: *I'm not dead yet but a replacement is already on his way.*

Dear said: "Another chance to have a really healthy, new baby—it might even be a little girl, a really *perfect little angel!*"

Coop growled.

He sounded just like an animal, so Teddy looked at him.

They both had tears in their eyes. But the whites of Coop's eyes were the color of the sun on a hot afternoon before it set, and the tears falling to his cheeks simmered and made tiny puffs of smoke. If he ever *stayed* like that, Teddy thought, someone else would see him—they couldn't keep from it!

Dear said: "There's just time to get my new career off the ground before I'll have to stay in the house and wait for the baby. I've been practicing really hard again, Niles. I want to help out, financially. I want to play again."

Niles said: "Why, you always help out, Evvie. I'm sorry—about a lot of things. You're the best wife and mother imaginable."

Teddy said: *Can you handle things now, Coop? What are we gonna do?* He got no reply. *Can you?*

But Coop didn't answer. He just moved his big shaggy head, leaving a shimmering red trail that smelled sort of like incense. He was squeezing his hands together. Tightly.

"I have to make a night call," Niles said. He came over to where Evelyn was sitting on the piano bench, ready to practice a couple of hours before bedtime, his tie reknotted, his jacket already on. He'd put on fresh Old Spice, maybe too much. "It won't take long."

"Are you sure?" Feeling wmany and nice after telling him about her pregnancy, she buttoned his sports jacket—all the buttons—and patted his stomach. "I worry about you when you're gone. There's so *much* that happens at night."

"I'm sure." He hesitated, gazing down at her, seated so demurely, prettily, on the bench before her piano. She looked winsome and vulnerable. "I'll be back before you know it."

"Well, all *riiight*," Evvie said, raising her face and lips in anticipation of a kiss.

When he had supplied it, Niles walked to the foyer, stopped in it to fumble, alone, for a scrap of paper in his jacket pocket, then squinted down at his own handwriting. The only light for the foyer came from the living room.

"*Where y'going?*"

Not having seen the figure in the corner, Niles jumped and instinctively pulled the note back. He wasn't sure whether the boy had had time to scan it or not.

"I have to go out for a while," Niles said. He also made his scribbled note disappear into his jacket pocket. Mildly annoyed, bothered, he opened the front door. "Did you want something, son?" he asked, pausing.

"A night kiss." The boy had taken a slouching step away from Niles. His manner suggested that his feelings were hurt.

"Well, *sure!*" Reminding himself to rig up some kind of light for the foyer, Niles stepped forward, reached out.

The kiss they exchanged was very brief. Their lips scarcely brushed as the boy merely leaned to him, didn't step out of the corner.

Frowning, Niles tried to get a clearer look at Teddy's face—to see if everything was all right now—but his son had already retreated and was sinking down on his haunches, face turned into shadows.

The poor kid might be sick, Niles thought, but he was growing like a weed.

4

Within half an hour after her poor Niles had left the house, dutifully toiling extra hours on behalf of her, Teddy, and the darling baby on the way, Evelyn was creating her own arrangement of Porter's "You're the Top" and nimbly, inventively, making it blend in a medley with Berlin's "Say It Isn't So." It absolutely enchanted her that two of the three leading song writers in ASCAP—Cole and Hoagy Carmichael—were native Hoosiers like her and she saw no reason why her name shouldn't make it three of the top four. She had begun working again on two songs of her own composition and was more aware than ever that Hoagy'd made it to the top with basically one wonderful song, "Stardust." If she wrote *two* tunes as memorable as that, simple arithmetic showed that she

should become just as famous a songwriter as she'd soon be a pianist!

Besides, she played piano a whole lot better than Cole, Irving, *or* Hoagy!

Teddy'd gone to his room to read and Duane was already asleep on the daybed in the dining room when the phone rang. Its insistent ring wouldn't be denied, and after trying to ignore it through three bursts of ringing, Evelyn finally got up from the bench to answer it. To keep from awakening her brother, she went to the telephone in the kitchen, lifted the receiver with annoyance but in greater control of her traitorous nerves than usual. "Hello," she said softly into the mouthpiece.

"It's me, Auntie Ev," a feminine voice said.

The awareness that it was Cass calling took Evelyn by surprise, brought her mind reeling away from her awareness of her identity as a performer and a creative artist to her unique status in the Mengaltdt family—her role as aunt, parent—then sent it spinning back to her oldest aspirations, in music. The discovery of her pregnancy became a piece of thrilling news for her niece. But rendered mentally muddled and uncharacteristically hesitant, Evelyn could only manage to gasp, "Where in the world *are* you?"

"Home," Cass answered. Her voice sounded flat, oddly lifeless. "Mom's."

Why? Evelyn wanted to ask. Except she didn't really want to know and didn't ask that. "How were things in New York? I mean, we didn't expect you back so *soon*."

"Me, too, Auntie," Cass said in her ear, sighing heavily. "That so-called booking agent I went to meet? You wouldn't *believe* what he was like, Aunt

Evelyn. His office was part of the rat's nest where he lived — on the second floor of this crappy old building in Times Square? Well, I want to tell you, it just took me one *look* at the creep snatching up his dirty socks, trying to make a place for me to *sit*, to realize he wasn't exactly Manhattan's all-time leading booker! I mean, his clothes were *hanging* on framed pictures of Jolie and Eddie Cantor, and there were goddamn *roaches* the size of cocker *spaniels* crawling all over themselves in his bathroom!"

Evelyn was nodding (and waiting) at the start of her niece's narrative, nodding less (and waiting with a realization that it wasn't going to get better) by the time she'd listened to two sentences, nodding faintly (and staring at an inch of space on the kitchen wall above the place where the phone was mounted) at the point when Cass drew in a breath. Duane's snores were beginning to build in intensity on the other side of the wall; Teddy's radio carried Lionel Barrymore's and Agnes Moorhead's voices, locked in quiet dramatic conversation, like ghost voices from a dimension no farther away than the dining room.

"Daddy was right, Auntie," Cass said. "I hate to say it, but the old man hit the bull's-eye from eight hundred miles away. The 'agent' I was fixed up with was a twerp, a wolf. Arms like octopuses, or is it octopi, Aunt Evelyn, you know everything — or maybe 'octopussies'?"

"Mr. Mayor, I'm not gonna let you attend that shabby affair," Agnes the secretary (or was she the housekeeper) was saying, "you've done enough for those people!" And Barrymore — Scrooge, he was better as Scrooge, come Christmas — was rumbling, "Now, now, Merrilee, I don't have a lot of choice as

mayor of this town." Evelyn said, "I don't know, Cass, I don't know." The actors' voices began to fade. Whether Teddy was turning the radio down or not, they were farther away than they had ever been.

"I just thought you should know, Auntie Ev. But I'm only down, not out. I'll go back to the Big Apple again, you can count on that. I'm a Mengaltdt too, don't forget. I'll take a bite out of that sonofabitch yet—we *both* will." Cass paused. "How's ol' Teddy, the little fart? Anything new with you?"

Duane's snoring soared, caught, and then hung at a level Evelyn had never before heard, then snuffled its way down and started over anew.

"Not one damn thing," Evelyn answered, and hung up the receiver before she began to cry.

5

The arrival of Niles at her apartment that night was one of the most unexpected and romantic moments of Faith Brady's life.

Simply seeing him standing sheepishly on her welcome mat—his knock had been so soft, so discreet, she almost hadn't gone to the door—was enough to confirm emotions that had been churning inside her since the moment when she found the nerve to tell Niles about his progress as a salesman. And to speak up on her own behalf, for her own slowly developing ambitions.

Faith had never been a calculating woman, wouldn't really have known where to begin. She hadn't seen the affable, unprepossessing man with the Robert Taylor mustache as a weak person who might

be susceptible to her charms; in the divorced Faith Brady's eyes, she had not even possessed the attractiveness to marry a man any better than Larry, her ex. And he had proved to be the worst choice she could possibly have made; slapping her around until she was in the "mood" for sex—Larry's expression for having reduced her to such physical and emotional helplessness that she was unable to argue the point with him any longer—and then getting so drunk that he sometimes forgot to resume beating her—had ultimately driven her to the desperate action of getting a divorce.

Which, for a used-up old bag of twenty-nine with a three-year-old daughter to raise alone, was desperation indeed. For a while, Faith's gratitude to Doc Greene for taking a chance on her rudimentary pre-marriage secretarial skills had been profound—

Until the good doctor became bold enough to want to search for her other skills. With Lynne depending on her, Faith hadn't seen a single way out of her plight until a wonderful moment when the realization of her own competence (and the aspirations silenced her entire life) coincided with the hiring of Niles. His regular features and clearly regular habits, quiet strength, and humble endurance in mastering a new role in life where flashy men like Larry were soon weeded out helped Faith formulate her new and daring plan: To become a sales representative—a sales *woman!*

Faith couldn't remember a single woman who had such a position, who actually went out into the world to test her wits with potential customers, then depended on her own abilities to earn a livelihood. The idea would have been unthinkable to her own mother

and father—and Larry would positively pee in his pants if he ever heard what she dared to do!

The man who was making her dream come true could not have been more welcome in Faith's apartment.

After Niles was seated, accepting her offer of coffee and looking more out of place than she'd felt when they'd been at the ten-cent store lunch counter and she had asked her big favor, they found themselves getting polite conversation out of the way in record time.

Then *he* was telling her more about Teddy, and his drunken brother-in-law who sponged off him; and *she* was telling him about Larry (and letting Niles have a glimpse of the sound-asleep Lynne); and *he* was talking about his wife—

About Evelyn Mengaldt Hiverave, who was the most amazing woman of whom Faith had ever heard.

"Understand, I'm not criticizing her," Niles said. "Only trying to—to get a handle on my situation. It isn't at all important about my workbench and tools; I'm not even saying Evvie had a thing to do with what happened." A sheen of sweat circled his forehead. "But if all our problems are just gonna get *worse*—I simply don't know where else to turn but to another woman. For advice," he added hastily.

Faith, blond hair swept up at the neck (she'd washed it an hour before Niles came by), sat beside him on her sofa. She had her stockinged feet tucked under her and, in the company of such a nice man, was losing her self-consciousness over the fact that she was wearing only a bathrobe over her bra and panties. "Niles, she can't be as talented as you say! And I don't think that's any excuse for—"

"She is," Niles stated decisively. "Everyone who hears her play knows immediately that she's a brilliant pianist. And she's smart, Faith—*far* smarter than I'll ever be."

Faith busied herself refilling their coffee cups, thinking hard. "But is she a good mother for a sick little boy?" She avoided facing him for another moment. "Is she well enough to cope with having a baby?"

Shaking his head in perplexity, Niles picked up his cup. "I was astonished just to hear she's pregnant! We don't very often—" He broke off, blinked. "A week ago, I hadn't heard a word about having another child. As for the other, Faith," he went on, striving to select the fair and proper words, "Evelyn tries to be a marvelous mother *to* Teddy. Whether she's a good mom *for* him—or any child—I dunno."

She looked directly at him. "Have you ever talked with the doctor about Teddy? Have you heard, for yourself, what he recommended by way of treatment?" She touched Niles's arm impulsively. He'd removed the jacket and rolled up his shirt-sleeves and Faith liked the soft dark hair she felt. "It's none of my affair, but could you get . . . Evvie . . . to have a pregnancy test? Just to be sure, I mean."

Niles stared into her blue, blue eyes. While he heard her questions—knew they were good ones—there was only one answer he had ready for her that moment. He folded Faith into the arm she had touched and brought her near to him, took another look in her incredible blue eyes to make sure she would not resist, and kissed her.

Faith didn't resist.

Then both of them had to put their cups on the coffee table.

Her robe seemed to come off at Niles's touch, to drop to the floor gracefully, of its own accord. He held the pretty woman close, content for some time to kiss her mouth, cheeks, forehead, the warm spot in her neck next to her white bra strap. The questions she had put to him remained in his mind, the words and ideas blurring, preventing him from considering other thoughts —

Until, easily breaking his grasp and standing, Faith reached behind her to unsnap her brassiere, allowed it to fall to the floor beside her robe. An arm's length from Niles, she stooped slightly at the waist to slip her hands into the waistband of her white panties and began to wriggle out of them. Her hair came undone and curtained her face.

Niles buried his face in her belly, kissed her deeply, did not even extend his arms so that he could cup her naked breasts. For a short instant he appeared to be just tasting her, reveling in her softness.

Then he got to his feet and reached for his jacket and tie. Without uttering a word.

She looked down the length of Niles, saw that he was almost erect and straining against the cloth of his pants. Again on impulse she moved, stepped before him, and felt the warmth of his body against hers.

Then she felt the hand with the tie and jacket lightly graze one breast, saw Niles staring down at her bosom, her exposed navel, her pale curly splotch visible beneath her panties. And he said, "Gotta go."

"Niles . . ."

"I really want you to work for me, with me; for us to be friends." Yards distant, he was knotting his tie

carefully, smoothing back his straight black hair. "I like you . . . a lot. But I'm—the sorry son of a bitch I am." He got into his jacket hurriedly, then looked back, held his gaze to the face of Faith. "Not much force; remember?" He swallowed, turned. "My family still needs me."

She retrieved her robe, gripped one end of it at the breastbone.

"Thanks for the ideas you gave me." He reached the door, opened it to claps of thunder outside the building. The sorry man's smile flashed, was gone. "Gotta get. Evvie worries about me if I'm out in a storm—but I won't call her, thanks. She thinks it's dangerous as hell to be on the phone then."

He shrugged, easing the door closed behind him.

She carried her bra and robe into the bathroom, didn't turn on the light. Through lace curtains at the window lightning shattered the night. But the darkness came back.

I can't believe I did such a thing, she thought, raising her eyes slowly to see herself, mostly nude, in the mirror on the medicine cabinet. Without the light switched on, her face and form were patterns of contrast, her deep blue eyes pools of shocked embarrassment. *To such a nice, decent man.*

Faith cried, but just briefly. Niles would be as good as his word, she would work for him, they'd forget—enough—and they'd be friends. *Friends*. Why did some women have so much and not appreciate it, why did others have—

Her phone rang at the same second thunder boomed. It seemed, for an instant, that her ears were ringing.

Tired now, weary beyond recollection, she stepped

out of the bathroom to answer it. "Yes, hello?"

No quick reply. The line was open, she could sense the contact, nearly hear a distinctly different kind of nothingness at the other end. She frowned, looked at the receiver, the mouthpiece, the phone cord, then at the bathroom. She had left the door open and the sky through the curtained window was squared off as though it framed and formed a portal to another place, a different time, a new dimension—black as sin or as the dark tunnel to hell.

"*Hello.*" A voice on the phone, the intonation as if it—that person—was the one who had been called.

Faith laughed lightly in relief. Another second and she would have expected deep, labored breathing, vile epithets. "This is Faith, who's calling?"

Another pause.

Then the caller inquired in the voice of someone shy about asking such questions, or in the use of the telephone at all: "Is my daddy there?"

The awkward and breaking voice of a child in puberty but one who might not be there long.

"*Teddy?*" Faith asked in a whisper, a tentative breath of a question.

Light broke through the dark portal down the hall and across the bathroom like a great rolling ball that seemed simultaneously to suck out the illumination in the apartment and to pound across the distance between the window and Faith-on-the-phone like a luminous, radiating, floor-level meteor. She had time to watch it come, to hear it on the tingling nerve ends of her body and feel its thunderous approach up and down the length of her spine.

It crashed into Faith, ate her—*devoured* her with nimbuses of light which momentarily turned her into

something like a neon sign, or the pulsating tree top-
per of an electrified Christmas tree.

She kept her feet for the whole time it took for the
lightning to complete its journey, traveling fifty thou-
sand miles per second—nearly one-third the speed of
light—before the stroke returned and fizzled out.

By then, Faith was dead.

Chapter Fourteen

1

He knew he should go straight home—he'd be risking the wrath of God if he didn't—but his encounter with Faith had left him keyed-up and tense, confused about a great many things that he had either taken for granted or tried very hard to take that way.

Not so much because he needed to think, and he certainly didn't *want* to, Niles stopped at a bar called the One Note not far from home to have a beer.

After he had ordered it, Niles noticed the starburst clock on the wall behind the bartender and knew he'd made a mistake in not going back to Draden House at once. He had spent the better part of two hours at Faith's place, he'd promised Evvie he wouldn't be gone long, and he was already in Dutch up to his mustache.

Sipping the Carling Black Label the hatchet-faced waitress brought him, he wondered if he might not have made a mistake about a lot of things. If he be-

gan enumerating them, putting them down in a list, though, he'd end up closing the One Note—two weeks from Friday!

Why was he living in a big white elephant of a house named after someone nobody even remembered? Why had he given up the security of a job he really liked, and yet, on the other hand, how the hell had he managed to become a good enough salesman to be on the brink of moving up the ladder a rung? Was it possible Faith's record keeping was wrong, that she'd used someone else's sales figures, even dummied them up to help him? Or her?

But that was all water over the dam and a bunch of crap that kept him from brooding about his *real* mistakes—those tied to poor little Ted—and he knew it. Making patterns on the table with the bottom of his beer bottle, he realized Faith was right and he should've managed to be around when Evvie took the kid to Dr. Biddle's. Sometimes it wasn't really Evvie's fault at all when bad things got started because he always "took the path of least resistance," just like she loved telling him, and he ought to be able to remember that Evelyn simply wasn't like Bobby, his mother. She was imaginative, emotional, she got carried away. She was sensitive, she exaggerated things when she'd had time to shove them around in her mind, and it was up to *him* to be the practical one. How many years would he have to be married before he absolutely understood that?

Niles lifted his head with every intention of summoning the waitress, ordering another Black Label.

But the woman was at another table, hand on

hip, peroxided head back, laughing at some joke another man was telling her, and it was so smoky in the One Note that Niles couldn't spot the big nose she had. The waitress was fifty anyway, she had biceps and thighs like Lou Gehrig's—and she seemed so very much pure female at that instant that she was pretty to him, even desirable.

That moment she made Niles think both of Evvie and Faith. Of a faith he'd maintained even while he was passing it up.

He wended his way outside, close to feeling a buzz, and drove home with his brain successfully blocked against further reflection on his sins as well as his mistakes.

But he didn't make it past Duane after he had quietly let himself into the house and was maneuvering for the stairs to the second floor, and bed.

Duane was sitting in Evelyn's chair in the living room, slumped on his tailbone, wearing only an undershirt and underpants. His legs with the light distribution of reddish hair were sprawled out before him and Niles thought for a moment that his brother-in-law was drunk.

He wasn't. "You have a nice time?" Duane asked, squinting broodingly up at Niles. The man needed glasses badly, owned a pair he had bought at the dime store but rarely wore them.

Niles tried to walk on by without taking umbrage. Heartbeat accelerating, he knew there was no way the redhead could know where he'd been and it was silly to care what he thought anyway.

But Duane changed the subject before Niles could cross the room to the stairs.

"Evelyn got a phone call from my sweet little daughter. Seems like her old mean alky of a dad knew what he was talking about for once. So now she's back home with her cold and ugly mother where she belongs."

The beer Niles had had let him take two steps past Duane before he realized the ramifications of what he'd just heard.

"How did Evvie handle it?" he asked.

"What *I'd* like to know," Duane rumbled, "is how the fuck you always manage to be out of the house every goddamn time your wife needs you?" He maintained his cold stare in spite of the anger in Niles's expression. "How'd she *handle* it? It damn near broke her into pieces, *that's* how!"

Niles automatically glanced around the room and what he could see of the dining room from where he stood, looking for damage.

"I was sound asleep—minding my own business—when my baby sister starts bawling her eyes out. Weeping like a goddamn baby! Don't worry, Niles, she didn't fly off the handle and break any of your precious possessions—it was her *heart* that broke."

"What did Teddy hear of this?" He knew for a fact Duane's sympathy for Evvie was phony as a three-dollar bill.

"Well," Duane chuckled, "she got a little *loud*. I don't know how Ted *could* have missed all of it." He sat up, wiggled his toes, belched.

"Where is she, in bed?" Niles was already moving toward the stairs.

Duane used his crutch to stand and face Niles, and nodded. "Alone as usual." He donned an ex-

ploratory expression and thrust his head forward. Squinting, he brought his hand up to brush delicately at the lapel of Niles's sport jacket. "You don't want Evelyn to catch you with any pretty yellow hairs, Niles," he said in husky, conspiratorial tones. "That lipstick on your collar the other day was bad enough. But if I know *my* baby sister, she'll pitch you out of the goddamn house for having some whore's hair on—"

Niles punched him.

Fed up with hearing about his costly, countless mistakes, no longer able to take criticism from the man who practically *lived* on him and slightly under beery influence, Niles hit Duane with a Joe Louis-like short right, and Duane fell back into the chair, sending it scooting several inches back till carpeting bunched under its legs.

"I'll be damned," Duane grunted mildly, with open appreciation. Massaging his chin, his eyes glittering with animation, he was covertly hostile. "Never figured you had the guts," he intoned. Then he groped for the arms of Evvie's chair, began hauling himself to his feet without his crutch. "So it's not a whore you're banging, huh? It's worse!" He was afoot, teetering. "You really *like* your yellow-haired little twat, that it?"

Niles's hands came up mostly fisted—and shoved Duane back into the chair, hard. "Stop. *Now.*" He was standing over the older man, his breath coming in short spurts, but he was attempting to control his temper. Above the place where his in-law sat with his limbs askew, his hair mussed, Niles believed he detected shadowy motion. Not near them but be-

hind the piano, in the corner under the balcony. Although he changed his mind at once, Niles was distracted enough that he suddenly wished very much that he would never ever again have to strike anyone. "If it's any of your affair, I didn't go to bed with anybody. You hear me, Duane? I have never screwed any woman but my wife. Now." He drew in a steadying breath. "Drop the subject. Let it go, Duane. You listening? Let it go—*permanently*."

For many seconds Duane said and did nothing except stare up at him. It made Niles recall similar run-ins with his father-in-law, E.H., a time when he and Evelyn had had to use rope and tie her father to his bed to prevent him from fulfilling a threat to kill Evvie's mom. The resemblance between deceased father and living son was growing, becoming clearer with time. Like her mother before her, Evelyn liked to go on and on about ghosts. Why didn't she see that she and Duane had been badly haunted since a point in time long before either of their parents had died?

Duane was trying to move his crutch around secretly so that he could get the drop on Niles and either cram the end of it into Niles's stomach or hook one of his ankles with it and throw him down. But while it was obvious to Duane that Niles had had a beer or two while he was out—running around town on the two good legs the bastard was lucky enough to have; he himself had never been as fucking fortunate as the sanctimonious son of a bitch!—it was just as plain to see that Niles was nowhere near high enough to catch off guard.

So, smiling, Duane fell back into the chair with a

loud sigh. "Okay. E.H. always said, 'Never pick a fight with a man in his house; it's a long walk home.'" With a gesture of sheer melodrama, Duane raised his right hand, open, to Niles. "It's dropped, it's gone."

Niles took a step away, turned back. He put his palm within inches of Duane's. "This means that even when you're loaded, you won't 'accidentally' do one of those family things of yours and Evvie's, and dredge up the past. Deal?"

Duane hesitated deliberately, insolently. He prodded the tip of his tongue around in front of his lower teeth while he seemed to consider the proposal—as if he had a choice! But maybe he did. Maybe men who'd already fallen to the last rung of the ladder had the choice of slipping all the way off, Niles wondered. "Deal," Duane said at last, and closed his fingers on Niles's hand.

Too late, Niles remembered that shaking hands with Duane was like holding one of Evvie's when she was scared, overwrought. Duane was trying now to win a child's game, clamping down on Niles's hand with all his strength. He'd liked doing that since the first day they met, so Niles just endured the pain, waited patiently until the man was tired of the sport.

People sometimes saw life as one long, hard game, but why? Was it because they loved their childhoods so enormously, whatever they'd been like, because they were afraid to risk being adults—

Or because life was only a game?

It was clear to Niles now that he should somehow have restrained himself, just considered the source.

Reaching the stairs and starting to take his first step up, Niles turned his head to look back at Duane. There was also, he remembered, the age-old male dictum that you should never strike a woman, a child, or a cripple—even if it *was* the vow broken more often since the dawn of time than any other.

Duane was staring back at him from Evvie's chair. His mouth was turned up at the corners in the fondest, most nonchalant and admiring of smiles Niles could ever have pictured. He knew it was phony as hell, except possibly for the respect that one bully has for another; for a convert to striking people. To losing one's temper, blowing up, and forgetting every other commitment simply to attain a momentary gratification.

Niles had to jog up the steps to get away from him before he threw his own wife's brother out of the house and experienced more satisfaction than he ever otherwise expected to enjoy in his entire life.

2

With everyone upstairs for the night, Duane reached for his crutch, stood, and wobbled.

He'd known he could make the son of a bitch take a swing at him one day, but he hadn't believed for a second that Niles could generate so much power. It had taken him all his willpower to keep from flinching away in case Niles decided to hit him again!

Duane trudged across the front room toward his suit coat in the foyer. If he could've gotten the bas-

tard *down*, on the rug—no holds barred—the story would have been totally different. Except that wouldn't have been smart since Niles had ultimately demonstrated that even *he* had a limit to what he'd put up with, and the idea had been to make Niles feel guilty. About him, too. And this bigshot palace of theirs was just about the only place left where he, Duane A. Mengaldt, was welcome on the planet Earth—

Which was just what he'd always wanted anyway!

"Just what I wanted," Duane muttered to himself, reaching the foyer and turning his damaged but rugged body to the open closet. "'Cause I don't *want* anybody, don't *need* anybody"—just like E.H. Balancing his chunky body just so, he reached into the closet with one hand, rumbling his deep, throaty chuckle, careless of whether he disturbed anyone else in Draden House. People *expected* drunks to be a certain way and they *liked* forgiving them. His fingers touched the whiskey bottle in his suit coat, closed around the neck; raspily, he began to sing, "I don't need *nobodddeee*'—"

Stopped singing, frozen by surprise.

The surprise turned to the first stages of shock.

It was crazy as hell, but it felt like something was *holding his wrist* at the same time he was clutching the bottle!

And it *hurt*, too, though Duane was slow to realize pain after spending half the leisure hours of his adult, nonbasketball playing life at one extreme of physical misery or another. Clearing his throat noisily, offended by what was happening to him—whatever it was—he craned his neck to squint into the

recesses of the closet and try to see what (*who?*) had him in its clutches.

Outdoor wear, unidentifiable things hanging in bags, several seldom-worn jackets of Evvie's, and an evening gown from the time when she played out were crammed into the black vertical pit of a closet along with Teddy's and Niles's galoshes and a sprinkling of discarded, unmatching shoes that littered the floor and rose so high that they brushed against the hanging things and made it all virtually impenetrable—

Except for Duane's extended right arm and hand which were beginning to experience the strangest goddamn agony Duane Mengaldt had *ever* felt.

Pain came in all sizes to fit any punishment (self-inflicted or otherwise) and need; he understood that better than most men. Breaking his wrist against the chin of another man in a bar fight made the arm feel loose, and useless, and the pain soon subsided to a tiresome throb (if you left the wrist in its cast). That was very different agony than he'd known after the cops got tired of how he mouthed off to them in county lockup and turned the cartilage in his nose to the consistency of the crap mothers put in Easter baskets. That was different pain from being struck on the top of the head (by Teddy, for example), and very different from the time he'd felt depressed and curious simultaneously and stuck the first joint of his middle finger, left hand, into the electric fan.

This pain—according to the usually reliable information transmitted by his brain—was a mixture of how one's hand and wrist might feel if they were

plunged into icy water (and trapped there while the water froze), and then pulled out and thrust to the elbow in molten lava.

Which seemed to Duane so goddamn ridiculous that it sounded like a neurotic idea his baby sister might have tried to sell people—like the crap about birds or flower smells in the house, and living people-things created by the power of thought. In short, it was so stupid or mad that he thought maybe he might just go on to bed for the night, and do it cold *sober*—simply to prove he could.

But as if it had read Duane's thoughts and strenuously objected to them, the wrist-seizing phenomenon in the dark and cluttered closet *yanked* on Duane's arm. Since he hadn't let go of the whiskey bottle, Duane had to tighten his elbow-clutch on his crutch, brace his feet, and dig in. *Let me go, you weird-ass sonofabitch*, the redhead told it firmly, angrily—

Except he *didn't* tell the thing so much as a syllable because his words merely *stopped* an inch or two out of his mouth. Stopped and were, he thought, *absorbed*. It was as if he'd tried to speak and swear and threaten and the well-formed words expelled by his breath had been sponged away—

Or sucked into the whateverinJesusname that had him in its freezing/steaming grasp and wouldn't let him go.

Uncle Duane drew in a pained breath, squared the shoulder that wasn't pulled out straight, and fired his best thought at it: *You're fucking with a Mengaldt here. You want a tug of war, bastard? You got a tug of war!*

He tensed his muscles till they were like nuts in a bag and yanked. Hard!

Something *gave*, he was sure of it!

He was also pretty sure that if he did it again, he'd dislocate his shoulder or wrist.

He yanked with all his power—harder—*strained* with everything he had at the end of the powerful yank—

And got his reward and punishment at one and the same time.

Through the thicket of darkness, clothing and coat hangers there appeared two pretty, rather feminine eyes set in sockets that seemed on fire with the coldest fury and deepest red Duane A. Mengaldt had ever seen at arm's length from his own eyes and face. The light lit up the closet's interior but it was hard to focus on anything.

That was the reward for his immense effort, and it was a short-lived one.

The punishment began in the form of Duane's realization that his right arm throbbed, burned, ached, froze, and felt loose-as-a-geese useless all at the same time, and that he still hadn't gotten his whiskey bottle from his suit coat even though his arm *was* out of the closet and dangling at his side. Sleeveless. Blue.

Then the punishment continued and got worse, even though, for a second, it appeared to be merely more interesting.

As he stared down at his bare arm and began to realize that there were also fat, moist blisters forming on the pale inside, Duane's attention was drawn for the first time to Niles's sample kit on the cre-

denza. The leather bag was open, and he could clearly see that it was *empty*. Every one of his brother-in-law's prosthetic bits and pieces had been . . . removed.

That was when he should have picked up his crutch or, better, simply have hopped—or crawled—away. The instant when he wasn't in the iron grip that had given him the pain was presently being belatedly recorded on his brain. But the pain had its way.

An artificial nose came out of the interior of the closet, pinched between fingers Duane didn't see, traveling with such force and such speed that it ran straight into Duane's nose before he could even see it coming. While it would take more than one attempt to drive it into the middle of his face—since Duane already *had* a nose—the experimental attack only stunned him. A prosthetic arm, the efficacy of its propelling swing reduced by the close confines, clipped the man on the side of the left jaw, the reflexively squeezing fingers scraping the back of his neck.

Then Duane disappeared wholly into the closet and the door closed on the darkness.

Chapter Fifteen

1

Teddy had gone to his room not long after dinner, not with any intention of sleeping yet but because it was the only place he could imagine that he could cover up his head and body and not think about the new baby Dear was making.

Without even undressing, he'd taken off his glasses, left them on the little table beside the bed, jumped in, and wiggled under the covers with his eyelids squeezed together—

And it didn't work. His memory kept pushing up at him the things Coop had let him hear.

About Dear and Niles havin someone to take his place. How it was "like magic." How they were "so lucky"—that was a bad one to hear.

And what Coop said, that she had a baby "growing inside her." Teddy made a face under the covers, tried harder not to think, not to remember—

"It might even be a little girl," Dear'd said.

For the first time Teddy attempted to understand what it was goin to be like to be dead and tried to

picture his home, Draden House, without him bein a part of it (*and* a tiny baby he would never see bein his replacement).

It was the most difficult thing he'd ever tried to do.

The second part—a cute little baby wrapped up in a blanket—wasn't the hardest because Teddy's opinion was that babies were the most useless things on earth and that he couldn't imagine one bein any competition to him since all they did was cry, make number one and number two, and eat awful stuff.

What made it hard was realizing that he *couldn't* compete with one after he was dead.

He couldn't do anything much then, according to what Dear'd told him about Heaven, except be good, maybe play a harp or something, or . . . or—

Despite himself, Teddy began to cry. He didn't want to, he hated giving in and actin like a little kid, but the other possibility of what he might do as a dead person was the same thing that *all* of Dear's family members did sooner or later after they were dead.

Visit.

Come to call on Dear, and maybe other relatives for all he knew (except that Dear said most living folks weren't smart enough to even see you were *there*), and maybe make a lot of noise—shove stuff off tables, scream real loud, things like that.

Only the screaming part sounded like it would be any fun at all.

But the only good part of bein alive was Coop, and the way Dear and Niles kept sayin *if* he was gonna die, and *when* the "worst happened." (He got

real confused about that, too—the stuff about the “worst”—since Dear’d always said he was God’s perfect little child and that Heaven was where everybody good wanted to go. So he might not even have minded dyin all that much and didden really understand why other people minded it, except they kept talking about “the worst” and also cried a whole lot when somebody like Grandma or Niles’s daddy really did it. Sometimes he wondered what faith was, if grown-ups couldn’t look forward to being dead. *He* had, sort of, till he was dyin. Maybe the faith part was s’posed to begin, really, on the Other Side, in Heaven; except that was *easy*. Anybody could believe in a place once you were *there*. He could believe in it right now except it was hard to do, alone.) Sometimes he just kind of wished it was over, instead of hearing all the *ifs* and *whens*.

But he definitely didn’t want to come tell living folks that bein dead was okay. Teddy felt real stubborn about that. Let ’em try dyin for a long time for themselves, then see if *they* liked it, then heaven!

After a while, he’d thought enough about things he didn’t want to think about to go to sleep, except he wasn’t sleepy no more. So he threw back the covers and sat up, squinting like an owl without his glasses. The room wasn’t dark because forgetting to turn on the light when he entered the room would be like forgetting to go number one when you had to pee.

He started to reach out for his glasses, left them where they lay instead. There wasn’t much to see anyhow; the skeletal shadow of his ruined comic

book rack, the radio, the books he'd read (*Robinson* was tucked beneath the bed with a chapter yet to go), the ceramic figurines with the cactus growths that made them resemble a hunchbacked small army eager to attack. When he wasn't wearing glasses, things always looked more like Teddy wanted them to look—or like they *really* did, anyway. If he ever wrote and drew comics, he could get ideas for stories anytime he took off his glasses! Of course, there was always the closet across from his bed—and no way of knowing whether Dear'd left it ajar or not (*he* certainly hadn't!)—but for now, Teddy was able to keep from looking at it and finding out.

(Coop had said he stood guard sometimes when Teddy was asleep, and vulnerable. Teddy knew he wasn't asleep right then, but he was in bed, so where was Coop?)

For a second, he had a panicky yen to jump into Niles's strong arms or to be held close by his Dear in hers, but he dried the few tears he'd already shed on a corner of the bed sheet and made himself remember that he was ten, now—already on his way to eleven.

If, and when "the worst" didn't happen.

The remembered image of the only pregnant women he'd ever seen leapt to mind. A lady named Alice (not the Wonderland girl), who'd played trumpet in Dear's dance band. With it came a grave doubt that he would ever again be hugged by Dear, even if he stayed alive for a while, 'cause it didn't look like there was *room* for any kid on the outside of a pregnant lady to be close to. Downstairs, then,

he heard the phone bein hung up; a handful of seconds later, he heard Uncle Duane grumping about bein waked up, and Dear was cryin a lot. His uncle complained once or twice, loudly, but then he sort of *laughed* and said something about his bein "right about Cass." Teddy didn't know what they were talking about, but he knew Uncle Duane shouldn't be laughing at a time when his Dear was crying.

For a moment Teddy thought maybe he should get up and go see if Dear was all right, but then he had to sniffle and wondered if he was gettin a cold. Or did you get colds anymore when you already had a disease? It sure wouldn't be fair to have *both*.

It suddenly occurred to him with a rise of strangely muted horror that he might just as well get used to having no more hugs since he would be goin away while Dear and everybody stayed here. His realization made a mixture of ideas and impressions run and float through his mind. With some courage, he admitted that some of them were not as terrible as they'd seemed to be a minute ago. He would certainly miss Dear after he'd died, but with another kid comin to life as a substitute, he wondered if Dear would really miss him? In a lot of ways, his Dear had appeared to be in a better mood since the day they went to Dr. Biddle's—not all the time, 'cause his Dear wasn't like that, but *more* of the time. She'd been playin piano a lot, she and Niles didn't have as many fights, and they'd completely stopped talkin about gettin divorced.

Maybe the baby (*little girl?*) would be more Mengaltdt than Hivereve and Dear could go back to her career and—

Teddy turned toward the bedroom closet and stared at it, without his glasses, through a veil of new tears. It was ajar, it *was* open—several inches—

And *Coop* had shoved it open, he was standing there, against the darkness of the Things, keepin' 'em from getting out, wearing his slow, easy grin, no glasses, no shoes, no shirt at all now, his hair like a *wild man's* it was so long; and Teddy knew *Coop* wanted to be asked the same question Teddy had asked him last time, ask it just the same way; so he did: *Can you handle things now, Coop? Can you?*

And *Coop* nodded his big head, the hair falling forward over his face for a second. *Yup*, he said, just like that! *Yup!*

2

Throughout the night Evelyn experienced a phantasmagoria of nightmares, recollections, vivid dream scenes that were so real she believed she was awake, snatches of what seemed like hauntings—or echoes of former hauntings—and instants that were so weighty and portentous that she experienced them as prophetic visions. For the most part, though, her sleeping mind was beset by an infuriating overlay of taunting resistance that stole the best parts from her completely and left her feeling that she had *almost* experienced something really insightful, *useful*—just before her mind sped on to another dreaming episode.

"You hold your people too close," a voice Evelyn

couldn't identify intoned, then danced away, only to return from another direction, another perspective: "You get pretty emotional, Evelyn. Pretty emoooootional . . ." She moaned, half turned. "Things you do aren't always in their besst interests," and coming at her from somewhere above and just to the right of her head, a big plain face, the mouth working, saying sonorously, persistently, "I'm acting in the name of God today . . . of Godddddd, todaayyyyyyy . . ."

Then she sat up with most of her body in the direct center of the bed, horribly awake, staring at the ceiling with two words—a name—on her lips: *Dr. Biddle*.

Of course. It was a reminder that she'd want to see the old man about the little one growing inside her. Every mother did that, it was part of everything, essential to the drama. When she was further along, of course, she'd see him.

Touching her abdomen with her fingertips, she smiled tenderly—

Remembered the reason for the old man's remarks, and . . .

Felt the beginning of a splitting headache. The *worst* kind, starting in the temples, then running around to the back of her head, fingering her sinus area simultaneously, the kind that *probed* and *probed*, bringing tears to the eyes.

"Niles!" She turned from the waist, wanting two aspirin so badly she almost decided to get up and go get them. She pushed at Niles's back, pushed a second time when he didn't budge and didn't make a sound. "*Niles* . . ."

And fell silent, peering into the darkness of their bedroom in pain and panic, *listening*.

She hadn't heard a sound—and didn't—but something was wrong, definitely wrong. Somewhere in the house . . . downstairs; it *wasn't* Teddy's room . . . something was wrong in the *living* room, or—or at the very front of the house.

A strong aroma of sweetness—flowers—wafted to Evelyn's nostrils like the tentacles of some dead and groping thing, something as sweet as *decay* . . .

She told herself she worried too much about members of her family. *I hold them too close*, she thought, headache gone, forgotten along with many other bothersome things.

The alarm clock hadn't gone off for Niles and it was too early to get up. Turning on her side, pulling covers with her, Evelyn closed her eyes against memory and fear, and slept.

Chilly, arms reaching out for covering that had somehow disappeared while he slept, Niles awoke and, frowning, stared at the clock. Shit, almost time to get up. Damnit, if he went back to sleep now, he'd be groggy all day!

He touched his bare feet to the bedroom floor one at a time as he struggled to a seated position on the edge of the bed. Ordinarily, he was a guy who practically bounced out of bed—assuming he'd been permitted to get his sleep—but this morning, well, he didn't feel very bouncy. He remembered having some sort of an unpleasant dream but he couldn't remember what it had been about, any of the details. Evvie thought he was a pretty dull customer and he probably was, but being married to a

woman like Evelyn was bound to have an effect. There were times when even he *nearly* had a premonition that things were somehow going wrong, badly wrong.

Times like right then.

But I'll bet it's just guilt, Niles thought as he remembered Faith. The way she'd been so nice, so friendly. The way she'd looked without any clothes . . .

Niles glanced around, at Evvie. Sleeping, still-pretty Evvie. He couldn't see anything much the way she was wrapped in the covers, but a wave of her brown hair was peeking over the blankets and the curve of her ass—*bottom*, Niles quickly corrected himself—made it hard to remember she was pregnant now.

If she was, he added mentally, Faith's idea about Evvie going to get a pregnancy test occurring to him. But Faith didn't understand, didn't *know* Evvie, couldn't realize that her free, creative spirit had hated most suggestions related to her or to Teddy, and reacted—well, pretty badly—to being told a damn thing.

She also wouldn't take kindly to any kind of dumb questions such as, How in the world did you manage to get knocked up when we almost never do it? Which was the remark Niles really wanted to make to her.

He remembered with enormous clarity the way it had been when they were expecting Teddy. He supposed he'd never forget it, not in a thousand years. Evelyn had stuck out her big belly, the navel thrust so far it looked a lot like a little third tit, said, "I've

done my duty for the whole world to see. How many times does it take before you're satisfied?"

Niles recalled the details as he went to the bathroom, got ready for work. He had tried to explain to Evvie, that, for a man, having sex was not a whole lot like getting a smallpox vaccination. A husband never worried whether it had "taken" or not; he knew for a fact that he would go on having the problem that Evelyn seemed to view as a contagious disease for as long as he lived.

Evvie, though, had been in possession of a lot of facts he was unaware of, as usual. The way having sex when she was pregnant was the riskiest thing a woman could do, both because the man could easily infect her with something terrible and because the man's bulk on top of her could cause something to rupture, and hemorrhage, even kill the unborn child.

God, how he hated terms like "a woman," "the man," and his "bulk"! It made them sound like a couple of dogs in a vacant lot—and the male dog weighed around a ton! But there'd been nothing to do but take Evelyn's word for it. He *certainly* wasn't going to ask Bobby, and he'd assumed, back then, that Pop was probably as ignorant of a woman's intricate, delicate, and embarrassingly involved internal works as he was himself.

Niles went downstairs quietly—on the tips of his toes—and headed for the kitchen. He'd bring in the morning paper to read with breakfast, but for now, he'd put a pot of coffee on.

He didn't remember that Duane was visiting them again until he had gone to the front door, brought

in *The Star*, and was glancing at the headlines in the kitchen.

Cautiously—because he certainly didn't want to awaken his brother-in-law and listen to a lot of Mengaltdt memories or heartbreaks—he peeked around the kitchen door at the couch in the dining room.

No Duane! There was no way to know whether he'd slept there or not because neither Duane nor Evvie bothered to make up the daybed once the man was in the house. If he got crocked during the morning or afternoon, it would just have to be made up again.

Niles hummed to himself while he drank his coffee and devoured two fried eggs. It might not be that bad a day after all; he'd always suspected his own premonitions were a load of crap!

After drinking all the coffee he wanted—birds singing at the side of the house were the only interruption of the morning's silence, it was going to be a peach of a day—Niles washed up the things he'd used, went to the foot of the stairs, and looked up.

When he was sure that Evvie and Teddy were safe and asleep, he walked to the foyer for his jacket and sample bag, humming again. He realized when he stopped to tighten his tie that the song was one Evvie wrote herself. "Back to Those Days," it was called. He unzipped the leather kit for his routine inspection of the contents, trying to recall Evvie's lyrics. "Back to those days, old-fashioned ways," Niles remembered. "Da-da-da-da-dadda-da, we've just been in a daze . . ." He'd have to ask her to

ing the lyrics again for him sometime, since the melody was really pretty.

Everything in the sales kit seemed in order.

"Oh, damnit," Niles swore, taking a closer look.

He pushed a black button release and drew out a prosthetic arm to examine it.

The hand part had a dark, brownish stain just below the thumb.

Couldn't they learn to leave his things alone, didn't they realize he made his livelihood—their too—with these things?

Niles tried for a few minutes to rub the stain away with a handkerchief from his pocket, but it didn't work, not even when he'd used some spit and wiped hard at it. Finally, exasperated and beaten, he replaced the arm in the bag and snapped it into place.

Annoyed, he almost forgot to get his jacket from the closet.

The notion of driving by Faith's apartment, since it was so early, occurred to Niles as he reached his arm inside the closet without looking. It might be interesting to know what she'd say about this latest unexplained invasion of his prosthetic samples.

But that would be tempting fate, Niles knew, getting his jacket out and slipping into it. He was only human, after all. Just the way *all* of them were.

Maybe he'd see if that florist shop where he and Evvie got plants for Teddy was already open instead. It'd cheer the kid up to have another one of the little cartoon characters with the cactus growing out of it—though for his own taste, Niles thought

as he opened the front door, they were pretty grotesque things!

Well, whatever he did, it was a beautiful morning.

On a day like this, almost anything could happen!

3

When she got up that morning, Evelyn had the impression that she had spent an all but sleepless night. That would've been all right since she rarely did sleep the night through (what with one thing or another), but she had no memory of having awakened even once, so she was inclined to wonder if anything was wrong with the baby.

By the time she had gone to the bathroom, sprinkled water on her face, and put on her favorite golden lounging robe, however, she realized what it was that had disturbed her sleep. Cass's goddamn telephone call, the night before.

Well, that was too bad for Cass, it was a shame her first visit to New York had gone so badly, but it wasn't anything Evelyn herself hadn't anticipated. Her niece was little better than a child; she simply hadn't had the experience to handle a masher.

And on top of *that*, of course, there was the indisputable fact that Cass was *not* Evelyn Mengaldt Hivereve! Hell, would-be band vocalists were a dime a dozen. Inexperienced girls and boys who were able to carry a *tune* came out of the woodwork, and expected to be the next Crosby or Russ Colombo, for goodness' sake! But highly skilled pian-

ists with the versatility to play with any band, to accompany the canaries (or singing trios and quartets) and *also* the star power to step into the spotlight, would be in demand *always*.

The problem for Evelyn was merely how to get from *here* to *there*. But it had never been a problem that couldn't be surmounted, it never would be, and it had always been just a matter of time before she was discovered. Name bands came through town to play at the Circle Theatre or the Indiana Roof constantly. Perhaps she should call the local union instead of just waiting, as she had, for Lloyd to ring her to say that one of the touring bands' piano players was ill and the leader needed someone terrific to fill in. That had always seemed to be the best way because her reputation in this city was so very well established and it seemed somewhat humbling to go *groveling* after a break like some rank beginner, like Cass or somebody. But it wouldn't do any lasting *harm* to phone Lloyd, the union secretary, or to remind him, considering that it had been a few years since she had played out anywhere. People could be forgetful.

Drinking coffee in the kitchen before going up to check on Teddy, the more Evelyn thought about it, the more the idea of reminding Lloyd appealed to her. She was at the peak of her powers, after all, since she had been rehearsing so much lately; Lloyd might even know of some gig coming up that wasn't utterly beneath her talents, and Niles *had* agreed to the idea of her performing again. Whether she was truly one hundred percent pregnant or not, the family certainly could use the money.

Suddenly filled with the conviction that the timing of such a call was at last perfect, she jumped up, sloshed coffee in her saucer and on the kitchen counter without noticing, and headed quickly for the phone.

The whereabouts of her brother Duane came to mind when her glance fell on the daybed in the dining room but that just couldn't be a consideration *now*. Maybe he and Niles had gotten into one of their masculine spats again and Duane had gone home; she couldn't recall just then what shoe store he was working in or whether this was a period when Duane was employed or not, but he might also have gone looking for a new job. The men in her family were so scatterbrained and unstable, she thought as she searched through an unwieldy pile of papers for the union book and the phone number. A down-to-earth homemaker and performing artist couldn't be expected to know where they were at any given moment.

She halted the search as the telephone jangled, startling her into immobility.

Her many long-standing qualms about getting news and messages in the daylight hours kept her that way for another moment.

"Evelyn?" The voice was *right there*—swiftly—when she'd just brushed back a curl of dark hair with the receiver, then held it to her ear. Just like E.H., the caller was impatient, like life itself. "Is this Evelyn?"

It was old Dr. Biddle; she recognized him instantly. The life-changer, the life-giver and life-stealer. For a fleeting time she imagined he could

have called because he'd heard that she was expecting. Then she knew that wasn't possible, that it was silly. "This is Evelyn, doctor," she acknowledged.

"Brace yourself," Dr. Biddle said, and his voice sounded somewhat different to Evelyn than it ever had in the past. But how could she brace herself when she didn't know what awful thing he was about to dump on her? Hadn't he done *enough*? "I have some remarkable news for you, Evvie. Are you sitting down?"

Life-changer, life-wrecker. It was men who pursued professions which put them in such positions, it was women who were the healers. It was the way of the world. "I am now," she said, sitting on the edge of the dining room couch. She touched the pillow she'd had Niles buy for her brother, strove to draw Mengaldt strength from it. Where *was* Niles? Why did she have to go through so much *alone*? "It is about Teddy. Isn't it?"

"I beg your pardon?" Dr. Biddle said, unfocused. "Why, yes—it is." He paused. "His last tests have come in. It's good news about Teddy, honey!"

Involuntarily, she closed her eyes. When she opened them, she stared around the room in amazement. He had called her "honey." No one had called her that—but Niles—in so very long. It was hard to concentrate, but he'd said something about "good news." For Teddy. "What is the news?"

"I'll give it to you directly," the old man said, almost laughing. "Teddy is going to be all right. He *doesn't have hemophilia after all!*"

She was clutching the cord with all her strength and she nearly pulled it from the wall. Birds were

making a racket in the driveway and she wasn't sure she'd heard him correctly. "The birds are singing," she blurted. And one *got inside*, she *remembered* it! "What did you say?"

"At this point in medical history it's very easy to mistake such symptoms for hemophilia, which is why I was so tough on you when you were out to the office . . . to prepare you yet make it clear that I *wasn't* diagnosing the more serious disease."

"*Stop that racket!*" she shouted at the birds, hand not quite covering the mouthpiece. She got to her feet, body and hands trembling. "Did you say he's going to be—all right?"

"As right as rain!" Biddle exclaimed, chuckling. "He had thrombocytopenia. The bloody picture is often pretty much the same, it has the same mean look."

Her *nerves*, she had to steady them! She had begun shaking just the way poor Mama shook in the last stages of her illness. She wanted a cigarette, a drink—and there appeared to be so *much* to understand. "Do you m-mean that you put me through this—this *hell* on *earth* because of *another mistake* you and your family made?"

"Evelyn . . . honey—"

"Don't 'honey' me!" She slapped the dining table with her palm, attempting to shake her cigarettes out of hiding. She knew she was so nervous she hadn't yet said exactly what she was trying to say—he seemed to have wonderful news, too!—but a fork Niles had left on the table was falling to the floor, there was red stuff on it, and it was getting on her good rug. "You cannot *imagine* what you've

done with your carelessness to Teddy—to me—to our entire family.”

“But,” Biddle said on a note of near panic, “Teddy *isn’t sick*. There’s no reason now why he can’t become perfectly—”

“You said the same thing after he recovered from scarlet fever!” She was bending to pick up the fallen fork but her fingers were dropping it again and she was losing all track of what she was thinking or saying. “No one should put a woman in my condition through anything so *horrid*.”

She struck her head on the table, bit her lip, reeling with pain, jumped up. Confused, she automatically hung up the offending telephone. Then, hugely conflicted, she simply ran for the living room and her precious piano, needing urgently to give full vent to her emotions. Weeping as she sat, she swept sheet music away and emitted wails that rose into all the rooms of the house. Instinctively, her hands found the piano keys and her fingers began to play . . . sonorous chords, first in the bass range wholly, then varying the approach with complex treble chording—startling herself by inventing chords her short fingers ordinarily could not reach. She laughed with delight, her tears becoming matching rivers on her cheeks; they ran down her face, dripping unnoticed on the keys. *My darling will be all right*, a part of her mind strove to enlighten the rest; but she was hysterical with joy and pain and her hands continued to pound dynamically over the keys, moving more quickly than she had ever moved them. Life was a nightmare, and a dream—life was not real, it was too real to be

borne. As she had borne her precious, perfect little Teddy—as she would somehow bear the delivery of another *emotion-sucking, time-devouring, demanding little puke of an infant!* It was what a mother DID, it was a woman's damnable LOT, there was no way OUT, for them, for Evelyn Mengaltd; for Duane, or Mama, or Niles, or Teddy, or—

Two boys with basically the same face stared at her as she played—entertained for the audience that was her very own, if she had no other—and each boy knew he was hearing an explosion of sheer genius unlike any he'd ever hear.

One boy wept, adored and treasured his Dear more than anyone or anything else he would ever know in his life. He was ready to lay down that life for her, at any moment.

The other boy was Teddy Hivereve.

4

Niles made a lot of callbacks that morning. He was careful not to exhibit the stained artificial arm and he had already made presentations to these medical men so he was spared the need to show it.

But shortly after the lunch hour, with new calls to be made, he returned to Doc Greene's downtown office suite, unwilling any longer to make a difficult daily task even harder.

He was successful in avoiding Doc for the length of time it took him to turn in the stained arm and requisition a new one, but his old classmate and

current employer returned from lunch just as Niles was getting ready to leave the office.

Suddenly recalling what Faith had said about Doc's romantic overtures and worried that she might have been with the cherub-faced little doctor, he paused to pose a question. "Where's Faith Brady?" he wondered.

"God, Niles," Doc said. "Haven't you heard?"

Niles stared at the man while the limited implications of the remark—along with a certain strained expression on Greene's face—sank in. He rested his sample kit carefully on a nearby desk and steeled himself. "No, I haven't, Doc," he said.

"Oh, that's right, you didn't stop by this morning." Nodding, Doc brushed past Niles, started toward his own office. "I forgot that."

Niles didn't want to pursue this—he knew for a fact—but he called after the shorter man. "Heard what exactly?" His own voice sounded like it needed oil.

"Well, her little girl managed to get out and notify somebody. It's a dreadful thing, Niles." Doc rambled on. "A freakish kind of thing. But—Faith was struck by lightning." He blinked once. "She's dead."

He left his old high school chum standing there, went into his office, and pulled the door to behind him.

"Lightning," Niles said as if he'd never heard the word. His friend Faith was dead.

A moment later, pushing his way out of the place without speaking to anybody, Niles went down to mill for a while with other blank faced and staring

men on the street. Above them, the spring sun was sullen and neither blinked nor spared them its glare.

5

Teddy was up for some time before going downstairs. After watching his mother play and seeing his pal Coop's display of tears, he felt oddly cold and went through the house to the back porch and out onto the river bank.

He didn't think Coop would be joining him. He also didn't know why he wanted to go out by White River, but he did. Ol' Coop said he was gonna take care of him, and things, but Teddy wasn't so sure now. Actually, he really didn't know what Coop could do about the dyin or the new baby coming anyway. Now that he thought real hard about it as he stared at the slowly-moving silent surface of the river, he wasn't even sure ol' Coop was exactly *real*. And if he wasn't, Teddy also wasn't sure that *he'd* made him.

The other day Niles had carried a nice lounge chair out to the riverbank, and Teddy got up on it now. Stretching out, aware that the wind was picking up, he trailed the tips of his fingers on the ground. It felt cold, it was muddy; it was like the stomach of a slimy animal, but Teddy went on touching it, trying to think . . . of many things:

If he had to die, why not then? Why not right away? Gazing up, there was sunlight to see and the view was clear in all but one direction and it was like he was there with God, sort of, so dyin

wouldn't be too bad.

A lot of it—of the fear—had to do with when and where you were, he decided.

Dear loved him but either she was changin or he was or it was because Coop was there.

He loved Dear, too, but that was changin too and that was as scary as dyin. Because he was pretty sure you had to love something even if you didden like anything.

And you couldn't when you were scared too much.

Shadows on the uneasy body of the river appeared to swell as if someone or something new might be waiting in the shallow depths with the willingness to come help, come play; but Teddy'd had that miracle of life and he s'posed there was only one of any kind to a customer. Anything else wouldn't be fair. So the river—*this* river—had no life in it now and it was hollow, like a bottle somebody'd turned upside down and poured out. There was nothin in it no more.

Water trickled at his fingertips like a kitten and Teddy didn't move, allowed it to lap, feed. The water was warm, tasting his fingers. Teddy nearly giggled. He wasn't s'posed to be out there so anything more he did would just be more crimes against Dear, or nature. He sat up, took off his bedroom slippers, and put them carefully on the lounge chair, side by side.

He stepped barefoot onto the adhesive earth, felt its pull on him, and stooped to let water run between his fingers and rise above his feet and ankles. He had gone to the river, he realized, and lifted his

head to peer back at Draden House.

Either his glasses were fogged or it *was* foggy, 'cause he didn't see home anymore. The whole horizon was clear—pale-blue light in every direction—and he didn't feel cold or scared or nothin.

6

Gas stirred incipiently in a belly that felt newly tumescent to her touch. Her too-short fingers stretched down as if to feel life curl warmly around them, as if she might touch the face of her slowly molding, perfect baby.

Laughing at herself for being so silly, Evelyn took another pull of the beer she'd gotten from the ice box and ruminated about the mysteries of birth. It was fascinating to picture something intrinsically human becoming attached to the inside of a woman like a bat to the roof of a cave. It seemed truly, genuinely mystical to her; of God. It was another affirmation of the beliefs, invisible but ever present, she kept for herself, almost lived on. Mammon and the things of man were not for her, never would be. Let 'em take Manhattan and shove it. Shove it up their old wazoo. She laughed, then opened the third and last of Niles's Black Labels.

Seated at the kitchen table, able to see through a part of the window, she fancied for a moment that time was not passing—except for her little one. Life could be measured by growth, not just minutes. Her gaze encompassed the etching of riverbank, narrowly took in the chaise lounge. Her dark pudding

eyes eventually picked out—not with certainty, she wasn't truly focusing—her son reclining on it, motionless as a catafalque. She got tears in her eyes. He was already half-gone, her sweet Teddy, drifting off to that other world she wished never to see. It was so sad and yet so right. For Teddy, for any child, what courage was needed to stand before the judgment seat?

Dreamily, she studied the images through her dark lashes and saw them darkly, objects of Rorschach like she'd seen in *Look*. Part of it was the waning afternoon, part of it was the upset of the day and last night—the torture of men's uncountable mistakes.

Part of it was the tall, shaggy shadow standing between Evelyn and the kitchen window. A shimmering of soul and mind stuff, attempting to be seen.

In a moment, however, she stood and went to the window—unobstructed—wanting to be sure her identification of her son wasn't in error, that she had not truly seen a discarded blanket on the chair. But it wasn't he, poor darling Teddy, providing her with a window to her own past. Hadn't she reclined and waited, too, for the long hours to pass and Daddy to come to her? The very early evening was granting her a glimpse into a time machine, revealing to her a last sighting of the little girl who had been so alone, so afraid even when she was not. Another child who had wanted merely to discover a means of survival.

Had Teddy gotten up?

Evelyn looked harder through the window,

squinted. She couldn't see him now; he *had* risen from the chaise. For a second her muddled mind would not locate him and she thought he might be coming through the porch into the kitchen any instant.

Then she saw a small, dark form by the river waters—and knew it wasn't Teddy, that it couldn't be.

Her poor, precious darling knew he wasn't supposed to get that close to the river.

Evelyn pulled the curtains over the window and, smiled. She felt lighter, turning back to the kitchen, as though a burden might mysteriously have been raised from her shoulders. At that moment she felt pleased with herself, and lifted her stomach with her cupped hands, felt new life coursing through her.

She was making everything better for Teddy. Easier.

Perhaps she would call the child Theodora if it was a girl. And if it turned out to be a boy, she might still name it Theodore; call it Teddy. In a way, it would be another chance for him as it would be for her, for Niles, for all of them.

But the sex—that terrible word—did not matter.

What *did* count was that she was going to have a wonderful, perfect little child. A true Mengaltdt.

The shadow that had been between her and the dark scenes outside Draden House departed that second, but she was aware of nothing but what she had in her head that evening and dearly hoped those thoughts would be her only ones from then on.

While Teddy was out in back wading in the river and while *she* was still mooning around in the kitchen—thinking of that goddamn *brat* she thought she was going to have—

He trashed the figurines and the cacti in his little pal's bedroom!

And it was *fun*, too, every bit as much fun as all the *other* things he'd had to do in his life—maybe *more* fun 'cause Teddy absolutely hated the dumb things and Niles was thinking of getting more of 'em, and because *Dear* thought they were pretty, his Dear had *bought* them—

And she was makin' him feel so damn bad—so unwanted and so lonely—that he just *had* to do something to get her attention too or he might go crazy!

So he ignored the way the plants tore into his big fingers while he crushed them between his amazingly powerful hands, and threw the stupid little cartoon figurines against the wall—then ran over to them and jumped up and down on what was left!

Then he ran down the hall to the bathroom, got the hot water bottle, filled it up with all *kinds* of crap he saw sittin' around—he got the rubber hose, too!—and ran *back* to Teddy's room to pour out the contents of the water bottle on the mess of cacti and shards of ceramic glass!

Ignore me, *will you*, Coop raged, sprinkling the perfumes and lotions and Old Spice after shave and *everything* all over the mess he'd made, doing a little jig with his big bare feet and also waving his

arms over his shaggy head like a regular wild Indian. *I'll show you, I'll show you, I'll show you!*

And *then* he took out his big thing and *peed* on it all, laughing as loudly as he wanted while tears coursed down his cheeks into his first growth of beard.

And when he was done, he ran down the hallway to the bathroom again to look in the mirror.

He had to stoop some, to see his reflection.

Coop had hair down past his shoulders, it was filthy dirty, and he saw signs that he was growin hair on his upper lip.

He thought for a minute about gettin Niles's razor and shavin it off, but hesitated to take a longer look at his image.

Pretty good. But he didn't believe, now that he thought about it a moment, that he bore a very close resemblance to Teddy now. His hair was the same color maybe and the shape of his face.

But it wasn't Teddy's looks no more, uh-uh.

Except he was taller, Coop realized. He really was taking a lot more after the Mengaltd side of the family now. A whole lot more.

Which—even if wonderful, beautiful, talented, hateful Dear couldn't see it yet—was only natural.

Very, very natural.

Chapter Sixteen

1

Drained by a day that was taking forever to end, Evelyn lay down on her living room sofa to rest. She'd turned on the radio but it was too late for her programs again today, evening was coming, and it took the rest of her strength just to reach out and turn the radio off. Feeling bloated but hoping that was only the new baby life churning inside her, she dozed off with a feeling of having really fallen into the sleeping state.

Tendrils of the setting sun penetrated the cathedral windows and played with patterns of gold on her forehead, cheeks, and fragilely closed eyelids. Faintly moaning an objection, a bedroom slipper dropped from one foot and she rolled partway onto her side. Frowned.

Someone else was in the room. She sensed it, knew it. Eyes, bathing her helplessly reclined self. Incapable of making them stop—just go away—Evelyn succumbed to the latest invasion in her day, and looked.

“Over here, sis.”

Brother Duane was standing across the room just out of the foyer, and the expression on his familiar face was difficult to read. He was all dressed up. He wore the nice jacket, trousers, and tie he had donned when Cass visited them most recently, and his thinning, reddish hair was neatly trimmed. It occurred to Evelyn suddenly that she hadn't seen him today at all and had forgotten him. "Where did you go off to so fast this morning?" she asked without sitting up.

He didn't answer at once. "That would be hard to tell you," he said.

That expression she hadn't recognized. It consisted of a great many qualities Evelyn didn't associate to any great extent with Duane, and other elements she could not identify at all. His leathery face exhibited a strange concern, a deeper sadness than usual, a warmth that was distant but unguardedly affectionate—a certain quiet sureness of himself she couldn't remember seeing on her brother's face since the two of them were only children. Finally, he added with a smile, "I'm pretty sure that I didn't go anywhere that you expected me to go."

The light in the room was difficult, and looking back at Duane was giving her eye strain. "Why are you staying way over there?" she asked querulously. A twinge of anxiety—a moment's trepidation—disturbed her. "Come sit down."

"I can't do that, Evelyn," he grunted. "Can't even stay." Though he sighed, he didn't appear especially downhearted. Regretful, maybe. "This will be as far as I go."

"My God, you're talking a lot of crap!" she com-

plained. Propping herself up on an elbow, she saw that there was something odd about her brother, unusual, and pointed to him. "You don't have your crutch!"

He thought about that a moment, then shrugged. "You don't take along what you don't need, sis." He patted the sides of his jacket—Niles's, really—with his hands. "See, kid? Empty pockets. No money, no ID, no keys, no bottle. Evelyn: this is a visitation. Surely you of all people must've figured that out."

She felt a catch in her breathing and glanced away with a shiver. "Don't be so damned silly. You've never believed me about such things before, so don't start pretending now! Duane, the visitations I've tried so patiently to tell you about always come from . . ."

He shifted the weight of his body (or perhaps simply altered his stance) and she seemed to see—seemingly in the center of Duane's muscular form—part of the front door of Draden House. "Evelyn, you always did have to have a damn rock fall on your head to accept a fact." He had his eyes trained on her steadily, he was nodding his cleanly shaven chin, and she perceived that it was Duane who had become a being for whom time now held little meaning. Not the child she carried. "This is a *real visitation*, sister."

"But you aren't dead!" She said it as though addressing Teddy or an even younger child but she also knew she was getting panicky, alarmed. "Stop horsing around, and come *in* here!"

Something of the old, devilish Duane showed in

his blue eyes. "Don't tempt me, Evelyn. You might not like what happened if I did . . ."

"I know that you're alive!" she persisted, closing her eyes. "You were here last night."

"For a while," Duane said—and the spooky, eerie way he said it made her open her eyes wide. "Damnit, *can* you see light and other objects through me or not?"

". . . Yes." She *had* to look again at him, *through* him.

"Welllll, sis," Duane drawled, "that isn't possible with living people." He seemed to draw a breath; his head and body momentarily dimmed. "I'm to tell you that all of you are in danger."

"Of course," Evelyn said. She had always believed that.

"I don't mean just of *dying*!" Duane said, his eyelids lowered. "That won't even be so bad for you if you're not killed the way I was."

Evelyn gasped. "Someone *killed* you? My god—was it Niles?"

"Let's not get into that. The point is, Evelyn, there's no reason for Teddy to have to die for years—nor Niles, I suppose. And where you're concerned, baby sister, all of us know you're too damn frail to *take* what's apt to happen to you, then just die." Duane was getting harder to see as the frame of the front door became clearer, but he had his feet planted firmly, like a Mengaltdt, and seemed determined to complete his remarks come hell or high water. "It isn't good to die with too much on your soul, sis. I'm learning that now so this is just a fair warning: Stop telling people all that horseshit!"

"Horseshit?" She sat up, flushing. Fear forgotten, he crammed her foot into the slipper that fell off. "You know how damn honest I am, Duane Mengaltdt!" She stood, started toward him. "Answer me—what horseshit have I ever told anyone in this family?"

Again the devilment showed but he neither responded nor seemed combative; he held his ground and raised his hand to stay her. She saw no lines in the palm; she saw fine tracings of spectral bone, like finer memory. She also saw how sad he looked. "You're not pregnant, Evelyn; you know that. You also know Teddy isn't going to die—that he hasn't even been particularly sick for a long time now. What you did to him before, by keeping the possibility that he didn't have hemophilia to yourself, went down very hard . . . here. What you're doing now by not even letting him know he's *well* . . ." He paused, shaking his head. "Tell him; tell Hivereve too."

She stopped a couple of yards from him, feeling very hurt. "Duane, you're threatening your own sister. Your *only* flesh and blood—except Cass, of course."

"You have to be honest with folks now, Evelyn, and finally face the facts." Suddenly he spoke in a voice that surrounded her, washed over her from every point of the compass. "Admit, too, that you are not expecting a child. Accept only what you *have* created, however hard it is to admit, or you may have to take credit for creating evil that isn't entirely yours." He nodded solemnly but he appeared engulfed by a dim, dark light that made his

face and form uncertain. "Tell everyone the truth, Evelyn, or you may reach the point when you never again know what's real and what isn't."

"I'll never give up *anything* I've created, anything I've wanted with all my heart!" Evelyn screamed and ran at the image of Duane with her hands raised, her fingers clawed.

She wrapped her arms around a coldness that chilled her to the bone even as it stopped her from running into the wall. For a moment, her upraised hands were frozen, her precious fingers immobilized.

"I'm no longer a man of flesh, with flesh, sister," her brother's voice called, a parade or repeating echoes. "All that you or I can hit or swear at or embrace in this moment is—death."

Duane was gone. Then she could move again but it was as if her limbs and spine were thawing; melting. Taking an uncertain step, she hugged herself to get warm, to feel blood circulate in her system again, and perceived that she was facing the closet in the foyer.

But there was an aura encircling it that frightened Evelyn, so she turned, limped deeper into the house of her dreams, hoping that she might never find anything in life but them and sensing that they were all becoming real at last.

2

Teddy came in from the river and went upstairs quickly, moving as quietly as he could, then sneaked into the bathroom when the coast was clear

and stuffed his wet bedroom slippers into the clothes hamper.

On second thought, he took them out, rummaged around till he found a pair of his dirty socks, put them on, and dropped the slippers back in the hamper.

He paused to listen, hard, when he heard Dear talking to somebody in the living room. When he heard no one else speak, he decided Dear was either talkin on the phone or composing lyrics to a new song. Ignoring the stink rising from the direction of his feet, he put on an old pair of shoes and started to leave the bathroom to go to his room.

Then he realized he had to make number one, had not made number two at *all* that day, and unbuckled his pants so he could sit on the toilet.

Number one proved to be a cinch but two didn't seem to want to happen. It almost *never* did, on command, which puzzled him. He could pee just about anytime anybody in the world wanted him to, but his bowels had a mind of their own or something.

And as usual, the harder he tried to "grunt"—Dear's other term for it—making a whole lot of appropriate grunting noises—the more he began to feel pretty sure that this oldest of problems had somethin to do with his new condition. The blood one that he had to die for.

When it occurred to Teddy that making more number two than he ever had before in his life—maybe more than anyone else had *ever* gotten out of himself—might possibly cure his disease, he began putting more effort into moving his bowels than

he had ever given anything in the past. He bent double on the toilet seat, scissored his body, strained for all he was worth. Then he put his fist in the pit of his stomach and gave it a truly Herculean effort.

And when nothing plopped into the bowl, he sat up straight as a thin board, then shoved down with his skinny buttocks. Then he got a good breath, held it, lifted his arms over his head, and fairly *thrust* the whole interior of his abdomen in the direction of the waiting pee-water.

He stopped when he was very dizzy and lightheaded, and when pain began to sear his insides, he dropped his head forward above his bony knees and wept with the effort, the frustration.

It had him beat. He'd given the disease a fair fight—even if it *wasn't* fair 'cause it hid inside him like a tiny baby—and the *sonofabitchin shit* stayed right where it was!

Teddy glanced up, shocked by the words he had thought and afraid that Dear might be out in the hall, listening to his efforts. He hadn't switched on the bathroom light when he came in, and now the room was full of shadows. Ominous possibilities. And no loving sound of his Dear breathing hard outside the bathroom door.

Her absence, the presence of evening shadows, and the realization that he did not want to be caught in the failure combined to bring him down off the toilet, hauling up his pants, rinsing his hands, and hurrying out into the hallway.

No light came from the downstairs region of the house but a light was burning in Dear's room. Not

his own, and he had to pass his parents' room to reach his.

Her door was open—not just far enough to squeeze in and get himself in awful trouble, but wide. He could see his mother from where he stood in the darkness and she was decent. Cross-legged on the bed, her golden gown almost taut across her bound knees, Dear appeared to be deep in thought. Teddy looked at her incuriously, feeling almost detached from her activity, her momentary affairs. He was messin with one of her magical hobbies—numerology—'cause he recognized a couple of old books with leathery, cracked covers that had been Grandma's or Alexandra's. She also had a lot of notepads, and torn-off sheets of small white paper, and she seemed to him like pictures she'd shown him of "shamans" and "mages." The notepaper gleamed in the light from the ceiling fixture and her Parker pen was flying. *Scribble, scribble*, not kind of thoughtfully like Dr. Biddle wrote but real fast; furiously. And as she labored, majestic in her sequestered study—somehow a stranger, just then—she snowed the floor of the room with note flakes.

What was going wrong, he wondered—what was happening that he sometimes saw this pretty, perfect person more and more as if she was always moving from place to place, appearing to him in a *new* light? Because he was dyin, he prob'ly should love his Dear still more (if that was possible); she couldn't help it if God wanted her to have his replacement ready.

Her face was shiny, endearing in a complete sense to him, even then. If life had hurt her so much that

she got mean sometimes—*gets real sensitive*, Teddy corrected his thought—it was prob'ly just the "Mengaltdt lot," as she put it at times, it was in her blood. And if that was so, why, he had the *same blood*—it wasn't all Hivereve, even if she didn't say that—

But then that meant that Dear must also have a sort of sickness, too, in her blood. And if *that* was the case—

She wasn't perfect. And neither was *he*, whatever she liked to *say*—

And it meant that his Dear was a liar. *A damn ol' liar . . .*

"Teddy, darling." She was looking up at him from the bed. "I didn't hear you."

"I know." He shrugged. "You was busy with your numerology."

"*Were* busy, sweetheart," she corrected him. She had been cryin or real upset, you could see that in her eyes and the circles under them. How long had she had those circles? "How are your bowels today?"

"I haven't been today," he told her before he could think better of it. But he *did* have the thought, too late, to tell her what she wanted to hear. "But they was—*were*—okay yesterday."

"Well, let it go," she said, eyeing him with sympathetic affection. "After all, you have been sick."

Teddy felt his eyes open wide, his stomach turn over. She was confirming his fears about the disease, and his bowels! Otherwise, she would *never* let him off so lightly. But he also saw a real funny look on her face, and she was batting her eyelids

like Niles and Uncle Duane did a lot when they thought they were in Dutch.

Dear patted the bed beside her. But she wasn't lookin straight in his eyes like she usually did. "I had a visitation a little while ago."

He stayed put, half a foot inside the room, his panic growing. They hadn't had night yet. Relatives on the Other Side didn't ordinarily show up by day. "Who w-was it?"

"He looked almost like he always looked, in life," Dear said. She was glancing away, maybe thinking about the ghost, maybe thinking of other things; Teddy couldn't tell. "But his *eyes*." She shuddered.

He knew it was a man ghost now. "What were they like?"

"Deep, darling. Very deep." She patted the bed next to her again. "Like he'd been to hell and back. Or was having very deep thoughts,"

Niles should be home anytime. And who was she talkin about? "Was he all pale and white?" Teddy asked.

"No," Dear said as though her interest was deepening, "he didn't look so much the way Uncle Rob and the others looked. But he had that nice jacket on—the one Niles gave him—and the same good tie he wore when Cass was here."

Teddy took one backward baby step. He knew who she was talkin about now but it wouldn't be real if she didn't say his name. How could he get out of there without her gettin mad? "Did you . . . touch him?"

"I tried," she replied, tears showing in her amazing eyes, "I honestly tried. To give him a nice, big

hug." Her gaze wended its way to Teddy's face and her real terror was there to be seen. "I *ran* to him—to my *only* brother—and put my arms up"—any instant she might break into tears—"but he was *so cold*, my darling Teddy, he was as cold as you'd *think* death will be!"

"Don't cry," Teddy blurted. He meant not to do a great many things that he was afraid she was going to do and he nearly rushed across the floor, the gap between son and mother, to embrace and console her—but she was really talking about hugging his *dead Uncle Duane*. "Please, don't."

"A-And right before he . . . faded away . . . he said I h-have to tell the truth. That I have to t-tell your father, and you, and everyone the *whole truth*." She started to get up, to come squeeze him, hold him tight, and the tears were just *sittin* in her eyes like two White Rivers—and the thought of hearing either that his Dear hadn't been tellin the truth or might say something even *worse* that he'd never, ever forget was terrifying. "About *everything*."

"I gotta make number two!" Teddy howled, jumping back from the door, into the hallway. He didn't, though he might have to throw up, but she'd follow him for sure for that. "I gotta go!"

She halted, a yard or so from him. Her face was getting red, it was crawling up into her neck into her face, and she looked almost like Uncle Duane! "You're running *out* on me? You don't want to hear your Dear's *biggest secret of all*?"

"Yeah! *No!*" He took two, three quick steps backward down the dark hall.

"After all I went through for *you*?" she demanded, appearing in the doorway. "But I *must* tell you! You *have* to know!"

"*Noooooo*," he cried, sweating, hurting, tears beginning behind his glasses. "I'm sorry, Dear," he added, turning to run. "But I gotta go!"

He dashed right on by the bathroom, aware that his own lie was showing, needing to get downstairs—somewhere, *anywhere*—

Yet he heard what she screamed at him while he was stumbling down the stairs: "It's going to be a *girl*, Teddy sweetheart! *A perfect little girl!*" She laughed and wept at the same time. Her final comments reached Teddy's ears just before he fled into the living room. "And I'm giving her *your* name, darling. I'm going to call her Teddy!"

3

When he had walked among the men in the welfare lines long enough to stop feeling quite so sorry for himself, Niles located his car and began the long drive home.

He vowed not to stop remembering Faith, however.

It was a damn hot evening; the temperature was somehow a receptacle of steaming, unforgiving memories just waiting to be drawn out.

There was still ample light to see what he'd withdrawn before he got home, and that was good. He had a helluva lot to look at.

Evvie had broached every couple's almost un-

speakable subject herself, a while back. She was the one who'd suggested they separate and Niles suddenly realized it had been on the night when Teddy's bleeding began.

Maybe there was some connection. It was hard to tell about kids, their feelings were so close to the surface.

He also remembered the way Teddy had pleaded with his mother and him. Niles had felt that life would no longer be worth living if he lost both his wife and son. He just hadn't said anything; as usual.

And even then, he'd let Evelyn take over, handle not only most of that first terrible nocturnal visit to Dr., Biddle's office but go with Teddy—without *him*—the other times.

Including the afternoon when the old man told Evvie about Teddy's newest condition. God, what a time to be busy doing something else, Niles cursed himself.

Scowling, he turned off East Tenth street, heading north. With the setting sun at his back, he wondered if it wasn't time he quit just loathing himself and did something *constructive*. The only reason he hadn't was that Evvie seemed happy to take over, and that kept him from having to get all the bad news firsthand, and take action.

But then he could scarcely blame her if she got some of the facts screwed up. He himself had admitted recently that she was flighty, she got nervous—too much so to deal particularly well with details. (*Reality?*) And in her subtle way, Faith had urged him to get Evelyn to go to a doctor and find

out for sure if she was really expecting again.

My God, if that was in question, then there could also be some doubt, some question, about Teddy's *diagnosis*. Christ Almighty, if Evelyn was actually able to imagine things about her own body—her *own* physical condition—

What would prevent her from . . . accidentally . . . making things up about Ted?

He thought about stopping at the One Note, even a liquor store, to get something to drink. Duane acted as if he was the only guy who ever wanted enough booze to keep from asking the really *tough* questions of himself, and that was a bunch of crap. The difference between them was that he himself could never quite forget that the same questions would still be hanging around when he sobered up, made worse by overlooked responsibility, lost time and opportunity, and a damn hangover. No, he *had* to keep his mind on *these* responsibilities.

In a way, Niles thought, they might turn out to be the only things that were all his.

Making up your son's health problems—why, a person who'd do a thing like that would have to be weird as batshit, or so frigidly locked up in herself (or himself) that nothing at all really mattered anymore. It was grossly unfair of him to let such a notion about Evelyn enter his head.

Still . . . what if it was true? What if she was not only *not* pregnant, but she had forgotten some treatment for their boy that might've gotten him well by now?

And—*what if Teddy isn't really gravely ill at all?*
Belatedly, the implications of Niles's hideous

ideas shocked him so badly he almost piled up the car on a traffic island where people were waiting to catch an interurban.

It was easily the worst thought he'd ever had. He told himself firmly, while his usually reliable nerves shrieked, that it was not only terrible and an unforgivable insult to Evvie, but such an absurd notion that his wife and his brother-in-law combined could never top it!

However . . .

Niles dug in.

Teddy would never have had the audacity, the balls, to wreck his own father's workbench and tools.

He'd never have had the strength or, for that matter (unless Niles was completely misreading his only child), the animosity toward his own dad that such a deed required.

He's a funny kid, Niles thought, *but he's also not nuts.*

Not yet, his dead friend Faith seemed to whisper to him in the twilight.

(Maybe "sensitive" was sometimes just a nice word for unstable.)

Niles could only think of one person he knew who came close to possessing all the attributes necessary for a goofy (*vengeful; cruel*) thing like that, or for a lot of goofy (*bizarre; neurotic; possibly worse than that?*) things that went on in his home.

All right; he could insist Evvie go to the doctor for a pregnancy test. He could *try* to insist.

But how did he set about getting the whole truth about Teddy's health?

"Teddy! Get your little ass back up here!"

She stood on the landing, eyes wide, looking down into the darkened downstairs area, too upset to think of turning on the light in the hallway. Heaving, seething, she tried to detect motion in that part of the first floor she was able to see from where she stood with her strong hands gripping the railing—tried to see where the ungrateful brat had undoubtedly ducked down behind a sofa or chair, or her piano. But she couldn't spot him, so an idea she had down deep inside her was simply not going to work.

It just wasn't possible to slip downstairs and sneak up on Teddy because he *might* have gone to the kitchen—and if she went the *wrong* way, he could slip out of the front door or through the backporch.

That would have been fun, but it was all right. Teddy was *gone* now. He was one hundred percent Hivereve. So everything she had striven to do to bring out his innate gifts was shot, demolished, over! It was almost beyond belief—but *Teddy had disobeyed her*. And not for the first time, because he'd gone out by that filthy river, she'd *seen* him there—and in the unplumbed kindness of her mother's heart, she hadn't even *punished* the little son of a bitch!

But—she *would*. She wouldn't *forget* it either, this act of sheer perfidy, this heartless rebellion

against everything that was right and pure. He'd *run off*, for God's sake, he'd turned into one more goddamn *Niles* right before her eyes—

And at a time when she'd really *needed* him, *exactly* like *Niles*!

Let him, then! Let him and his father *and* his *uncle* run straight to *Hell* if they wanted to—because Duane, too, had left her, abandoned her at a time of family need—a time of *good news* for *all* of them!

But they didn't *want* to hear any good news, they wanted to *wallow* in their own stupid mistakes, their own narrow, selfish interests, their common *lusts*! Angrier even than before, she started down the steps in the evening gloom. "Tell them the truth?" she repeated Duane's injunction aloud. "*That'd* be a laugh! I've told them the whole truth my *whole life*, and the only thanks I get is watching the ass end of my so-called 'loved ones' running away--away from the woman who *loves* them!" She lost a slipper, stooped off-balance to paw for it, nearly fell. She caught a quick breath, continued the descent while she shook her head. *Well, doctor, I certainly won't hold them too close from now on!* "Go ahead, sweet precious *Tedd-eee, run!* Hide! I don't give a damn *what* you do, *I* have my career!" She reached the foot of the stairs, turned toward the living room. "And I have my *new* Teddy, too, baby—don't forget about *her!*"

Exuding ferocious joy, she went lopsidedly to her piano, gripping her slipper, her bright-eyed gaze still scanning the shadows for Teddy. *He'll come out if I make him mad enough!* she told herself. Maybe it

wasn't *nice* to tease him, it'd hurt his little feelings—but who *gave* a shit when he was all Hivereve now, when the little prick had *asked* for it!

Hell's bells, he had simply *pretended* to be sick, this time—and for all *she* knew, even the goddamn scarlet fever was just one of the little faker's games! And since he'd just been playing on her sympathies, sucking up like all men did—to get anything they could *get* from her—there was no conceivable need to stifle her artistic sensibilities anymore! Hell with it, if high-and-mighty *Master* Hivereve was going to live!

Breathing deeply, pretending to the universe that she was again calm, Evelyn cocked her head in reflection as she lowered herself with dignity to the piano bench.

From the corner of her eye she imagined for a moment she had seen Duane. Standing once more in the entrance to the foyer.

She closed her eyes, reopened them, and nothing was over there.

"Hell, Duane, I tried," she called with her hand cupped to her mouth. "I *tried* to inform the little snot but he wouldn't listen!"

Why would she have thought he would? No one ever listened to her. Well, then—who gave a shit whether Duane or Uncle Rob or *any* of them liked the way she conducted her affairs or not? They were all just another goddamn bunch of *men* whether they were living or dead, so who in hell *cared* what they wanted?

Evelyn played one perfect and perfectly exquisite run in the early evening silent darkness, then raised

her head to smile radiantly to the audience she often enjoyed pretending to be filing in the living room with the expressions of respectful, enchanted expectation.

(Nobody was coming in the front door, but there was a *creaking noise* from the big closet in the foyer!)

The aura of death. Not a man of flesh. This moment . . . death.

Evelyn rose from the bench, quietly. Backed away; toward the stairs.

Duane . . . He was back. But he no longer *looked* like he had the last time she saw him.

This Duane was like something from the pit, impossibly animated—like a Disney cartoon—b-but some of the frames had been left out of the film, because he walked in terrible *jerks*, his legs and arms made *grinding* sounds in order to propel the rest of him forward. She stared across the living room at his face—and there wasn't much left of it, it was like he'd had pimples everywhere and picked at them until there were *pocks* for his nose, his eyes. *The truth*, he said with his mouth, pointing to Evelyn. Splintered teeth dropped from the mouth like popcorn spilled in a movie theater. *You haven't told the truth. Griiind; clak, clak*, his steps drew him closer. One ear fell off; when an eyebrow came loose, he pulled it the rest of the way off like a Band-Aid over a scab. *Truuuuuthhhh!*

He seemed this time to be thinking about coming over and playing double piano.

Niles let himself into the house as quietly as he could, his mind made up to do something entirely on his own—something constructive, for Teddy and for him. In memory of Faith. It might even be for Evelyn's own good.

But whether it was or not, he'd known the last few blocks of his drive home that if anything deterred him from calling Dr. Biddle just as soon as he *got* there, he would never find the guts to do it later.

Where is *everybody*? he wondered, not even bothering to hang up his coat in the closet. He realized consciously for the first time that he hadn't brought his sample kit with him but didn't pause to think about it as he crossed the front room and headed for the kitchen phone without breaking stride.

Evelyn wasn't fixing supper; Teddy was nowhere in sight; Niles couldn't remember if he had seen anything of Duane since their set-to; and Draden House was still as the dead. Niles found the phone book and leaned against the wall while he looked up the number. Just as he located it, he became aware of the sun's last light of the day glittering on White River beyond the kitchen window. It looked like a bed of jewels, and Niles—thinking how much he wished he could buy pretty things for Evvie—couldn't decide for a moment if the natural light was an omen indicating that he should or shouldn't commit such an act of disloyalty.

Then, removing his suit coat in tortured doubt, he noticed Teddy's old highchair. It had been aban-

done in a corner of the kitchen. With no further hesitation, he hung his coat on a chair and turned to dial Dr. Biddle's number.

The old man kept evening hours twice a week but Niles didn't remember which nights. If this wasn't one of them—or if this was the doctor's day off—

“Yes?”

The polite but rushed burr of a voice was Dr. Biddle's! “Hi, this is Niles Hivereve, doctor.” He couldn't think just then how to phrase either of his questions. “I just got home, and—well, I guess I'd like to know more about my son Teddy's case.”

“I'm sure it sounds like a miracle to you, Niles, but it's true.”

A miracle?

“I believe,” Dr. Biddle said, “there's a more important involvement between the mind and the body than most of us know of. It wouldn't make me popular with most of my colleagues, Niles, but I suspect we shall find one bright day that the unconscious mind pretty much *accepts* whatever it's told, and acts upon it. If it believes it's guilty of a sin, the unconscious measures the sin against its in-born concept of right and wrong. Then it sets out to punish the body accordingly.”

“Doctor, I'm not sure what that has to do,” Niles said, perspiring heavily, “with Teddy's case.”

“Well, I'm not either,” the old man said good-humoredly. “I'm only speculating. You see, a child tends to find a great many things natural . . . normal . . . that *we* expect him to regulate. Till that time, all the customary excretions of the body—from urination and bowel movements to tears, even

to *bleeding*—are viewed as reasonable avenues of . . . expression. It's then that he starts learning that we disapprove of *untimely* expressions of that sort, that we fear a loss of blood. Then it enters permanently into his head that these functions he saw as natural are probably linked to punishment—or reward."

Niles glanced restlessly at the river and tried to understand the relevance of what he was hearing. "Frankly, sir, I'm still not following you."

"That's because GPs don't acquire a great many followers." His match striking told Niles he was lighting up. "Niles, like all kids, Teddy had heard constantly that this or that activity is right, or wrong. We have to do that to 'em, I know. But since there's precious little *any* child can do properly for quite a period of time, much of what they learn is that they're usually wrong. Consequently, if my opinions prove right, all people are raised from the start to *punish ourselves—and to die.*"

"That's quite an opinion," Niles said, frowning, sweating. Groping.

"And if I'm right, Niles, what we are dealing with in the young is a *learned susceptibility*—to germs and to *ideas*. They're both invisible." He chuckled. "Between birth and death—in some cases, between birth and the time a human being becomes mature—a person cooperatively accepts his punishment over, and over, and over *in an effort to get good at it!* Good enough to make himself pay the ultimate penalty, by perishing. The sins of the father, you know. I think this is what is meant."

"So, *my son*—"

"Reacted to the sins he felt guilty of committing by 'accepting' first scarlet fever, then the symptoms of hemophilia. Not that he knew anything about either, I don't mean that. I'm referring, I believe, to the massive effort he was exerting to be a *good boy*, the massive guilt he felt when he believed he had failed . . . and the massive amount of blood he released in the desire to say how *sorry* he was."

For the first time in a long while Niles realized he was smiling.

But he didn't quite dare ask the question that could validate his joy.

"As to the question of *how* Teddy recovered—just as I told your wife on the telephone, Niles, the boy definitely does *not* have any dread disease—I'm inclined to believe we may never quite know the answer." The old physician inhaled, coughed once more. "But I daresay it's linked to some realization he's come to, on his own; some idiosyncratic and strongly independent *thought process* linked to his own perceptions, his own imagination." Dr. Biddle laughed. "I imagine the atmosphere in your home is as if a dark cloud had been raised, a great burden from your shoulders and Evelyn's."

"You wouldn't believe it, doctor," Niles said, his heart thudding. Teddy wasn't dying, didn't *have* a disease—and apparently, Evvie had known it for hours, but made no effort to find him and tell him! "One more matter, quickly," he said. "Evvie seems to have missed her period. She has, well, an idea that she could be . . . pregnant."

Biddle laughed again but this time with no trace of humor. "I'm afraid your wife had a lot of ideas

that don't always gibe with the facts, Niles. I examined Evelyn not long ago; she's definitely not 'with child,' as they used to put it." He paused. "I hope this won't come as a disappointment but frankly, it's highly unlikely Evelyn can ever again become pregnant. Didn't she tell you about her examination? It was some time ago. Before Teddy's little bleeding mishap developed."

It was a moment when Niles felt the greatest gratitude in his life and, at the same time, a simmering sense of bewilderment. "Doctor," he said, "you began by saying this isn't really a miracle. I'm not second-guessing you, sir—but isn't it pretty unusual for a boy diagnosed with a disease that could kill him to have *another* condition that just . . . clears up and goes away?"

The deep breath Niles heard in his ear was so shockingly startled, aghast, that he feared for a second that the old man was having a heart attack of his own. "I never told your wife Teddy had hemophilia, Niles. I was at great pains to make that clear to her. Never *at any time* did I make such a diagnosis."

Unable to do more than whisper his thanks into the mouth-piece, Niles hung up. What had he ever done to turn Evvie against him to such an extent?

Before he could begin to think it through, Evelyn was screaming angrily at Teddy.

Enroute to the stairs he realized with dismay and a horror he knew he wouldn't forget that Evvie hadn't *told* Teddy that he was going to live!

No mother and son sharing such wonderful news could conceivably be making such sounds.

Niles flipped the lights on in the hallway of the second floor, hesitated to determine the origin of the shouts and screams. Not his and Evvie's bedroom; Teddy's.

I'll get Teddy outta this madhouse, go back to Picturesque, Niles told himself as he charged down the hall. *We'll go it alone and Evvie can have her precious career!*

He stepped into Teddy's room, stopped inside the door in astonishment.

The place looked like a bomb had struck it! Colorful pieces of shiny stuff—Teddy's cactus plants and their pots—were strewn everywhere, but that was just the beginning of the mess. Drawers from Teddy's dresser had been yanked out, contents spilled, kicked everywhere. Window curtains hung in tatters and a pervasive odor of urine hung on the air.

Then he noticed that Teddy's books and the few comics he had left were just about all that was unharmed and wished he could make himself believe Duane had done this awful thing.

Evelyn had Teddy by one wrist. It was clear at once that she'd been paddling him with a hair brush; the brush lay on the floor between them, broken at the handle. It had been them shrieking, and any other day, Niles would have avoided interfering the way he'd have avoided heavy falling objects.

He strode forward and started trying gently to take his wife's fingers away from his son's wrist. Maybe she *did* know how strong she was. "Why, Evvie?" he said.

"Why *what?*" she asked, puzzled apparently but trying to regain her self-control. "Why would I punish the little brat after he's made a mess like this?" She spun away, found empty cosmetic bottles, from the bathroom, to display. "Look at what he's *done.*"

"Didn't!" Teddy insisted, the lenses of his glasses afloat in tears. He was addressing Evelyn as much as he was his father. "I didn't do *any* of this!"

It was hard to see their features clearly so Niles turned on the bedroom light. The room looked even worse than he'd originally believed. The figurines hadn't just been broken, they'd been demolished, and pieces of prickly cactus were caught in the remnants of curtains. He wasn't remotely used to being judge, jury, and executioner—Evvie had always filled that slot with enthusiasm—but he drew in a breath, then put his hand out to Teddy. "I know you didn't do it, son," he said.

Teddy ran to him, glad to have Niles's arm around his shoulders.

Evvie faced them, and while she looked wearier and older than Niles could recall after a decade of marriage, she also looked icily in control. Not hesitant, or apologetic; not even surprised. "It's all changing, isn't it?" she said, sounding husky, almost rasping. "Changed, really. First Mom, then the flowers; the bird—a string of proofs of my God-given powers." Her robe was soiled again and seemed to hang crookedly on her. "My only child

beginning to turn against me as he grew, steadily, toward his damned fate!" Her voice rose at the end of the sentence, her fine brows with it. "I've *seen* you when you thought I wasn't looking, Teddy! Even when you sit, or slump, and *pretend* you're not getting bigger, and bigger, I've *seen* how you really look!"

"Come on, Ted," Niles murmured, nervously turning away with the boy.

"Who *is* she, Niles?" Evvie demanded.

Niles looked back, vastly shocked. "Who? What are you talking about?"

Evelyn's smile showed her small, white teeth. He'd always thought she had the smallest, whitest teeth he had seen in a human mouth. Now he believed they were like the teeth of a piranha fish. "I read it all in my numerology charts, you sneaky bastard! Who's the bitch you've been seeing, the one you leave home at night to visit?" She was losing her poise fractionally, microscopically, and no one had ever known how to prevent it. "You've been untrue to me, and you might as well admit it!"

"No," Niles answered truthfully. "I haven't." He gripped Teddy's shoulder, ready—*anxious*—to get both of them out of the house.

"You gutless, know-nothing son-of-a-bitch—I *want to know her name!*"

Niles stared back, realized that Evelyn remained the most astonishing woman he would ever know. She made him feel naked before her, and little, all over. In the strangest of ways, she *did* know things others did not; she was never entirely wrong about anything much. But she was also never quite right

either.

He worked Teddy slightly to his rear, edged them toward the door, moving backward as his trembling hand brushed the door all the way open. "I've never been untrue to you, honey," he said softly. "I've always loved you, and I always will. I'm no expert, but I don't think you're quite right any more or that you can tell the difference between a lie and—"

Evelyn literally leaped behind Niles and Teddy, slamming the door shut, then stood in front of it, arms folded. *Her face*—it was the radio-commercial color, it was wash-day white! "And the truth? Well, I know *you* for what you are—that's the truth! One more goddamn worthless *man* preying on decent women till they're in trouble. One more randy *animal* who can't *wait* to rush off to some two-bit *whore!*"

"Faith was no whore!" Niles said before he could stop.

Gazing blankly from Niles to Teddy and back, open mouth glistening with spittle at the corners, she was only momentarily stopped. She stared at Teddy with her eyes open so widely the lids seemed apt to split and seep blood. "Listen to what your father's saying, Teddy—that's how *you* were cut out to be, that's the lot awaiting *you*—wrecking the lives of innocent women with your masculine needs! Well, I tried to *save* you from your destiny, darling, to *rescue* you from becoming another goddamned man!" Her mouth and nose worked, searched for breath. From her depths, then, she summoned a smile Teddy knew very well. "Precious boy, I tried to save you from your very own *genes*."

"Teddy," Niles said clearly, "you're *not sick*."

Teddy glanced up, saw his father nod the promise, and dared to hope. But Dear wasn't through.

"With all my heart, little boy," she went on as she groped for his hand, "your very own Dear has sought to protect you from *life—life itself!*" Her moving fingers appeared to turn to shadow things when the lights in the hallway blinked, and Teddy's own lamp flickered. "To save you from despair, heartbreak, a dreadful fate—just by *letting you die!*"

Again the lights dimmed, all over Draden House. "You *aren't going to die*, Ted," Niles said firmly, definitively, walking toward his wife and raising his arm to push her aside if necessary. "And *she is not pregnant*. She's been telling you *awful* lies, son."

The lights went out all over the world.

Destination unknown, Dear whirled and ran from the room. Her outflung arm slammed the door shut with a sound like that of a car slamming headlong into a post.

It seemed to Teddy at that instant that his mother had taken away the light—taken it *with* her—and he fumbled the bedroom door open, dashed after her as quickly and swiftly as he could, wanting to get it back.

And long before she could have reached the living room, Teddy heard piano music rushing up the stairs at him, cannonades of sound. If Dear heard it, too, she'd realize someone else was playing *her* piano.

Then he knew who it was even before he descended the steps.

Coop sat at the grand piano, shoulders wider than those of any man Teddy had ever seen hunched in concentration, his waist-length sandy-colored hair dripping forward over the keys, hands like whole hams making chords that exceeded an octave and a half, banging away with such intensity and force that—if there'd been neighbors living in the distant but adjacent homes to Draden House—they would surely have objected. He was naked now, Teddy noticed, naked as the day he hadn't been born, except for a portion of the left arm of Teddy's shirt; and he was as dirty as any boy would be who never bathed, never *had* to bathe. From where Teddy stared at him—behind Dear, a few feet from the stairs—Coop emitted a smell that only a mother might love. It was what Niles had always called "ripe" (when he was hinting at Teddy), but was also—at the same time—goatish and gassy; baby-milk sour. In his aroma was a mixture of spoiled cisterns and swamps plus rags that had been used for unthinkable purposes.

He was clearly enraptured by the music he was making. Glimpses of Coop's long face revealed the pained but imminently orgiastic expression of some pianistic virtuoso on the verge of achieving levels of genius he could never again approach.

And it was the worst noise Teddy'd ever heard.

For another full second he couldn't understand *how* his pal Coop was mangling Dear's keyboard to

such an amazing extent. It sounded like a herd of elephants parading back and forth on the piano.

Then he realized how ol' Coop was doin it at the same time Dear started anew toward the piano, and just as Coop's big head began to turn in recognition toward them: *He was playin only the black keys.* There was no way to know why, but Coop's large fingers—short in proportion to the huge hands, larger by far than other digits Teddy'd seen—weren't *touching* the whites—the ivories—at all.

Coop peered through the lightless atmosphere of the living room in the direction of Teddy and Dear, obviously adjusting his vision after great concentration on his terrible musicianship, and an immense smile broke across the lower half of his kindred face that was—for Teddy—like the first closeup glimpse of a lunar crater.

"Did you *like* that, Dear?" Coop asked. He was so eager for approval—Dear's approval—that his shaggy head and neck seemed to crane toward the woman. "I made it up, Dear! Your darling little boy made it up *just* for *you*!"

Dear's face wasn't visible to Teddy; she was facing away from him. But what Teddy really couldn't tell while he waited in horror for whatever happened next was whether *Coop* was visible to *Dear*. He didn't know what might happen if *he* was the only one who was able to see how his pal from White River had grown past periods of shimmering insubstantiality to the solidity of ongoing life. Coop had proved more than once that he sure was real enough to destroy—whether he ever created anything himself, or not.

He might get real *mad*—do somethin to Dear!

"That was nice, a really nice try," Dear said, nodding. She went to him in a blur of tarnished yellow, speaking in her sweet voice (like she talked to cousin Cass), her manner all-business; instructive. "Scoot over and I'll show you the best way to play that."

Teddy gaped at them, frozen in place. With old jealousy, he watched Coop slip a foot or two down the piano bench, making room; saw his mother nestle down beside the hulking young form. He heard Niles over by the stairs, coming their way, but didn't turn to see his father.

"You see, darling," Dear said quietly, "you were playing only in *minor*." She reached out for Coop's grimy hands, held them just for an instant. "You're going to have to go wash them right after our lesson, you have dirt absolutely *ground* into your nails." Smiling, she positioned his hands—one of them made two or three of hers, Teddy observed—over the keys. "If you play all in minor, sweetheart, it will sound so very *sad* . . . like your little heart is breaking."

Coop's head bobbed. The expression he wore was one of great desire to please, to do just what he was being told. Looking at him, for Teddy, was a case of peering into a distorting mirror—a mirror that showed himself grown, but only bodily, physically, big and powerful to see but emotionally as tiny—as shrunken—as his Dear might want him to be.

For Coop, there was only the fond, beguiling, pretty mother with a thousand and one scraps of knowledge, talent, and circumscribing love.

For Mother, there was the new and clean sheet of musical manuscript paper on which any song—any lyric, any score—could be written and then played again and again, to her heart's content.

For each of them there was the faith of impossibility.

Coop lowered his hands to the piano keys with infinite, pitiable precision—desperate to touch the right keys, push the little vertical planks exactly as his Dear had shown him—to share her beliefs.

"Why, that's just *perfect!*" Dear praised him through the shadows.

Niles, beside Teddy, heard what Evelyn had said. Hearing nothing else, his frown descending so deeply between his brows that it could not leave him, he called, "Evvie, *honey*," and took a step forward.

The big boy seated before the piano burst into tears. "Oh, Dear," he wept with relief and joy, lifting his arms and massive hands toward the pianist, "what did I ever *do* to get a mother like you!"

He hugged his Dear hard—with all his strength and his blighted love—

And neither Teddy nor Niles ever saw him again after he'd dissolved.

Evelyn sounded as if she were strangling.

Teddy turned on the lamp by her chair, then ran with his father to help her.

For a long moment it seemed that she was fighting to get her breath. Her dark eyes were rolled back in her head, her arms were pressed against her sides, and she was *pointing*—with the fingers of one hand—toward the area above and around the piano.

She leaned back against Niles as if fainting or dying, and Teddy, taking her hand in his, felt tears start in his eyes.

At last, to Teddy's and Niles's relief, she began to breathe again and even mustered a faint smile.

"What happened, Evvie?" Niles asked gently, comforting her in the crook of his arm. "What is it?"

"I was . . . playing," she began, incredulous of expression, "just—noodling . . . and all at once, why—there weren't any *white* keys anymore. Isn't that the strangest thing?" She gazed at them with puzzlement. "I wasn't just looking at the keys," she went on. Abruptly, she tugged herself away from Niles, frowning. "I had begun to look around me, out into the room . . . and it was *dark*." Idly, Evelyn rested the heels of her hands on the piano. Her fingers automatically spread, danced restlessly as though of their own volition. "The darkness—the black keys—were everywhere." She lifted her head to peer from husband to son, swallowed. "Regardless of where I turned—the whole *world* was in a *minor key*. It was . . . *black*ed out."

Teddy and Niles looked at each other.

"I won't have this!" Evelyn said suddenly, jerking around to stare at Teddy. "I have an engagement to play, the people are expecting me!"

"Evelyn," Niles said tentatively, frettingly. He moved to stand closer to Teddy, to shield him. "Honey, I'm going to have to be honest with you. There really isn't—"

"I want to wear my good red dress." She took Teddy's hand and squeezed it. "I want you to be

proud of your Dear when I go out to play."

Niles leaned down to kiss her cheek. She smiled, used one finger to begin picking out a childish melody. "I'll get it," Niles said, adding softly, "Stay with your mom, Ted." He rumbled Teddy's hair.

" 'I have a little shadow,' " she crooned to Teddy, " 'who goes in and out with me.' " She paused in wait for him to sing it with her. When he just looked at her, she whispered sweetly to him, "Be my wonderful little darling and go turn on the light for your Dear."

Niles, starting across the room with the intention of phoning Dr. Biddle, called to her, "Do you know where I'd find your dress?"

"Of course," she replied. "I always know where *all* my things are."

Teddy found that she was staring intently at him, hungrily, and even though he began to retreat slowly from her physical reach, those brown eyes held him tightly.

"Well," Niles called again, "do you want to tell *me*?"

Dear went on playing the little tune for Teddy without breaking their gaze. "You'll find it in the foyer closet, Niles," she said. Then she ended the simple melody with the flourish of a Count Basie *plink, plink*. "*Alllll* the way at the back . . ."

When I die, you'll see me in a patch of sunlight on your floor.

— John MacLay

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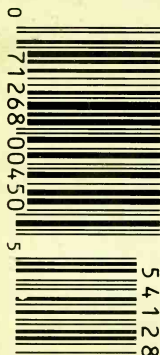
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