

On the day that Duvall came Benjamin Fermoye was twelve. In a year he had not grown an inch or gained a pound, and no one had noticed. He was not sick, but fixed, immured in the vastness time becomes when you are twelve, when a month's events can flash by in a day, when certain days, certain hours, even moments can seem to last, to go on and on and on for weeks, indeed forever.

Untouched, and for days on end, ignored, he was not a child and not a man. His only friend was six-year-old Louis, who lived next door. At home he had the television with its tears and love and death, lives he could turn on and off at will, much in the way he mastered his own existence, perceiving himself as a kind of image lodged in the airwaves of visible space somewhere between stars and rooftops, a voiceless speck that by the touch of a button or a word might be summoned, briefly, safely. It was in his dreams that he felt most threatened, so often lately pursued by the relentless drumbeat of dark footsteps and the warmth that oozed sticky and shameful and nameless, and always so unexpectedly, that he did not dare sleep in pajama bottoms, but in a towel, the same towel by morning hidden damp and wadded behind the bureau, then taken out again at night and wrapped stiffly coarse around his hairless groin and thighs.

It was late May on the day that Duvall came. It had been a raw, rainy spring in those mountains, where spring was never a season proper, so much as a narrow passage, a blink of the eye, a flicker of light from ice to green, where even in the valleys every bud, sprout, and shoot held so tight and fast that it seemed certain nothing more could ever bloom or thrive again. Nothing.

Omar Duvall had been in Woodstock the night before he came down over the mountain into Atkinson. He had sat in his car that last cold night, sleepless and shivering as he waited across the street from the little jailhouse, its white paint shimmering in the moonlight. How many times had he turned the key, countless, countless times, ready to flee, but then stayed instead, went on sitting, shivering, waiting, and did not know why. Later, he would tell how he had heard summer's first cricket. In here, he would say, striking his breast. It was a stirring, he said, feeling it before he heard it, and then had not really heard it at all, he would insist, but had felt it; no, not even felt it, for it was like a heartbeat, and who ever hears the beat of one's own heart, much less the beat of another's, he would say, his piercing eyes on the boy's mother. But Duvall said he had, and Benjamin would believe him, because through that same rawness had come the midnight dream of his father's drunken fists demanding entrance at every door and window, while inside the house, the boy dared not breathe or move on his scratchy towel, but lay listening to his mother's dead voice at the door, "Go home, Sam. Leave us alone." And then his sixteen-year-old brother, Norm, the man of the house for ten years then, his voice cold and menacing: "Get the hell outta here before I call the cops!" And then his seventeen-year-old sister Alice's quick gasp down the stairs: "No! Oh please, Norm, no!" her small voice quick like the sputter and hiss of a brief wick doused as the glass shattered inward onto the cellar floor. The shards would fall, they fall, they fell, piece by piece, all night long like the faucet's steady plink, plink, plink.

Benjamin lay awake listening to the floors creak and the strapping ping, and he began to hear from outside the faint sigh of warming sap race through the trees, from root to root, as the earth buckled with sudden shoots that tore through the ground all night long as that plink, plink grew nearer with dawn, and louder. Plink plink plink as the grass greened and thickened overnight

with the same suddenness of the new leaves that had not been at his window the night before, but were there then, that morning of the day that Duvall would come.

So of course the boy would believe Duvall when he described the stirring in his heart that night. There seemed no mystery in any of it, for he had always known that Duvall was on his way, his coming as inevitable as the summer's fiery sun, and as unstoppable.

It was early morning on Main Street. In the second-floor window of the big brown boardinghouse sat Judge Henry Clay. From here could be seen the roofs of the stores downtown on Merchants Row, and distant church spires, and farther on, the woolly green mountaintops hugging the valley. The Judge's right eye was closed, his left eye fixed blankly on the park across the street with its graceful elm trees and the pagoda-roofed bandstand built thirty years before, when he was mayor of Atkinson.

On the corner of the park, in his leased stand, was Joey Seldon, the blind man who sold popcorn and soda. On the opposite corner a dusty station wagon idled noisily at the red light. Inside the car were three dark men and a tall man in a white suit and straw hat. Suddenly the tall man threw open the back door and ran down the street. The car screeched around the corner after him in a burst of fumes and querulous voices. Joey Seldon cocked his head curiously.

Up in the window, the curtain fluttered, then blew across the Judge's face. A moment later, a tiny woman with bluish-white hair backed into the room with two stemmed glasses of orange juice on a mahogany tray. This was May Mayo, who with her younger sister, Claire, ran the boardinghouse. May quickly set down the tray on the table by the bed, then hurried to lock the door. "Oh dear," she gasped, seeing the Judge's head swathed in curtain gauze. She unwound the curtain, then wet her fingers and patted his mussed gray hair. She sat in the floral chintz chair next to his and drank her juice. When it was gone she picked up the Judge's glass and sipped daintily as she stared out at the empty park.

The Judge had been one of the town's most respected and influential citizens. But now only a handful of his old clients ever called him and even fewer came here. In this last year the Judge had failed rapidly; his legs buckled easily, and his mind grew keener with the past than the present as he fell in love over and over with every sweetheart, wife, and mistress he'd ever had, never noticing how each one spoke in May's shy giggly voice.

One evening as she was straightening his room, the Judge had seized her hand. "Lie down," he had whispered from the bed. "Lie down with me." And so she had, that night and every night until the last. In the morning she would steal down the hall in time to be roused by Claire's demanding knock on her own door.

She reached over now and touched his cold rigid hand. From time to time voices and footsteps moved along the corridor past the locked door, and in a light gay tone, she would address the Judge. "Such a day! At last! Summer's finally here. Really? I didn't know that. Well, what can one—"

Her voice broke off, and her hands cupped her ears. From the Judge's innards, there seeped another eerie hiss and with it, now, this first foul smell. Locking the door behind her, she hurried

down the dim corridor to her own room, then tiptoed back with her cut-glass atomizer of Sweet Lily. First she sprayed the rose-papered walls, the stained Persian carpet, the Judge's soft bed, his wardrobe of limp dark suits, his oak filing cabinets inured with a half century's pledges and breaches and secrets, and now, finally, she sprayed the good Judge himself, now entering his thirtieth hour of death.

Through the dawn and the pale empty streets, their voices rose and fell like squabbling birds.

"Slow down!" he said.

"Mass starts in five minutes and we're late," she said, hurrying on.

"Late 'cause of you," he called ahead. "Settin' pin curls jest to clean house and wash winders for a dollar an hour," he scoffed.

"Windues, not winders," she said.

"Windues, winders, you still gotta wash 'em," he muttered.

These were the Menka twins, Howard and Jozia. Howard was the Monsignor's handyman at Saint Mary's. Jozia worked across the street from the church for the Fermoyles family, whose housekeeper she had been for thirty years.

They began to climb West Street hill, Jozia's long legs carrying her yards ahead of her shorter brother. Every now and again he trotted to catch up. This morning she walked even faster. Today was trash day, and she wanted to finish her work early so she could go down and visit with Grondine Carson, the muscular garbage man. This time she'd make sure it was all done so Mrs. LaChance wouldn't get mad like last week when she came out on the porch and yelled down to Grondine, didn't he know a standing swill truck drew flies and oughtn't he hurry it up and move on, instead of bothering people that had plenty of work to do?

"Slow down!" Howard ran up to her. "What's your big rush?" He glanced away sadly when she did not answer. He knew what her big rush was, just as he knew the reason for the pin curls under her yellow kerchief and the blue perfume bottle in her pocketbook. He had seen her gooney-eyeing that old pigman Carson over the Fermoyles' barrels enough times now to know what was happening. Last Friday Carson had given her the blue perfume bottle. All weekend long, it sat on the kitchen table staring at him like a cold watery eye.

He shivered.

"Lookit them geraniums," he chattered now in a high-pitched nervous voice. "Not half's big as the ones I did." He trotted up to her again. "I put manure on mine. Miz Arkaday said not to, but I did." He giggled into his palm. "I did anyways."

Jozia glanced down at him. "You oughter do like you're told," she said. "Specially to Miz Arkaday."

“She ain’t my boss,” said Howard. “The Monsignor’s my boss. Not her!”

“Miz Arkaday runs the reckery,” Jozia said. “So she’s your boss to the Monsignor. Jest like Miz LaChance’s my boss to her mother. It’s called a ... a change of demand, Miz LaChance says.” She flicked him a haughty smile, then strode briskly on.

Howard paused, fists clenched, mouth trembling. He ran up to her. “You think you’re so smart. You think you know everythin’, don’t ya?”

“Shet your mouth,” Jozia snapped. “Or I’ll shet it for ya.” She did not break stride.

Hurt swamped his sluggish face. “Least on my job I ain’t got four bosses!” he yelled after her.

She turned. “Who’s four?”

“The two ya got and Sam and Mr. LaChance,” Howard said, pleased that she was waiting.

“Sam Fermoyle ain’t my boss. You know that! And Mr. LaChance, he don’t count. He ain’t nobody’s boss,” she huffed, and started walking again. Secretly she considered herself Mr. LaChance’s boss. She liked to think that Mr. LaChance was as scared of her as he was of his wife, Helen. “And pretty soon,” she called back to Howard, “you’re gonna have three bosses. Monsignor’s getting a new priest.”

“I know that!” Howard said. “I knew before you did!”

“You did not!”

“I did too!”

“Did not!”

“Did too!” he shouted, running up to her.

They were in front of the armory. Across the street on the corner of the park, Joey Seldon was stocking his red cooler with cans of soda. Like the milk truck rattling by and his radio songs, their voices were such a part of the blind man’s morning that he did not raise his head as they passed.

“Then how come you never said nothin’?” Jozia demanded.

“Cause!” Howard’s chin went out. “Monsignor said I’m not sposta say what I hear. What I hear’s God’s business and nobody else.” He looked up slyly. “And I hear all kindsa good stuff.”

Jozia rolled her eyes. “You’re jest full of it. Fack, you’re so full of it, I got to laugh. Ha ha!”

With Jozia in the lead, they continued across Main Street.

“There’s the Judge,” Howard said as they approached the Mayo sisters’ boardinghouse, where the familiar figure in the upper window stared past them.

“Finer man ever live,” Jozia sighed in the same tone Mrs. LaChance always used. As they passed the gabled and turreted house with its weedy front lawn and its striped awnings faded and torn, Jozia’s eyes blurred and her mouth sagged in a wet smile.

Her faraway look frightened Howard; she was thinking about that pigman again. He nudged her. “I know somethin’ else too. Somethin’ about Miz LaChance,” he said loudly.

She blinked. “You don’t know nothin’ I don’t know,” she sniffed. She held up two knobby crossed fingers. “Cause Miz LaChance and me’re jest like that. Jest like sisters almost.” A little smile perked Howard’s face. “I know that house ain’t hers. Not really.”

“Course it’s hers,” Jozia said. Now that they were a block from church she pulled off the kerchief and slipped the bobby pins from her hair. The little curls clung to her head like shiny round worms. “Hers and old Miz Fermoye’s, and someday, all hers.”

“Oh no, it ain’t,” Howard whispered. “Nossir!”

“Oh you’re jest so full of it, you make me wanna puke sometimes.”

Howard shuddered. Jozia knew he hated that word, puke. Just the sound of it turned his stomach.

“Whose house is it then if it ain’t hers?” Jozia smirked.

“Never mine,” he said, lagging behind.

“Never mine ‘never-mine’!” Jozia snapped. “Cause you don’t know, that’s how come ‘never mine.’”

“I do so know! I know better’n you!”

“You don’t know nothin’ better’n me! Fack, you don’t know nothin’ better’n anybody. Fack, you’re ’bout the dumbest person I ever knowed!”

“Oh yah?”

“Yah!”

“Okay! Okay! Then I’m not tellin’! And next time you wanna know who was that comin’ outta the reckery crying, go and ask ... somebody else.” Howard blinked. He had almost said, Go and ask Grondine Carson.

“See! You’re jest making things up again to get my goat.”

“Okay, then. It's Sam's house, that's whose house!” he blurted.

“Is not!” Jozia said bitterly.

“Is so!” His chin went way out this time. “And Miz LaChance's scareda him finding out. She told Monsignor, she said it's all a trust. That only the Judge knows. And her.”

There were a lot of things only Mrs. LaChance knew, like poisoning her husband's nice dog Riddles and making Howard bury him out in the backyard before Mr. LaChance got home from work. After that he'd quit working for Mrs. LaChance. A lady that could do that to such a nice dog could do anything to anyone.

Jozia shook her head so violently that her lips trembled. “You're crazy. You got it all messed up. It's old Miz Fermoyle's house. Then when she dies, it's gonna be all Miz LaChance's house. Jest yesterday Miz LaChance, she said to Sam, ‘This is my house,’ she said. ‘And I don't hafta put up with no crazy drunks.’” Jozie nodded vehemently. “That's what she said and everybody knows what a holy woman Miz LaChance is.”

“She ain't holy,” Howard muttered. “Jest cheap.”

“Cheap!” Jozia laughed that shrieky superior laugh of hers that so rankled her twin. “Cheap don't go buying two new doors for the church!”

“That's when I heard her!” Howard said. “After the man from the paper took the picture of her and Monsignor with the doors, and Monsignor said thanks, and Miz LaChance said it was least she could do. ‘Beside,’ she said, ‘better the money be going to the church than the barroom.’ And Monsignor said, ‘Acourse not,’ she could trust him. And Miz LaChance said she knew that, and Monsignor said how the church needs a new roof and the convent boiler's not gonna make winter and the Bishop's all outta money to help, so's the only way to do all them repairs is bake sales and bingo, only he don't have a church hall. And then he said how she and her mother's house being right across the street'd be perfeck and would she ever thinka selling to the parish. Acourse he shouldna even ask, 'cause he could never pay the whole price it would cost. And Miz LaChance said she was awful shamed to say it, and how nobody knew but the Judge and now him. She said the house was her brother's and her mother's, and after her mother dies, it's all Sam's house, and not one bit hers, after all her work, all her slaving. And Monsignor said how that ain't fair, and Miz LaChance said her mother spoiled Sam rotten, and how he was always the favorite and she was always the one to pick up the pieces, and Monsignor started saying he thought the phone was ringing, so he'd better go get it, like he does when he's sicka talking. And Miz LaChance started crying and saying how all she ever got was leftovers her whole life, nothing but everybody's leftovers, and if anything ever happened to her mother, she'd be out in a street. And Monsignor said, ‘Well, probably you'll be getting your mother's three tenement houses, Helen.’ And Miz LaChance really started bawling then, and she said no, she wouldn't even get them. She said they's going to Sam's kids. Each kid'd get one.”

Jozia blew her red nose into her kerchief. Tears streamed down her face. "Poor Miz LaChance," she sniffed.

"How 'bout poor you?" Howard said. "Soon's old Missus Fermoye's dead, they ain't gonna be no more job left. And then watcha gonna do?"

"I dunno and I don't care!"

"You gotta care!"

"You shut up, Howard! You jest shet your mouth!" she said, speeding ahead. "I'm so sicka you and your mean mouth!"

"Wait fer me!" Howard cried as she hurried down the walk to the white marble church. Jozia paused and shouted, "You jest go by yourself. And you jest sit by yourself, too. I'm sicka you!"

Howard bounded up the steps and reached past her for the door, just as she reared back at him with her purse, and the perfume bottle inside met his cheekbone with a stinging jolt. She ran into the church. Touching the welt, Howard tried to blink back tears before going inside. He staggered down the aisle to the front pew, their favorite one, but Jozia knelt steadfastly at the entrance and would not let him in.

At eleven o'clock the Judge's telephone rang.

"I'm sorry," May said softly, "but the Judge can't come to the phone just now." She glanced at the back of his head and lowered her voice. "Could I take a message?"

"If you would," replied a woman's stern voice. "This is Helen LaChance calling. Helen Fermoye LaChance. The Judge will know.... Would you tell him I'm having a ... a bit of a problem here."

"Of course," May said. In the background she heard a man's drunken bellow.

"Get back in your room," Helen LaChance hissed away from the phone.

"This is my house just as much as yours," Sam Fermoye cried. "And if I say she's fired, she's fired." His voice grew louder. "You hear me, Jozia, you're done! You're fired! Now get the hell outta my sight, you stupid, no good..."

"Excuse me," Helen LaChance said into the phone, then with her hand over the mouthpiece, her muffled voice warned the obstreperous man, "I've got the Judge on the line...."

"Lemme talk ... Judge!"

"Get away from me!"

“Give me the goddamn...”

With the dark struggle thrashing at the end of the line, May’s eyes held on the Judge as if to keep him from being toppled in the scuffle.

“Get back...”

“We’ll see who’s...”

“Don’t you touch me.... Judge! Judge! I want those committal papers signed....”

“Hey.” The drunken voice laughed, receding into the distance. “I was only kidding. You know what a kidder I am, Jozia. Jozia!”

“Get back in your room!”

A door slammed.

“I’m sorry,” Helen LaChance said breathlessly. “It’s my brother. He’s trying to fire my housekeeper.... Wait! You just wait! Where do you think you’re going?” Mrs. LaChance demanded suddenly. “Excuse me,” she said desperately. “But my brother just stormed out of here. Tell the Judge I don’t want Sam to see Mother’s papers. Tell the Judge ... oh ... oh, I’m sorry.”

The sun rose higher and higher and higher still, straight, straight up, until all at once, in a dizzying moment, there was heat. And from the percussion of glare and shadow, there erupted a blaze of bees on petals, a dazzling blur of colored balls, spinning spokes and racing bikes, a motionless whirl of skipping ropes and schoolyard screams, and the thump and clatter of quick dark burrowings, and scamperings, and the cicadas’ hard dusty hum, and the close ear-buzz of bugs and the tender flesh-bite of gnats, and the bone-clang of shovels sparking stone beneath the giddy, bright-flapping, tattered frenzy of birdflight, spinning faster and faster, nearer and nearer the sun. All over town winter-grimed windows rattled up, and front doors creaked open.

Omar Duvall crept from yard to yard, his white suit streaked with dirt, his straw hat shapeless in his sweaty clutch. They were still looking for him. He had spotted them twice since morning, cruising the streets slowly, slowly, with all the time and patience in the world to search until they found him.

The early-afternoon sun poured in on the Judge, who had shifted in the chair. His chin hung farther down on his chest as his shoulders hunched closer together.

The phone began to ring. It was Joey Seldon. From the window May could see the blind man down in the telephone booth that was across the street from his popcorn stand. He shouted to be heard over passing traffic.

“I’m sorry,” May said. “But the Judge can’t come to the phone just now.”



“Tell him it’s Joey,” he hollered. “He’ll come.”

“I’m sorry, but he’s not feeling very well.”

“He’s not sick, is he?” Joey’s voice tightened.

“A little.” May closed her eyes.

“Oh no!” Joey groaned. “He won’t miss the council meeting, will he? It’s tomorrow night.”

“Um ... I really don’t know,” May said, her eyes burning. There was no air to breathe.

“Look, tell him he’s got to make it. Tell him Greene just stopped by, and tomorrow night’s the vote. Tell him Greene says he’s got enough votes this year to turn down my lease for the stand.”

“Yes,” May muttered as if scribbling this all down. “Of course ... enough votes ... to turn down lease....”

“Tell him Greene’s on the warpath again....”

“...on warpath...”

“And tell him this—he’ll like this. Tell him Greene says it’s the end of an era....”

“End of an era ...,” May repeated dully, her gaze settling on the Judge’s contorted hands, the fingertips just beginning to blacken.

“Tell him it’s a matter of life and death,” Joey shouted over the rumble of Grondine Carson’s garbage truck as it accelerated up West Street.

“A matter of life and death,” came May’s vaporous whisper. There was a click, but she stood listening to the dial tone, steadied by its urgent drone.

A few blocks away in the School of Holy Innocents, Benjy Fermoye glanced out the window to see his father staggering through the schoolyard below. In the front of the room Sister Martin snapped her pointer against the green continent on the canvas map. They were supposed to know this for tomorrow’s exam; the major exports and imports of each country as well as their capitals. What she wanted them to learn was not just miles and oceans away, but worlds, lifetimes removed from Benjy, when all he could perceive of distance and other lives was the father who came looking for his younger son only when he was drunk, the father who at any moment might come bursting through that doorway.

“The capital of Venezuela is...” Sister Martin nodded at Linda Braller’s waving hand.

“Caracas,” Linda answered.

“The capital of Uruguay is...” Sister Martin looked at him. Just then the bell rang, and all heads bowed with the departure prayer. Benjy stared in horror as Mr. Lee, the school’s janitor and crossing guard, came out of the building and hurried after his father. Mr. Lee grabbed his father by the arm and managed to steer him back onto the sidewalk. Just as his father stepped into the road, a car turned the corner. Benjy looked up to see Sister Martin’s lips moving with the class prayer as she stared out at the schoolyard. Her eyes widened with the squeal of brakes. A man was shouting. Benjy lowered his head.

“Please, dear God,” he prayed, “it’s okay if he’s dead. But not here. Anyplace but here.” The second bell rang, and Benjy rose slowly as his classmates jostled up the aisles for the door.

“Benjamin! Wait!” called Sister Martin with a glance toward the window.

“Look at that guy out there,” Jack Flaherty called, pausing at the window. He pointed.

“Mr. Lee’s helping him up. Look, he’s so drunk he can’t even stand up. Let’s go see!” Flaherty cried, his newly deep voice cracking with delight.

When they were gone Sister Martin closed the door. He squirmed as she came down the aisle. The long black beads at her waist rattled against the desk as she sat in the chair next to his. She was a young nun with a deeply pocked face and bushy eyebrows that massed over the bridge of her large nose. He’d known from the first day of school that she didn’t like him. She was always singling him out, calling on him when he didn’t even have his hand raised. Try, she would urge, at least just try. Most of the time he knew the answers, but hated the silence in that terrible moment of everyone staring at him. She had finally given up. She wet her finger now and rubbed at an ink smudge on the desktop. He tried to remember if he’d done anything wrong today, but he knew he hadn’t. He never did. The classroom smelled of chalk dust and the heat of her black wool, warm brown apple cores, the limp remnants of bologna crescents and peanut butter and jelly crusts and lead pencil shavings that filled the black metal wastebasket.

“Benjamin,” she said, then paused, her coarse face reddening. Sweat leaked from under her stiff white wimple as she stared at him. “I just want you to know ... I ... I want you to know that I ... I understand. I know how hard it can be to have someone ... to have such a situation going on in your life. But you’re not the only one, Benjamin.” She tried to smile. “Believe me when I tell you that. We all have these, these crosses to bear. Do you know what I’m saying?”

He both nodded and shrugged, which seemed to irritate her. The shouting grew louder in the schoolyard. A horn tooted. He glanced down, relieved not to see his father.

“Look at me! Don’t look away. Look at my eyes. See my face. Do you see? Do you know what I’m saying? I’m homely.”

He was shocked. He stared at her.

“It’s a fact of life. I’m a homely person, aren’t I?”

“No,” he said, and she smiled.

“It’s my affliction, my cross to bear, just as your father’s condition is his affliction, his cross to bear. Benjamin, I said, look at me.”

He tried to keep his gaze on the solid furry line of her eyebrows.

“I want to help you, that’s all. But you have to let me help you. Please, Benjamin,” she said softly. She leaned closer. “Now, I know your father has a drinking problem, and when I saw him out there ...”

“That wasn’t my father.”

“...and how you seemed to shrink up...”

“That wasn’t him.”

She sighed, blinking. “Yes, it was. I know that was your father.”

He shook his head. “No, it wasn’t.”

She bit her lip and sniffed, and he was afraid she was going to cry. She reached across the aisle and put her hand over his.

“It’s all right, Benjamin,” she said softly. “Whatever he is has nothing to do with what kind of person you are. Do you know what I’m saying?”

“But that wasn’t him,” he said, grateful when her hand slipped away.

Benjy came up the street from school, walking close to the dusty hedges. In their yards, dogs lazed in pools of sunlight, panting under their wintery coats. Cars full of teenagers cruised the streets, windows down, convertible tops peeled back, radios blasting, voices shrill and heedless. From everywhere came music and motion and young mothers wielding squeaky baby buggies past porch rails bannered with bright scatter rugs, beaten and airing now in the first lilac’s welling sweetness.

He stopped dead. Ahead on the corner was Jack Flaherty with his hands cupped to his mouth. Flaherty stood in a circle of older boys, one of whom was Bobby Busco, sixteen years old, the same age as Norm, Benjy's older brother, but twice Norm’s size. Busco was lighting Jack’s cigarette. “Suck it,” Busco kept saying. “That’s it, deep! Deeper!” The younger boy’s face purpled until he spit the cigarette onto the ground in a spasm of choking and coughing. The older boys roared, laughing as Busco thumped Jack’s back so viciously that he dropped to his knees, gasping for breath.

Benjy started to walk fast. Just a few more yards and he would be around the corner.

“Lemme try it again,” Jack begged. “I took too much!”

“Yah ... Sure, Flaherty ... Go buy your own....”

“C’mon! That ain't fair. Gimme one!”

“So long, creep,” one of them called as they turned to go.

“Wait! Hey, wait, you said you’d... Hey, see that guy?”

Benjy’s father was coming toward him.

“That’s Norm Fermoyale's father.”

“Yah, I know, and look, that’s his brother.”

Benjy froze.

“Benjy!” his father called. “Jesus Christ, Benjy,” his father cried, throwing his arms around him. He reeked of liquor and sweat. His eyes were raw and his cheeks were dark with stubble. “You gotta help me. I gotta go see the fucking Judge, and I don’t feel so good right now.”

The boys watched from across the street. Someone was laughing.

“I can’t,” Benjy said. He pulled away and his father grabbed his arm, twisting it as he jerked him back. “I can’t,” he said again, and his father slapped the side of his head.

“What do you mean you can’t,” his father bellowed and hit him again. “I’m your father, and I need your fucking help, you fucking little weasel you...”

But now he pulled back with all his strength and was running as fast as he could from the shameful reach of that bawling howl and the boys’ stunned laughter.

Alice Fermoyale, Benjy’s sister, had gone straight from school to Cushing’s Department Store. She sat there now in the personnel office, picking the cuticle on her thumb as she watched Miss Curtis glance at the application she had just filled out. Alice smiled her nervous, gulping smile while Miss Curtis explained that the only summer opening left was in Cosmetics. “What we need is a girl with, well ... you know, to demonstrate the makeup ... we need someone who's a little more ... a little older.”

Alice’s thumb began to bleed. She sucked at it, then reached quickly for her books, which fell onto the floor as she stood up to go.

“Have you tried the Taylor Shop? They always seem to need...”

Alice nodded and backed toward the door.

“Well then, what about Birdsee’s Sweets.... You did?... What about the library? That might be more ... Oh. Well, what can I say? Better luck next time,” she called after Alice, then closed the door and sighed. “But I doubt it.”

The white-haired receptionist rolled her eyes and whispered, “I didn’t want to say anything, but that was Alice Fermoye, you know, Sam Fermoye’s daughter?”

“Oh!” said Miss Curtis, looking toward the door. “And Marie, the secretary from Briscoe’s Sporting Goods, that’s her mother, right?”

“I didn’t want to say anything,” the receptionist said, “but Lord knows, the last thing you’d want is him in here drunk, trying to see the daughter, the way he does his wife over at Briscoe’s.”

“Or the mother on my back,” Miss Curtis added. “I see her in church, and she’s always got this look, like she’s just waiting for somebody to cross her.”

“Well,” the receptionist said, “poor thing’s had a time of it, I guess. But then again, she asked for it, running around with a thirty-year-old man when she was still in high school.”

“You’re kidding!” Miss Curtis said.

“That’s the truth,” the receptionist said. “I remember. Everybody does. ’Course, no one ever says much, we all felt so bad for Mr. Cushing and our poor Nora. It was one week before the big wedding, and Sam Fermoye runs off and marries a teenage girl.”

Lester Stoner was waiting for Alice in front of the store. “Well?” He grinned hopefully. “Did you get it?” he asked, falling in step beside her.

Eyes wide, she shook her head no. Her face still burned.

“My father knows the Cushings,” Les was saying. “Maybe he could put in a word.”

She wished he’d shut up, always acting so superior to everyone else, when he could be such a creep sometimes, always hanging around the nuns. He could make her feel so inadequate. That was it, if he said one more word she’d break up with him.

“Come on, Alice, don’t feel bad. There’s a lot of jobs in town. You’ll see.”

She walked faster. It wasn’t his fault. She couldn’t believe she’d just done that, gone in there for a job, into Cushing’s, where of course they’d all known. She could tell, especially that old lady with her patronizing smile: I used to play bridge with your grandmother Fermoye. Say it! Say, You’re Sam’s daughter. Damn! Why had she done that? Why couldn’t she ever stand up to her mother? “Cushing’s!” she’d almost shrieked this morning, standing over her mother as she swept up the broken glass. He got drunk. He kicked in the cellar window and put his fist through the back door pane, so now she’d pay. Her, the one whose fault it all was, would always be.

“Cushing’s,” her mother’s dead voice repeated, not even looking up, daring her to argue, daring her to be ashamed, daring her to be afraid, for fear was the worst offense. Cowards were afraid,

and damn it, Marie Fermoye wasn't working her ass off to raise cowards, so if her younger son Benjy was afraid of water, then he'd damn well spend every day this summer at the public pool, and if her daughter was afraid of what people might think, then she'd march straight into Cushing's to offer herself, Alice Fermoye, Sam's daughter; Sam and Marie; the worm in her mother's unwed belly, the reason for it all-her, the shameful, sinful, lustful reason. Her brother Norm was lucky. He wasn't afraid of anything. She envied him his good looks, his strength, his confidence, his quick brutality, his rawness that was so much like hers, their mother's.

"How about Birdsee's?" Lester was saying as they waited for the light to change.

She shook her head.

"The luncheonette!" he said as they passed Eunice Bonifante's restaurant on the corner. Eunice was his aunt. She was a widow now, and, so the rumor went, having an affair with Lester's father, her dear sister-in-law's husband.

"I'd hate that," she said. "All those people at the counter staring at you."

"They don't stare at anyone," he said. "They just stare. Like my father does. He chews and he stares." He looked at her and seemed to realize for the first time how upset she was. "What's wrong, Al?"

"I hate this town!" she said, walking faster now, because her eyes were filling with tears. "I hate these dinky stores and these crummy streets and people watching you every minute; like right now, every place we go by, somebody's looking out, saying, 'There's that Fermoye girl, what's her name, she never says two words, and that's Lester with her, his father's Sonny Stoner, the chief of police, and Lester is valedictorian of his class, such a smart boy, wonder what he sees in her!'"

Lester laughed. "They don't say that!"

She looked at him. "Did you ever wonder what it would be like to be invisible? You could do anything you wanted and go anyplace and no one'd know."

Lester stepped in front of her now and whispered, "Yah, and you could see what everyone else was doing. Can you imagine, being invisible up at the Flatts, looking in all the windows at the parkers." He grinned, his small bright eyes glowing the way they had in his darkened kitchen when he had her listen to the calls coming over his father's police radio. "It's better than TV," he had whispered above the static. "It's almost like being God," he'd said, laughing.

A garbage truck rumbled down the hill, leaking rancid juices from its seams, its stench everywhere.

"I could get a job at the lake!" she said suddenly. "Mary Agnes said there's a couple of waitressing jobs at the hotel. She said I could...."

“No!” Lester said, stopping in the middle of the sidewalk. “I’ll never see you!” His voice quivered, reminding her of a chemistry class last year when some kids switched beakers on Les, and when he put his on the Bunsen burner, the smoky explosion of ashes blackened his face.

She didn’t know what to say. They’d only been going out for a month and Lester was her first boyfriend. He looked the way he had in chemistry that time, mad enough to cry.

“They all stay in this dumpy cabin behind the hotel,” he said, his eyes blazing with indignation. Spittle frothed the corners of his mouth. “And there’s no adult supervision and there’s drinking every night and parties! And I know for a fact Mary Agnes had Tony spend at least one night there last summer, because his mother’s call came into the station, and I heard my father on the radio send Victor out in the cruiser, and sure enough, that’s where they found him. With her, Mary Agnes, that tramp!”

“Les! She’s not a tramp.” Mary Agnes had been her friend since second grade. But in the last few years Mary Agnes’s best friend had been Tony.

He glared at her, his mouth puckered sourly. “Take my word for it! She’s a tramp and I know!” He always seemed to know all that was bad or tainted in town. Alice wondered how many calls he’d heard concerning her father. Thank God, Norm hadn’t called the police last night.

Lester walked alongside her in rigid silence. Pale-eyed and pink-skinned, he was always too serious, too smart, too polite, too good. Tall and slim, he moved with this ramrod intensity that adults valued as ambition, high-mindedness, an intensity his classmates had always mocked.

The closer they got to Lester’s house, the more distant her troubles became. Here, the air was sweet and green and still. Lester’s shoulder brushed hers and her eyes blurred and her legs felt weak. Her insides burned. Yesterday he had touched her breasts for the first time. Neither one spoke now as they came up the brick walk toward the trim white Cape.

Inside, her eyes raced hungrily over the living room, with its gold plaid sofa and matching club chairs, its rust-and-green braided rug. The lampshades were patterned with eagles, as was the pale green wallpaper, its gold eagles perched atop crossed fifes and drums. She’d give anything to live in a house like this, where the slightest drip of a faucet or squeal of a door would not be allowed. She wished they could sit up here, but Lester always hurried her downstairs to the paneled rec room.

She waited down here now while he ran up to relieve his mother’s day nurse. Lester’s mother had been sick in bed since Easter. Though no one would speak the word, they all knew it was cancer. Alice put on her glasses and spread her books and notes over the coffee table. Finals started tomorrow, but it was no big deal for seniors. Most either had their jobs lined up or knew what colleges they were going to, so these final grades wouldn’t even really matter.

Alice had been accepted at the state university, but after her mother’s initial thrill had come days of depression about where the money would come from. It came up daily now, in every

conversation. Lester had also been accepted at UVM, but his father wanted him to go to Castleton State so he could be near his mother these last few months.

According to her doctors, Mrs. Stoner wouldn't live to see Christmas. Alice had heard that from her brother Norm, whose best friend Weeb's mother was Mrs. Miller, the nurse Les was showing out the front door now.

"The pills were by the bed again," Mrs. Miller was saying. She sounded irritated.

"I had to leave early. I had my first final," Les said. Alice glanced toward the stairs.

Lester had left early to walk her to school. He hadn't had a final.

"I told you yesterday, Les. They're awful strong."

"I know. I forgot."

"And she's in so much pain now, sometimes she can't think straight. She's liable—"

"I'll go put them on the dresser," Les said.

"In the bathroom's best," Mrs. Miller was saying. Her voice seemed to be out front now. "Then when she needs one, somebody'll have to get it."

"I'll go right up and move them now." As soon as the front door closed, Lester bounded down the stairs and onto the couch.

"Your mother's pills!" she said.

"She's sound asleep," Les said, leaning against her as he reached up to turn out the light. She took off her glasses, surprised; usually there was the pretense of homework for at least fifteen or twenty minutes. He fell against her, clenching her arms so tightly that they hurt.

"Don't go," he begged, kissing her eyes, her cheeks, her neck. "Please don't go to the lake," he whispered against her lips. "Don't leave me alone here, please." His mouth was open, his tongue shoving against her tongue until she finally opened her mouth. It was strange the way he could be so irritating, such a sissy, until he was down here in the dark, pressed against her, kissing her so frantically, running his hand so hard up and down her thigh that she couldn't think straight, couldn't even picture what he looked like, and for a moment as he pushed her bra up over her breasts, she wasn't even sure who he was. This was a different Lester. She had this power over him. She could make him do bad things. A sharp ache filled her chest and she was afraid she was going to cry.

Downstairs, the doorbell rang. The boardinghouse shook with Claire Mayo's heavy footsteps. Claire was the younger sister, square-jawed and stocky, the one with the head for business. It was Claire who berated the grocer's delivery boy for worms in the lettuce or the linen service for stained sheets.



“You will not!” she barked from the front parlor. “You most certainly will not! This is a—”  
A man's heedless voice engulfed hers.

Upstairs, May drew the afghan over the Judge's lap. Her wrinkled fingers lingered on the swollen crotch. Her breath grew short and her ears began to ring and her heart began to pound until the whole house throbbed with its blind ruckus.

When the door flew open, she did not clearly see or hear them, though she knew they moved about the room in a commotion of heat and anger.

“He's dead!” her sister, Claire, wailed, falling back against the bedpost. “The Judge is dead, sister. He's dead!”

“Don't look at me,” Sam Fermoye cried, lurching back out the door. “I didn't lay a hand on him. As God is my witness,” he sobbed drunkenly as he tripped and staggered down the stairs and onto the street and through the horn-blowing traffic with dogs snapping at his heels and little boys stumbling and laughing after him, teetering on curbstones, bouncing off telephone poles.

May opened her eyes and watched curiously as they careened through the park, where Joey Seldon cocked his doughy head to hear the little boys parrot Sam, “The Judge is dead! Jesus Christ, the Judge is dead!”

Joey Seldon spun dizzily in his ramshackle stand. “Wait!” he called. “Tell me what happened!” he shouted, pawing the air with enormous hands. He groped for the door, then made his way to the sidewalk and waited, listening up and down the street for someone to tell him what had happened.

To make sure he wouldn't run into his father again, Benjy came through the woods that horseshoed the eastern edge of town and sloped from the wild flatlands that were the foothills of Killington Mountain. He had been in here before with his brother, Norm. But now, as he ran alongside Moon Brook, he realized that this was the first time he had ever been in these woods alone. If he stayed with the brook, at some point soon it should curve around a huge boulder, which would put him almost directly behind his street.

In here the heat was thinner, the trees pale with new growth and far enough apart so that sunlight slanted down in wide silvery bars. He stopped running now and began to walk. His eyes flickered warily to the left, toward that menacing ridge of pine woods beyond which lay the Flatts, where people lived in tin-roofed shacks and trailers. They were all blonds and redheads with strange first names like Bonaparte and Fantasia and Benito and Hemingway and Coolidge and Blue. Their last names might be Carper or Mansaw or Hunsen or Kluggs or Wallace, but they shared the same flattened brows and close-set, palely lit eyes, and ghostly pallor that seemed to devolve, not only whiter with each brood, but thinner; so that there glowed in their flesh now that cold depthless translucence of blue ice, like wintry mountain runoff, that marked them as offspring of cousins, so that husband and wife often looked enough alike to be brother and sister.

Though she wasn't related to any of those people, Benjy's own mother had lived for a time in the

Flatts, in a small house her father had rented from Grondine Carson, the pigman, whose hog farm was next to the town dump. His feet were wet, his shoes heavy with the ooze of the spring forest. The usually narrow cut of the brook had swamped in every direction through the wild laurel and the white cedar and stunted pines, and nowhere could he see the boulder.

He had come too near the Flatts. Here, the trees grew closer, and he thought he could hear the eerie squeal of pigs in the distance. He went on a few feet more, heading for a rocky incline; then he stopped and listened, certain he had just heard a voice. No, he kept telling himself as he climbed, it's the pigs. It's got to be the pigs. It couldn't be his father.

Suddenly, when he had reached the top of the hill, he darted back and fell to one knee, crouching in the tangled sweep of a willow tree. Below, in the clearing, stood two men, a young black man and a tall, barrel-chested white man in a white suit and a straw hat, which he pressed to his chest. The young man was shorter and wiry, and now as he moved catlike toward the white man, Benjy thought he saw the sharp glint of metal in his right hand.

"Don't!" the white man said. "Please! I been your friend."

"Which is why you took out your knife, right?"

"I was only tryna make you listen to reason," the white man said in a Southern accent, a drawl much like the young man's.

"Well I got the knife now, so it's your turn to listen, Omar," said the young man.

"First put that down!" the white man said, waving the hat. "You hear me, boy. Down, I said!"

"I don' wanna hurt you," the young man warned. "Just give it over, so's we can get on home."

"Now, Earlie." The white man laughed weakly. "You and your grandpa been paid, and Luther, too. Fair and square, what more do you want?"

"You know what I want," the young man growled.

"You got the car and everything I own in it!" the white man whined, wagging his head. His slick black hair gleamed in the sun. "I gotta have a few dollars. I deserve th—"

"Just give it over," said the young man, taking another step. "Give me the money!"

"I been good to you!" the white man cried, then whipped his hat at the stealthily approaching young man. "I put shoes on that old man's feet, and I put food in your bellies, and you know, every time you asked, Earlie, a woman in your bed, and—"

"Give it!" the man named Earlie snarled.

“And back there I could’ve run off when they started waving that woman’s check around, but I didn’t, did I? Not only that, but I went and paid bail. I sat outside all night. All night long, waiting for the courthouse to open. I could’ve run, but I didn’t! I could’ve told them it was Luther that changed them figures, but-”

“No, you couldn’t!” Earlie cried, and stamped his foot in outrage. “’Cause Luther don’t read and Luther don’t write!” He gestured angrily and his palm flashed white in the sun. “You was the one that changed them checks and the old man damn knows it now. Just like he knows they ain’t no black old folks’ home, and they ain’t no Stankey Magazine Company, Incorporated. They’s all lies you made up, just like them Bibles we been giving, half the pages empty and no damn good, like you, Duvall!” The young man moved closer. “And I bet none of them subscriptions ever once came to them people. ’Cause you kept all that money, didn’t you? And no five dollars neither. Ever’ check for five we brung back you changed to fifty, didn’t you? Didn’t you?” he snarled, hunching closer.

“Now you just settle down,” the white man sputtered. “You’re makin’ a mighty big commotion outta one desperate little incident,” he said, sidestepping; and so did the young man, in a rippling crouch, shoulder muscles taut beneath his bright red-and-yellow diamond-patterned shirt, every step pacing the white man’s, another step, and another, until they were directly below the boy, whose gaze fixed in horror on the blade in the young man’s hand. Just then, there came the high-pitched squeal of a rooting sow. The young man’s head jerked up and his yellow-shot eye snagged on the boy’s thin face peering down through the pale willow leaves. And in that instant of hesitation, the white man, seeing his chance, pivoted, then sprang toward the pine woods, toward the pig farm. The young man wheeled after him, and then they were both gone. And so was the boy, back down the hill, and through the woods, his heart pumping his heavy wet feet until they met pavement, one street over from his own.

Benjy sat on his sagging back steps with six-year-old Louis Klubock, who lived next door. It had been a terrible day, but he felt safe now in this naked heat with chubby Louie beside him and the Klubocks’ old black Lab dozing at their feet. Delicate music drifted across the driveway from the open windows of the newly painted yellow house as Mrs. Klubock played the piano and sang in a high sweet voice. Sometimes when Mr. Klubock joined in, Benjy’s heart would almost split in two with joy and longing. Mr. Klubock was at work now in the butcher shop. Louie was lucky. He had everything.

“My uncle Renie used to have a dog,” Benjy said, reaching down to pet Klubocks’ dog. “His name was Riddles. My mother said my aunt poisoned him. But Uncle Renie said he just took off. He’s got a cat now in his store. But it’s a secret cat. Nobody knows about him.” Benjy knelt down and scratched the white ruff on the dog’s chest. The dog rolled onto its side.

“I like cats,” Louie said.

“We had one once, a kitten, a little white one.”

“Yah, I remember that,” Louie said. “Your mother brought him home and then she took him away. How come she did that?”

“I don’t know.” Careful. With so much not to tell, so many feints and dodges, and all the bobbing and weaving, he could feel his brain become this fluid, slippery, shimmying mass behind his eyes. “She says cats are the worst pets of all.” He continued scratching the dog’s chest. “She says they’re just like people. All they care about’s themselves. She says boy cats are the worst, ’cause they’re just like men, staying out all night and getting into fights and dragging home in the morning just to have a place to sleep.”

Klubocks’ dog got up then and lifted a leg and wet on the foundation. Its yellow stream trickled down the newspaper that was stuffed into the broken cellar window.

“Your father broke that,” Louie said.

“I know,” Benjy said, watching the dog cross the driveway, then disappear into the coolness of the lilac bushes that bloomed at the edge of Klubocks’ yard.

“He was drunk,” Louie said.

“I know.” Some things just couldn’t be bluffed.

“Your father’s always drunk,” Louie said, watching him.

“Not all the time.”

“Do you hate your father?” Louie asked suddenly.

“Why, do you hate yours?”

“Yes!” Louie said, and Benjy laughed. “He makes my mother cry. Sometimes the phone rings and she picks it up, but nobody’s there. Just some breathing. My father said she likes the calls. He said she likes men to look at her and call her up, and she always cries when he says that.”

Louie’s small round face moved in close to Benjy, who stiffened back. The dog was growling in the lilac bushes. Now Mrs. Klubock’s music sounded heavy and sad. He thought he heard squealing tires.

Louie was telling him how they might have to move to Arizona because of his father’s swollen hands and knees. His mother had cried because all her life she was scared of snakes. She said a lady in Arizona was going to the bathroom once and she heard this splashing noise in the toilet and she jumped off the seat and this ten-foot rattlesnake was swimming in the pee water. “You think that’s true?” Louie asked, his eyes suddenly raw and watery. “You think a snake can come up the toilet like that?”

Benjy leaned forward, looking toward the white blur turning the corner of the driveway. It was the same man he had seen in the woods. His chest was heaving, and his face was fiery red, and the cuffs of his pants flopped with mud.

“Is that your father?” Louie asked as the man stumbled down on one knee, then scrambled frantically to his feet with a backward glance.

“No!” Benjy said, his eyes wide with fright.

The lilac bushes quaked with the dog’s barking. A horn sounded on the next block, a long steady blare.

“Don’t tell them niggers I’m here, boys,” the man panted as he ran behind the house.

“What’re niggers?” whispered Louie.

“A Negro,” Benjy hissed, eyes shifting between the road and the back of the house. “A black man and he’s got a knife!” he whispered.

“He’s got a knife!” Louie wailed, bolting off the steps into his house.

The music wrenched to a stop. Moments later, Mrs. Klubock held up Louie to her kitchen window. “See,” she said loudly. “It’s only Benjy!”

“A nigger’s gonna come,” Louie wailed. “The man said so, and he’s got a knife!”

“No, no. It’s only Benjy,” she soothed, putting the boy down, then coming back to the window. “I’m surprised at you, Benjy. Scaring Louis like that! I think Mr. Klubock’s right. I think it’s about time you hung around with boys your own age and left Louis alone!” She slammed the window shut on Louie’s screams. The dog’s barking had subsided into a low steady growl.

Benjy sat frozen on the step. He sat for a long time, staring up at the Klubocks’ kitchen window. In its reflection was the crooked chimney of his own house. He scratched a bite on his arm and the little hairs bristled. He slid to the end of the step and glanced around the corner of the house, relieved to see no one there. He ran inside and locked the door. He turned on the television and sat on the couch, his knees drawn to his chin. The house filled with strange crackling, scratching, moaning voices. He turned the volume up as loud as it would go and stared at the familiar faces on the screen. As the scratching grew louder, he felt himself grow smaller and tighter.

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