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Speak to the earth

Sherry Van Zante
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SPEAK TO THE EARTH

A Project Report

Presented to

the Faculty of the Department of English

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Sherry Van Zante

May, 1992

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

SPEAK TO THE EARTH

by Sherry Van Zante

This creative writing project falls into the literary genre known as a short story cycle. It is a set of rather simple individual stories that link together to form a more complex whole. The introduction explores some of the characteristics that distinguish this work from a short story or a novel, including such unifying forces as repetition of characters, themes, character types, and specific images. In this cycle we see the maturation of two protagonists. The work begins with the character Viney, develops chronologically, and ends with her daughter, Imogene. Imogene appears in some of Viney's stories, and Viney appears in some of Imogene's; the effect is of overlapping concentric circles. Both protagonists begin as children and develop to adulthood through a series of initiations. Each story captures a moment in the character's life that is essential to the character's development.

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But ask the animals, and they will teach you,
or the birds of the air, and they will tell you;
or speak to the earth...

Job 12:7-8 (NIV)

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Introduction

This creative writing project falls into the literary genre known as a short story cycle. It is neither a novel nor a collection of short stories; rather, it "is a set of stories so linked to one another that the reader's experience of each one is modified by his experience of the others" (Ingram 13). Each of the stories included here is complete in itself, but is combined with the other stories to create the larger unit in order to present a bigger thematic picture. The stories are simultaneously independent and interdependent as "the parts of the cycle remain as important as the book's overall effect" (Mann 12). Characters, themes, character types, and imagery repeat in the individual stories lending unity to the work as a whole.

In her book, The Short Story Cycle: A Genre Companion and Reference Guide, Susan Mann states that short story cycles are "predominantly about the maturation of a single protagonist as stories are joined together to describe the development of a young person from adolescence to maturity" (9). Other types of cycles "are devoted to the maturation of a 'composite identity'" (10), "examine the role of art or the artist," "concentrate on a particular setting or

community," or "are unified by a limited period of time to evoke an historical epoch" (12). This cycle does not clearly fall into any one of these types.

The stories in this cycle are not connected by place. The extended family of characters is fragmented and joined and fragmented again. True to Twentieth Century American realities, they are mobile.

In this cycle we see the maturation of two protagonists. The stories of these two main characters are arranged in a chronological sequential development as we start with Viney and end in the next generation with her daughter Imogene. Concentric circles meet and overlap as Imogene appears in some of Viney's stories and Viney in some of Imogene's. When Imogene's daughter, Margaret, enters her mother's life, we feel that the story will flow on beyond these pages as the multi-generational legacy continues. The inclusion of Imogene's grandmother, Grandma Hammonds, shows the current's movement in the past as well. This rippling effect of influence through time is apparent in the connection of one generation to the next and the next. It becomes clear what power simple lives have over the way future lives are lived.

These are stories written by a woman about women, so it may

not be surprising that they center on relationships as the main unifying force in the cycle. Relationships with men and siblings are handled, but the primary relationship explored is between parent and child, specifically between mother and daughter. While each story in the cycle is fairly simple, the dynamics of the complete cycle is more complex.

The readers see both Imogene and Viney hiding from one another while at the same time they struggle to reveal themselves. The human desire to be known and the fear of being known are reflected in the behavior of these characters throughout the cycle, and the Twentieth Century theme of isolation is clear. The very form of the short story cycle with the gaps between stories emphasizes isolated lives, "the theme of loneliness, the motif of walls between people, the lack of communication" (Mann 11) as the characters exist and are revealed only in the restricted, fragmented world of single stories. Despite the isolation theme, threads of anger and tenderness hold one generation to the next.

Taken as a whole, the work is also a peek through the keyhole at the nature of women. Each story captures a moment in the character's life, and the two groups of stories capture the personalities of the two major characters. Traditionally, women are

taught and most instinctively long to be "the eternal nourisher of children, of men, of society" (Lindbergh 45). The Earth Mother is the character type in literature shaped after this female drive to give. "It is she who gives birth, nurtures and renews the world. Her prime motive is to serve others, even should it endanger her own well-being. She is usually plump, robust and filled with simple knowledge" (Sweet 24). The two main characters in these stories are examples, though not pure examples, of this character type.

Both Viney and Imogene are simple people who are led by their beliefs, and in many cases they simply do the things they do through an intuitive wisdom. They manage to reach beyond the circumstances of their lives and hold onto their integrity. They find meaning in life because their vision is simple and clear. That vision is probably best exemplified in the apparition of Grandma Hammonds in "A Domesticated Cat": "Suddenly, Grandma Hammonds rises up out of the coals and shakes her finger at Imogene. She says, 'Now Imma, remember we're here to serve not to be served. Go wash their feet.'" Both Viney and Imogene were nurtured by this Earth Mother type.

Mother Hammonds appears also at the end of the first story in the cycle; here she is a promised savior who will provide an escape

and a fostering care for Viney. In the next story she is at Viney's side coaching her through childbirth. Then she is Viney's support at Will's graveside. She is again the caretaker and protector in "The Battering of Wings," and it is in this story that we see how she came to raise Imogene. Mother Hammonds' death occurs during one of the gaps between stories and is never mentioned by the other characters, but her powerful influence is made very clear in Imogene's firelight vision.

Viney is the least pure Earth Mother type in the cycle. Her instinct to give is stifled by the events in her life as she cares for a terminally ill mother, is sexually molested and then rejected by her father, loses her first husband, and is physically abused by her second husband. Still, Earth Mother behavior is manifested in her life as we see her caring for her father and animals in her youth, giving birth, making biscuits, fleeing with her children; and, in old age, taking her grandchildren into her lap.

Imogene emerges as the strongest character in the cycle, and despite the fact that as a child she is a tomboy and hates being a girl, she is an Earth Mother. She has a sensitivity for life, even the small lives of mice and rats; she is empathetic to all forms of suffering and is in touch with the earth. Through the stories we see

her develop by way of an internal, natural growth. The title of the cycle and the scripture it is taken from enforce this idea of developing an unintellectual knowing. Imogene has an inner strength which the outer circumstances of her life can not touch.

All three women live by a simple creed: Work hard, be honest, love your man and never leave him, and be kind to the creatures of the earth. This simplicity is at the core of this cycle as it focuses in on small lives: ants, a snake, mice, rats, a baby calf.

In keeping with Earth Mother characteristics, the stories repeat images of nursing and of milk: a mother nurses a child, Viney milks a goat, Imogene feeds the baby calf as she prepares for death.

In mythology, Diana or Artemis, the moon goddess, represents such aspects of women's lives as childbirth, and she is the goddess of young living things, particularly young animals. Consequently, this cycle is full of moon imagery. The moonlight defines Viney's father's form as he comes in the night to tell her he's sending her away. The full moon shines through the open window and keeps Viney company just before she goes into labor. In "The Battering of Wings," daylight filters in "lighting the barn's night like a half-moon" when Viney goes to prepare to flee with her children. In "And There Was Light," Viney has "the light of ten full moons in her fingertips."

"Hollow Moon" expresses the emptiness of Imogene giving birth to a stillborn child, and the silver moon illuminates the trumpets of the daffodils in "Twilight Cocktail."

Eye contact is also important in these stories as characters blink or stare at one another. This imagery obviously reflects the longing for intimacy and the fear of obtaining it in "The Stare Down." In many of the stories, closing one's eyes shows an unwillingness to learn, while keeping them open expresses the opposite desire.

Hand imagery is also repeated, as is water imagery and the idea that relationship is like a dance. This repetition of imagery is one of the generic signals that unify the individual stories into a larger whole, along with the repeating characters, themes and character types.

Another feature that characterizes this book as a short story cycle is the title, which sets it apart from a collection of short stories, which normally carries the name of one in the collection along with "and other stories."

Finally, "central to the dynamics of the short story cycle is the tension between the one and the many." This work clearly strives to display "a double tendency of asserting the individuality of its

components on the one hand and of highlighting, on the other, the bonds of unity which make the many into a single whole" (Ingram 19).

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THE FAMILY

I

VINEY

The Course of Events

The year Viney Belle Calip turned thirteen she watched her mother die, started menstruating, and was deflowered. In that one year she learned that we all walk through "the valley of the shadow" sooner or later, that women must endure "the curse of Eve," and that being known in the Biblical sense hurts the first time. That year Viney was thirteen and a woman in all respects, but at the same time, she was a girl without a mother, isolated on a farm, with no one but her father to teach her.

A few months after her mother had gone to rest on the banks of the Jordon, gone to that glorious place where pain and suffering are no more, Viney was drying the supper dishes. Her father was sitting at the table smoking. This was their ritual. Every evening while Viney washed the dishes, she would watch him make up a roll-your-own. While she dried the dishes, he would smoke it and watch her. The ritual was silent, but it had a rhythm like a dance.

Normally, both partners moved to the silent music until the dishes were in the cupboard and the cigarette butt was crushed in the zinc mason jar lid her father used as an ashtray. But tonight he

broke the rhythm.

"Leave the rest of those dishes to air dry and come sit with me."

Thinking there must be news, she hung the dish towel on its hook and went to the table where she slid into the chair he had scooted out for her. For a while he just smoked, inhaling and blowing out, deep and slow. She waited and gradually, breath by breath, forgot to wonder about the news. She loved to watch him smoke. It seemed as if the smoke cleansed him. It went in, swirled around and left, leaving him empty, purified by fire. After he started smoking nothing seemed to matter, for that day nothing mattered any more. Tonight, it did not matter that one of the new heifer calves wouldn't take to nursing or that another one was scoured. It did not matter that the silage corn was a foot too short for this time of year or that the wheat market had fallen off. Though he had nearly half his land in wheat, for now, it did not matter.

He smoked until the ash was long on the cigarette, almost falling, before he flicked it in the jar lid. Then he took Viney's hand, pulled her to his lap, and drew her in against his chest.

His chest pushed up under her as he inhaled and fell in little jerks as he puffed out rings. She turned to watch him try to blow the new rings through the old ones. They moved out, thinned, and

vanished. They were fragile like people.

He exhaled. "I don't know what I would have done without you. I couldn't have made it through your mother's illness and death without you. You've been a regular little woman keeping house and caring for me." He smoked the cigarette down to a stub and crushed it out.

Viney felt her cheeks get hot.

"You did a fine job nursing her. No one could have done better." He hugged her with both arms.

She started to cry. The tears were big and silent. They wet her cheeks and made her snuffle.

He started rocking her slowly from side to side. "Stop crying now. She's gone to a better place."

"Oh Pa, I'm not crying for her. I'm glad she's gone. I'm terrible, but I'm glad she's gone." She pressed her face against the smooth skin at the base of his neck. "I was sick of caring for her."

"You're not terrible. Don't you go saying such things." He pulled her tighter against his chest and kept rocking, rocking. "You've been cooking and cleaning and caring for her since you were eleven years old. She was just sick so long she wore you out. Stop crying now. You did right by her. We both did." She slid her arms

around him and held on tight.

He pulled the ribbon from her hair and loosened her braid, combing it out with his fingers. Then he began to pet her hair, rubbing it slowly in long strokes down her back.

He took her face between his hands. His big hands were rough and smelled of the sweet Virginia tobacco he bought every month at the store in town. His pillow case and sheets and clothes all had this same smell.

He kissed her forehead. "I love you, baby. You're a fine little woman." He kissed her cheeks, first one then the other. "And you're so pretty with your dark eyes and light hair." With his thumbs he brushed the tears from her lower lashes. Her eyes glistened.

"Your eyes are almost black. They're like two burn holes." He pressed her back against his chest and rested his chin on her head. "My poor baby. You've felt all the hardship of being a woman."

He held her and held her and after a time, she realized he was holding his breath. She held hers too. He sighed and lifted her face to his. He kissed the end of her nose. He kissed her chin. He kissed her lips, pressing his mouth hard against hers.

Viney was awake the next morning when the birds began to sing. In the stillness just before dawn, she tried to understand what

had happened. She remembered how he had unbuttoned her shirtwaist and sucked on her. He had sucked and nuzzled and smacked just like a baby calf. He had moaned and went on about how long it had been since he had touched a woman. She remembered how in a flurry of touching, she had found herself stretched out under him in his bed as he tried to push himself inside her. He had kept saying, "I'll be gentle, I won't hurt you, I won't hurt you, I won't hurt you." But he had kept pushing, and it had hurt.

Viney went to the kitchen and built a fire. She put on the kettle of water to warm for his shave and started mixing up pancake batter. The house was cold. The Indian summer was gone.

When he came into the kitchen, he didn't greet her, he didn't look at her. He poured the water into the bowl, worked up a quick lather in the shaving mug, unfolded his straight-edged razor and silently shaved. He ate his pancakes and went out without a word. Through the window she watched him walk to the barn. His back was straight and his steps were long. His heels came down hard.

She ate alone. When the household chores were done, she went out to weed the garden. At dinner time he didn't come to the house. Supper time, too, came and went. She looked for him around the barn. Then she did the chores.

When the hay was in the mangers and the chickens were fed, she poured grain into the milking table feeder and untied the old nanny from the fence line. The goat jumped up on the milking table and started eating her grain. Her bag was hard and full.

The milk squirting into the pail under Viney's hands plunked out a rhythm. She rested her forehead against the nanny's flank and sighed. "Oh nanny, what's come over Pa? It's not like him to forget to milk. What do you think's come over him?" As the milk level rose, the tone changed and kept changing until there was nearly no sound at all, and the bucket was full.

Back at the house, Viney let Jack, the dog, in to eat the scraps from her supper. "Pa must have gone to the fields, Jack. He's so worried about that corn." She scrapped her plate into the dog's dish by the door. "He doesn't make much over it, but I know he's worried." Some time after nightfall, she heard her father's steps on the porch. She jumped up from her mending to warm his food. Jack followed her to the kitchen.

When her father came in and saw what she was doing, he said, "I'm not hungry." He looked at the floor. "I'll be going to town tomorrow. I want to leave before dawn so I'm going to bed." He went to his room and closed the door.

"Goodnight, Pa." She didn't understand. That door had never been closed. She looked at Jack who was looking back at her with his head cocked to one side. "You don't understand either, huh?" She put the food back in the ice box. "I don't know why Pa won't look at me, talk to me." She pulled gently on one of the dog's ears. "Jack, I'm scared. I don't understand."

In her room, Viney tried to stay awake. She wanted to be up before her father left. Her not sleeping worried Jack, made him restless. He sat for a long time by her bed. Then he spun around and around and around and curled up to sleep, but before long, he was back up pacing. Then he was back by her bed, his cool nose resting on her pillow. She buried her fingers in his fur. When she woke up her father was gone.

That evening when he returned, he wasn't alone. When Viney heard the wagon coming and went out to greet him, she saw Aunt Lottie sitting next to him.

"Viney, Lottie and I were married today."

She looked at her father, and her throat seemed to swell shut.

"Oh, Viney, isn't it wonderful? You need to take our picture. I've been telling King all the way home that we need a wedding picture." Aunt Lottie climbed down from the wagon and started

going through one of her bags in the back. "When I was in Junction City last week, I bought a Kodak Brownie. Can you believe it? I have my own camera and it only cost me a dollar." She put the black box in Viney's hands. "You hold it like this, look down through this hole, make sure we're in the middle, and push this button. That's all there is to it. It's easy. Come on King. We'll stand over here in front of the house. Viney you stay there. You have to be quite a ways away."

Viney looked down through the lens at her father and Aunt Lottie. They were miniatures in a bubble, not like people at all. She pushed the button.

"Take another one now. We should take several." Lottie slid her arm through King's and pressed herself up against his side.

A few days later, Viney finished clearing the table as her father reached for his tobacco pouch. She could almost hear the beat for their dance strike up.

"That's a nasty habit, King. Everything in this house smells of that smoke." Lottie leaned forward and smiled. "I wish you'd quit."

He opened the pouch. "I've been smoking since I was fourteen. It's part of me. Asking me to quit is like asking me to stop looking like I do."

Viney scraped the scraps of meat fat from the plates into the

dish for Jack. The grating sounded harsh, discordant. Since the night before Lottie came to the farm, the dance had lost its rhythm.

Viney pushed the glasses into the hot dish water as her father slid a slip of cigarette paper from the pack. The water, straight from the kettle, burned, but she set her teeth against the pain. During her mother's illness, she had learned that a house is full of germs that have to be killed with lye soap and boiling water. She had also learned that most pain is tolerable if you set your teeth.

Viney watched Lottie watch her father. He tipped the V of paper his way and sprinkled pinch after pinch of tobacco across it, back and forth, slowly tapering the little mound at the ends.

Viney had always thought Aunt Lottie was an attractive woman. Though she was broad, she was pretty and strong and healthy looking, nothing at all like Viney's mother though they were twins. To Viney, it had always seemed as if this sister had all the good blood.

As Viney washed the flatware, her father picked the cigarette paper up, carefully cradling it between his thumbs and forefingers, and licked its edge by slowly pulling it across his flat tongue. Her fingers rubbed the cloth over the tines of the forks as he slowly rolled the paper, tucking it in and pulling it up around itself. He

rolled the paper slowly, slowly, keeping it tight. The sequence was still new to Lottie. Viney could tell she was waiting to see what came next.

He licked and smoothed the paper and twisted its ends as Viney scrubbed the pots and pans. The kettle whistled. Then as she poured the rinse water from the kettle, he brushed loose flakes of tobacco from the table with the back of his hand.

"Viney, I'll dry those dishes. You come sit with your pa."

"That's O.K. I can do it. It's not much of a chore."

Her father dragged a wooden match across the sole of his boot. He puffed on the cigarette to light it, and in a rush of smoke, blew out the match.

Lottie was up taking the dish towel from Viney's hand. "You've done everything around here long enough. I could have helped you out long ago if Mary Elizabeth would have allowed it. I don't understand why she didn't want me here. Why she denied me my Christian duty."

Viney went to the table. This was the first time she had sat there alone with her father since the night before Lottie came. She watched him smoke.

Suddenly, she wanted to be close to him, to sit on his lap, to

have him pull her against his chest and hold her. For days he hadn't touched her. Since the night before Lottie came, he hadn't touched her at all.

Viney felt Lottie looking at her. She wondered if she knew. She was sure what had happened was terrible because it had changed everything. The blood rushed from her face at the thought of Lottie knowing.

"Are you feeling O.K., Viney? You're white as a sheet." He crushed the butt of the cigarette into the jar lid and raised his hand to touch her forehead.

Viney hated him touching her like this, now, after all this time, now, with Lottie watching. "I'm just tired, I guess."

"Are you too tired to give me a haircut? I'm really needing one."

"Oh, I'll cut your hair, King." Lottie dropped the dish towel and started going through the cupboard. "Where are the clippers now?"

Viney jumped up. "I keep them here." She took the clippers from the top shelf of the oak shaving cabinet. "I'll cut his hair. I know just how he likes it."

"Viney is quite a barber." King came to the sink where Viney cooled some of the leftover rinse water and wet his hair. "I trained her myself a couple of years ago." He sat down and Viney draped a

towel over his shoulders. "The first time, I held a mirror up and watched her hands and told her just how the barbers did it. She listened close and learned fast."

Viney pulled the comb through his shiny black hair and smiled at Lottie.

That night, Viney was deep in a dreamless sleep when he woke her.

"I need to talk to you without her hearing. The way I'm planning on doing you isn't right. I owe you some words." He knelt at the side of her bed. The moonlight defined his form. One of his hands rested on Jack's head, the other reached out to stroke her hair. It was too dark to see his face.

"What happened. What I did to you. Well, it was wrong. I'm ashamed." He swallowed hard, and the silence of the night pushed in heavy around them.

"What happened ruined things. It can never be like it was before."

Dread filled Viney. She knew by his voice how serious and sad he was.

"No one must ever know. It would shame us both." He went on in a whisper. "Lottie thinks she knows. I think that's why she's so

jealous of you. Why she wants you out of the house. She went on and on tonight after you came to bed. She wants me to send you away." He gripped the edge of the bed. "Her thinking she knows and knowing for sure are two different things, so I've agreed for you to go away. Mrs. Hammonds is the teacher in town. Lottie says you can stay with her, help her out with her chores. In exchange, she'll school you. It'll be a fine thing for you to have an education, to know how to read and write. Lottie plans to tell you tomorrow. You need to know that I brought her here because of you. I love you, Viney. I love you too much." He kissed her forehead and walked quickly from her room. Before long, Jack poked his nose between her face and pillow and sniffed her tears.

First there was one bird with one song. Slowly, gradually, other birds joined in until there were many voices and many songs harmonizing to greet the sun. Viney was awake. She got up, dressed and went down to let Lottie tell her she was going away.

Butterfly Wings

The baby moves inside her, for the first time it moves. Sudden and unexpected. Flutter of butterfly wings, eyelashes to eyelashes in a butterfly kiss. Viney free falling as the floor drops from under her. She presses her palms flat against her belly, but the flicker is gone. With eyes closed, she catches herself.

Surprise, as if the woman who gave birth to Elvie over two years ago was someone else, a shadow-self. The story is clear. So many hours in labor. So many pushes. But the pain, the feelings, are remote, unattached. It occurs to her that this is going to be something new. This child, this pregnancy, this experience is going to be new and different. She was wrong to think she had been through it before. She opens her eyes.

Will reaches for her elbow. "Viney?"

She smiles. "I just felt the baby move. For a minute I felt it." She wants to share her discovery with Will. She wonders if she can explain it. "It startled me. I was surprised. It was different."

"It's been a long time. You probably just forgot what it's like." Will takes her hand. "Tell me." The way he looks at her she knows

he really wants to know. His face is soft, open, and his light eyes, grey now, search hers. Ringed with a thin line nearly as dark as the pupil, those pale eyes, sometimes blue, other times green, are a fascination to her. She believes she can tell his state of mind by their color. When they are blue, he's happy. When they are green, he's mad. Grey is more complex. Worried? Confused? Disappointed? When his eyes are grey, she has to look for other signs. She knows they are grey now because he is curious.

She feels important, connected by her womb to the mystery of life. She feels privileged and sorry for Will, sorry for all men because they will never be mothers.

He takes her hands and sits down in a straight-backed chair. Still standing, she towers over him.

"Well, it's hard to explain, but this movement kind of took my breath away like someone was tickling me with feathers on the inside. I remember bumps with Elvie. Kicks and pokes against my ribs. This baby's movement was somehow different."

Will pulls her against him and presses his face against her belly. "Maybe this one's a boy. Maybe that's the difference. Wouldn't that be nice? Wouldn't it be nice to have a boy this time?"

Tired from the discovery of movement, the new life floats in the fluid. Anchored by the umbilical cord, she floats and listens to sound with a new awareness. The drone of the voices soothes her, lulls her to sleep.

From across the room, Viney watches Will studying for his normals. He is going to normal school so he can be a teacher. She has rocked Elvie to sleep, but she keeps rocking, holding her child against her.

She studies Will's back as his long pale hand turns a page. The movement is graceful. The hand beautiful.

She thinks he will make as good of a teacher as his mother is. He is patient and gentle and strong, the kind of person who is good with children. She knows teaching is what he's always wanted to do. She remembers first coming to the Hammonds' house five years ago. Will had helped her learn her letters. Later, he had drilled her in multiplication tables while he curried down the horses, told her stories about history as he mucked out the stalls, and listened to her read while he oiled the harnesses.

She looks at the auburn curls starting to form at the base of his skull. Held down with hair oil, they are no more than ripples,

waves. The presence of these waves means that it's time to cut his hair. Tonight she will clip the curls off with the scissors. She will comb and clip until his hair is again sleek and smooth against his head.

She watches her young man, thankful for his love. She remembers knowing early that she would marry Will. As a boy, he had loved animals and was good with them, so his chores were mainly around the house and barn. Unlike the other Hammonds boys, he rarely worked the fields and hunted with their father, so he was usually around home. She reassures herself that their love will conquer all. He will pass his normals, and they will be able to have a home of their own. She sighs and dreams of sewing her own curtains, weeding her own garden. She believes that taking care of Will and their children and their home is her glorious fate.

She realizes that the new baby hasn't moved for some time. She imagines it sleeping inside her. Both children sleeping, the one she can see and the one she can't. She tries to imagine all the children, a house full of them. All the boys looking like Will and all the girls looking like her. She is only eighteen. There are a lot of years ahead for having babies.

The baby stretches awake, pushing against the pressure of Elvie's weight. Cramped, she opens her eyes. She sways in the fluid. Sways with the rocking. Tired of the same position she moves, rolls head over heels, head over heels.

Viney sits in the tub and looks down at her body. Her belly is large and round. The skin on it is stretched thin, nearly transparent. She can see the web of veins running just under the surface. Blue. She wonders why they are blue. She tells herself to ask Will.

The baby moves. Viney watches her belly rise and fall, rise and fall. It seems to her that this baby swims in tight turning figure-eights. Up on the left side, down on the right, up on the right side down on the left. On and on.

She rests her hands on her belly and feels the movement from the outside too. "You are full of energy," she tells the baby. She thinks it's amazing how different her two babies are. She already knows they are different.

"You're going to come into this world and make everyone take notice." She imagines the baby. She sees him as a boy about the age Elvie is now. He has red hair and freckles. He is chasing a cat. He stumbles on a rock and falls, but he doesn't cry. He just gets up and

goes on chasing the cat. She knows this baby is a boy.

Will comes into the room. He comes to the end of the tub, lifts her foot from the water and examines her sole. "That's what I thought," he says, "you're turning into a prune." He slides his hand slowly down her calf, down her thigh and into the water. She catches his hand and pulls it to her belly.

"The baby's moving. Feel."

She watches his eyes. Reflecting the light from the lamp, they glisten as he reaches down to feel with the other hand too. His palms rest on her wet skin. The two of them stay still as the baby moves. When the baby is finally still, Will smiles and leans down until his lips nearly touch Viney's bulging belly-button. "Hello, baby. Are you tired out now?"

"What shall we name this baby?" Viney asks. "I think we need a strong name like Abraham or Solomon."

"What if it's a girl?"

Viney looks at the top of Will's head. His hair is parted in the middle and slicked down. In this light the line of scalp exposed by the part glistens white, strikingly white. She kisses his head, presses her lips to that innocent, pure white line.

"Oh, it's a boy. I can't even imagine it's a girl."

Imogene is still, listening to the warm sounds around her. She drifts, rides the current of her wet world.

Viney can't sleep. Her body won't let her. She longs to sleep on her stomach, to press her face into her feather pillow, but her swollen body is a ball and chain. It binds her, holds her, clamps her on her back. Squeezing her lids together, she keeps her eyes closed and tells herself to sleep. Sleep. She tells herself to relax, and sleep will come. She knows that's what she needs to do, but she is so full of baby she can not relax.

Next to her, Will breathes in the deep and regular pattern of his sleep. She can hardly breathe at all. The air sticks in her throat. Shallow. Her lungs won't fill. She concentrates on breathing. Deep and controlled. In and out. In and out. She matches her own breaths to Will's. Then she feels pain. She's been on her back too long, and the pressure of the baby threatens to push her spine down through her skin. Razor-like vertebrae. She rolls to her side, opens her eyes and stares.

Breaking the horizon, the full moon shines in through the open window. Viney looks straight at the big yellow moon on the rise. At

first it slides slowly up the sky, gliding on an invisible track, shrinking and intensifying as it goes. She watches. It seems to move faster and faster the higher it gets. Suddenly it is jerked into place by an impatient hidden hand, and is still. Suspended at the top of the window this now white moon brightens the room. Its light shines in cool and blue. She stares at the glowing silver dollar moon until her eyes start to water. She blinks and looks again. The moon keeps her company.

"I'm ready for this baby to be born. I'm ready for it to be out here where you can hold it, where you can deal with it. I'm ready for this to end." She talks to Will's back, believing only the moon hears.

Imogene opens her eyes at the sound of the voice. She feels the anger, but she has problems of her own. She is cramped, pressed against bones. She can hardly move. She sleeps again and waits.

"Bite on this." Mother Hammonds slips a piece of leather between Viney's teeth.

Viney clamps down. The pain whirls. Powerful. Twisting. It strikes. Then slowly, gradually, finally, it withdraws. Viney's blind stare focuses on Mother Hammonds.

The older woman runs her fingers through the younger's hair. "That's why they call it labor, sweetheart. It's a lot of work. You have to work to get through it, but it will end. You know from Elvie's birth that it will end, and what a blessing you'll have from it all." She sponges Viney's face with a cool wet cloth. "Bless your heart. Bless your precious heart. You're almost there. Bless your heart."

The cooing fades to silence, warm, wet silence as the pain dips and strikes again. Powerful. Battering. Persistent. Viney's teeth slice into the leather when the contraction does not pull back. Deadly quiet fills the room. Then short quick breaths. The pain goes on and on. It twists into a funnel, builds to an explosive force, lifts her body right up out of the bed. Will comes forward from the shadows and helps Mother Hammonds hold Viney down. Sucked into the funnel, she screams. Whirling on and on and on, she screams through clenched teeth and leather. Mother Hammonds and Will dissolve. The bed, the walls, the sheets she grips with constricted hands, evaporate. She rotates in the funnel. Alone.

"Push, Viney push," Mother Hammonds directs her.

The words enter Viney's ears and bounce off hardened drums.

Mother Hammonds comes to her side. "Push. It's time to push."

Viney pants and doesn't hear.

Will leans his face close to hers. He pulls on the leather clamped between her teeth. Her eyes focus on him, and she releases her jaw just long enough for him to remove the leather. "Viney. You can push that baby out now. You can do it. It's time to push."

She nods and bears down. With everything in her she pushes to end the pain.

Will leans his body over hers. "Push, Viney. You can do it."

She gasps for air, presses her face into his shoulder and pushes again. She fights to get out of the funnel. With Will's hands on her shoulders, with his words in her ears, she finds the power to push. Then with a groan, she puffs out the air, inhales and pushes again.

"Here's the top of the head." Mother Hammonds is at the end of the bed now. "You're doing it girl. Come on and push. Push now."

Viney bears down. Unaware of her action, she opens her mouth and bites into the fabric of Will's shirt. As she bites, she bears down harder, pushing with all her might.

Viney's tired. She's ready to give up. She's ready to let the funnel carry her away. Then she feels Will's presence, his strength. She takes a deep breath and decides she will finish having this baby for him. She pushes.

A cry splits the silence.

"It's a girl." Mother Hammonds smiles at them.

Will and Viney look at each other, at Mother Hammonds, at the wet squirming baby she holds up.

"A girl." Will doesn't question it. He just repeats it.

"A girl," Viney says getting used to the idea.

The little girl, Imogene, blinks at the new light and screams.

Even Though He Dies

Viney looked beyond the line of people passing her with their regards to see little Imogene by Will's coffin. She was standing there looking straight down into the hole. Her knees locked, she leaned forward from the waist and looked as if she thought that hole went down forever.

Viney watched as Elvie joined her little sister. She watched as they both peered into the hole. The way they stood back and leaned forward on their toes, bent at the waist, ready to jump away, Viney knew they thought some big old hand was going to reach up and snatch them in, just as it had snatched their daddy.

She wanted to go to them. She wanted to tell them that no one could snatch them away. She wanted to believe it herself.

Her nostrils flared as she identified the heavy smell of the opened grave. That smell of damp earth mixed with the sweet smell of the newly cut grass repelled her. She wanted to bolt. She looked with wide eyes at the people in line to comfort her, and for the first time she saw her father and her stepmother, Lottie.

Lottie stepped forward and hugged her. "He lives in a better

place now." She kissed her cheek and smiled. "He's gone home, and you can look forward to seeing him when you get to the other side."

Viney looked at her father, but he wouldn't look at her. Instead, he looked at the ground. Without a word, he reached down and took her hand and quickly pressed the palm of it to his lips. She felt a warm tear drop into her cupped hand before he backed away.

"King and I feel so bad for you," Lottie went on. "We would like to ask you all to come back to the farm, but I guess you'll be staying on with the Hammonds, seeing as that has been your home. I told King it would be hard to uproot your girls at a time like this."

Viney swallowed.

Mother Hammonds, who had been standing beside Viney all along, took her hand. "Of course they'll be staying with us. I've helped Viney bring those two girls into this world, and I want to be there for this baby too."

Just then, the baby inside her kicked. Will's third child moved inside her. The live seed. The idea of it set off a wave of nausea in her stomach, and her knees nearly buckled. She put her hand, holding the tear, on her swollen belly, and let the little bit of salt water soak into the fabric of her dress. She held on tight to Mother Hammonds with her other hand.

"Well, we sure understand that. Don't we, King?" Her father didn't stir. Lottie took him by the arm and went on, "King's not feeling well himself. We need to get him home. We just couldn't miss being here for you, Viney."

"Thank you." Viney smiled.

"We'll check in on you in a week or so."

"That would be nice, Lottie. You know where to find her."

As they walked away, Mother Hammonds slipped her arm around Viney and let her lean against her.

As if in a dream, Viney continued to shake hands and accept embraces. Then old Leota, the oldest woman in town, cupped Viney's chin in her palm and looked straight in her eyes. "I'm so sorry dear. He was so young. You're so young." The old woman patted the hand Viney still had on her belly and shook her head. "What on earth are you going to do now? What on earth are you going to do?"

The Battering of Wings

Viney Belle was going to have another baby. There was no doubt about it. She knew the signs. Before she took the biscuits from the warmer, she stood with her back to Roy and ran her hand slowly back and forth over the pleats at the waist of her skirt. She knew she had to tell him before he could see for himself. She knew she couldn't keep this secret forever.

Reaching for a biscuit, Baby Clayton tried to pull out of the arm she had clamped around him. When she reached one for him, he drew the biscuit to his mouth with both hands and started nibbling on it like a little squirrel. She hitched him up higher on her hip and put the pan of biscuits on the table.

Roy took a biscuit and broke it open on his plate. "The important thing is for a man to get ahead, and there's the chance for doing that in the city. There's no life for me here anymore. No life. Just a struggle."

Viney closed her eyes, ready for the rest of the speech, ready to hear him complain again about all the mouths to feed, the instant family, but it didn't come. She looked at Roy, who was staring at his

plate. He looked into the biscuit as if it were a crystal ball, as if it, this bit of flour and shortening and salt, held the answers. She put biscuits on the girls' plates.

"Mama, where's the preserves? I want preserves on my biscuit."

"Your mama's made gravy." Roy pointed to the skillet. "Good sausage gravy."

Imogene turned up her nose. "I don't like gravy on my biscuits. I like strawberry preserves."

"Just a minute, Im." Viney turned to go to the pantry.

"Don't you go gettin' her those preserves. She's got to learn to eat what's on the table. To eat what we've got without complaining."

"But, Roy, we have the preserves. I just hadn't put them out yet."

"She's going to eat the gravy." He walked around the table and spooned out dip after dip of gravy until her biscuit, her plate was covered. "Now, Imogene, clean your plate."

"Try it, Imma," Elvie whispered. "You haven't tried biscuits and gravy in a long time. Maybe you'll like it, now."

"Like it or not, she's going to eat it."

"Now, Roy," Viney pleaded.

He glared at her. "Don't you go challenging me. You know what you get when you do." He opened and closed his fists slowly, pumping himself up. His face turned red. "This is my house. You're my wife, and these children will listen to me. They will mind." He shook a fist at Imogene. "Now, clean your plate."

Imogene looked at Roy with Will's eyes. Changeable eyes. Blue, green, grey. They were green now. Viney suddenly realized that Imogene looked at Roy the same way Will had looked at a gopher's work in their garden. Her face was hard. Her lips thin. She didn't move.

Viney held her breath.

Roy was a big man, and towering over the little girl, he looked immense. He shook his head. "You look just like a little imp."

Imogene's thin-lipped expression grew harder. "I look just like my pa."

Frightfully, the hand raised. Viney saw it go up and lunged forward, but as fast as it went up, it struck. The chair toppled over, and Imogene fell to the floor. Her head hit, and she went limp.

"Oh, no." Viney scooped Imogene into her lap with one arm and gathered Clayton and Elvie in against her with the other. "You monster, look what you've done. She's just a little girl." She pressed

her hand on Imogene's neck and felt her heart beating there. "You could have killed her."

"She had it coming. She's always throwing up to me that I'm not her pa, though I'm the one taking care of her."

"No one has that coming. You're just mean. You have a mean streak a mile wide."

He came at them. Elvie screamed, and Clayton started to cry. Viney hugged them, tried to shield them. "Don't you touch my kids. Don't you touch them ever again. I hate you. I hate you. You're nothing but a monster."

Roy's hand was up, coming down, but it stopped. He stood there as if he'd been frozen, as if he could see himself through all their frightened eyes. He turned and slammed out the door.

"Elvie take Clayton." Viney picked Imogene up and carried her to the bed. She started pushing clothes into a pillow case. "We've got to get out of here Elvie. Help me get our things together now. I'll go hitch up the buggy."

Viney knew Roy would be back. He'd be back and he would probably be sorry. He was always sorry and apologetic after he cooled down, but he'd never hit the kids before. She had to get them out of here. Instinct took over. She felt sly, like a mother cat hiding

her kittens from a Tom.

She went to the barn. The huge structure with its warped, grayed siding stood aloof, a world to itself, his world. She opened the door within the big double door slowly, afraid he was there. Even in the morning, the inside of the barn was dark as night. Daylight filtered in between the dry shingles, lighting the barn's night like a half moon. She stood still, peering in, waiting for her eyes to adjust. The sweet, rich smell of hay that reached her nostrils from the loft was discolored by the stench of the rusty farm implements stored below and the fetid grain packed in bins. "Roy?" Her voice startled the pigeons roosting in the rafters and the barn was filled with the battering of wings. She closed the small door and opened the big one. He wasn't there.

When the horse was hitched, she carried Imogene and the pillow case of clothes out of the house, and Elvie carried Clayton.

Mother Hammonds sponged Imogene's forehead with cool water. "Of course we'll take care of the children. You just stay here too. You just stay as long as you want."

Viney hugged Clayton, pressing the warm smoothness of his skin against her cheek and arms. His warmth, like flint struck her.

It moved over her and through her until she felt twisted and powdery like a spent match. "Oh, Mother Hammonds, what am I going to do?"

"You're going to stay right here. That's what. You're our boy's family. You're our own, and we'll be taking care of you now." The flint sparked and Viney felt herself twice burned.

"I haven't told you. I'm afraid things with Roy are going to go from bad to worse." She looked at her shoe. The leather was dry and worn, and a little web of cracks covered the toe. "I'm going to have his child. I'll be showing soon, but I haven't said a thing about it to Roy. I'm scared to tell him."

Mother Hammonds reached over and took Viney's hand from where it rested on her abdomen and held it. "Oh Hon, surely the man will have feelings for his own child. He must have good in him or you wouldn't have paid him any mind in the first place."

"I thought he was a good man. I suppose there is good in him, but he has a mean streak. The way he hit Imogene was nothing but pure meanness."

"Hitting this child you're carrying now or you while you're carrying it would be like hitting himself."

Clayton was asleep now. Mother Hammonds took him and

went to put him down. With her arms empty, the charcoal crumbled to ash and Viney felt herself carried away on the wind.

"Viney Belle Cribbins, you get out here." Roy had come. It had been two days, but for all those hours Viney had known he would come. The time had been heavy with waiting. How? When? Now, with the sound of his voice the heaviness swelled. Her mouth went dry. Her heart raced. "Viney, come out here and talk to your husband."

Mother Hammonds started for the door.

"No, let me go." Viney handed Baby Clayton to her and went out to him. He had just been to the barber shop. His hair was clipped close, his moustache trimmed and waxed. He smelled of cigar fumes and bay rum.

"Viney, I'm going to the city to rent us a place. They hired me on at the furniture factory. I'll be making twenty-five cents an hour. It'll be a new start for us. Things will be different there. I won't feel like I'm sinking. I'll be back day after tomorrow. I want you to be all packed up and ready to go." He turned and walked down the road without giving her a chance to open her mouth. Viney turned and went back in.

Mother Hammonds asked, "What was that about?"

"He wants me to pack up to move to the city. He's coming for us day after tomorrow."

"Well, he can just come. I'll give him my mind when he does."

Viney picked up the colored tangle of embroidery thread that Mother Hammonds had been trying to sort. She loosened the threads with her finger tips, pulled, loosened, and pulled again. "I wish I'd never married Roy." She pulled on a loose thread. It came out a ways, but before it came all the way out of the tangle, it pulled into a knot again. "I wish I hadn't married him in the church." She jerked on the thread. She jerked and jerked but only pulled it tighter. Mother Hammonds put her arms around her. In that safe circle, Viney started to cry.

"I have to go with him." Viney pulled back. "I have to go, but if you'll keep them, my babies don't. I know it's too much to ask, but will you, can you..."

Mother Hammonds touched her cheek. "Of course, dear. Don't you worry. Of course."

"I have to tell them." The desire to see her girls pushed Viney to the door. "I'm going to go look for them. I need to tell them now."

The girls had gone to gather wild flowers to put on their

daddy's grave. Viney knew where wild flowers grew. She knew they grew in surprising places. The places to hunt them were as big as the land. She had no idea where the girls were, but her feet took off walking.

She walked through the town. It was the only town she'd ever seen. It was a nice town with everything country people needed: A good public school, a bank and a hotel, churches--Lutheran, Catholic, Mennonite, a drug store, a post office, a variety of other stores and businesses, telegraph service. Windmills pumped the water, and there was even a rich family with a car. The town endured as the people who made it up always had, gripped by the seasons, following the moon. Viney tried to imagine leaving this place. She walked, savoring its changelessness, its peace and order.

At the edge of town, her feet chose an old path. As if she'd gone back in time, she was walking with Will.

"Willy, why are you bringing so many buckets? We'll have to pick a week to fill all those up."

"With Ma watching the girls, I plan to do a lot of picking." He winked. "It'll take at least until sunset to fill these four buckets with huckleberries."

"Oh, at least until sunset." She winked back at him.

At the huckleberry patch, they picked quickly, making it work.

Viney picked until her fingers turned blue. Then she watched Will pick. He rolled the berries off the shrubs and into the palm of his hand. When his hand was full, he swooped it over the bucket and went back to picking with an empty hand. He was up on his feet, hunched over to reach the fruit.

"You look like an old bear getting his dinner."

"Well, I'm a generous old bear. I'll share." He filled her mouth with huckleberries; she filled his, and they kept feeding each other until they were full.

"Elvie. Imogene." Viney hoped her girls would hear her call. She hoped to find them and help them pick the flowers. "Elvie. Imogene." She hoped they'd know how hard it was going to be for her to let them stay. "Elvie." Without them her life would be hollow, like an empty shell. "Imogene." She wanted them to go with her. It was for them that she planned to let them stay. "Elvie. Imogene." No one would ever hurt them here.

Suddenly, Imogene came pushing through the bushes and stopped. She stood there, poised like a bride, stiffly holding a bunch

of Daisies, Sweet Williams, and Blue Flags in front of her. It seemed as if she were only a picture of herself.

"Mama, see what we found!" Elvie came crashing through the bushes behind her sister. "We found Sweet Williams. Isn't that perfect?"

Viney nodded. "Sweet Williams for our sweet William." Her voice cracked, and she dropped to her knees.

Elvie hugged her. "Oh, Mama. I didn't mean to make you cry."

With Viney on her knees, Elvie was taller. In the arms of her first born, Viney felt like the child, relieved, comforted. Elvie had always been a giver, giving and giving and giving back again. During the middle of the night feedings, while nursing, Elvie had reached out with pulsing baby hands. In the graceful flowing rhythm of a waltz the little hands had twined themselves in Viney's flowing nighttime hair, loose from its pins. The two, entwined, had floated together on the music of the silent waltz, just as they were floating now.

"Is he here?" Imogene's voice stopped the music.

Viney looked at Imogene, wondering at her perception. "No, he's not."

"Where is he?"

"He's traveling. He's going to the city to find a place to live. He has a job there." She held out her hand. "Come here, Imma. I need to talk to the two of you."

She cupped their chins in her palms and leaned her face towards theirs. "Now, I want you to listen and never forget what I'm telling you. I love the two of you and Baby Clayton more than life. I've gone and got our lives in a mess by marrying Roy. He's not good enough to be your step-father. I don't think there's a man alive good enough, and I know no one could ever take your daddy's place, but I've married this man. I've made my bed, but that doesn't mean you have to sleep in it. Grandma and Grandpa Hammonds love you and have the means to take care of you. I'm thankful for that. Otherwise you'd all have to go live with Roy in the city too."

"You're going to go with him?" Imogene's eyes were wide, unbelieving.

"I have to. He's my husband."

"But, Mama. You can't go with him. He hurts you. He's mean."

"You said you hated him," Elvie whispered. "I heard you say it. You can't leave us to go off with someone you hate."

"I don't have any choice, but I do have choices about you. He doesn't have any right to the three of you." She took them by the

shoulders. "Now, what I want you to remember is the part about me loving you. When I'm not here with you, I want you to know I'm thinking of you every minute and wishing things were the way they used to be. I want you to understand. I want you to know that I just couldn't live with the worry of him hurting any of you ever again."

"Mama, why did you marry Roy? Why didn't you just stay here in the first place?" Imogene's look was flat, open, curious. She really wanted to know. Elvie nodded.

Viney swallowed. "I guess I thought I needed a man. I guess I thought I couldn't live without one. When the Diphtheria took your pa and left me alone, I guess I thought I was just too young to be alone."

"But you weren't alone. You had me and Elvie and little Clayton was on the way, and you had Grandma and Grandpa Hammonds."

Viney put her arms around her girls and, together, they started walking back. "I guess I just thought I needed a man."

Back at the house, Mother Hammonds left the tangle of thread she'd been working on and put potatoes on to boil for their dinner. Imogene and Elvie arranged the flowers in the jar, and Viney rocked Baby Clayton while he finished his nap.

Later, they would eat and walk to town. They'd spend time at Will's grave. Then they would walk back home in the stretching

shadows of the late afternoon. Viney would feed Baby Clayton and give him a bath. She'd read to Elvie and Imogene and brush their hair. That night, she'd sleep again with her children in Mother Hammond's spare double bed. The next day, they would all drive out and work together packing up their things, emptying the farm house. Viney would have to stop Baby Clayton from sucking on a loose button that he found on the floor. And, the next afternoon, Roy would pull up in front of the Hammond's place in an automobile and honk the horn.

A Broken Seal

Accepting Roy's body as a clumsy thing to be endured, Viney stared at the ceiling. Suddenly, the bouncing of his haunches stopped. He sighed, rolled off of her and jumped out of bed.

"We need a change."

She looked at him with wide eyes.

"Get up now."

Naked, he stood there at the edge of the bed, and she was afraid of him. Uncovered and upright, the powerful muscles and the fierce erection, his body seemed violent.

"Come on now, get up."

She slowly crawled out from between the covers. She stood and tried to hide herself with her arms. She trembled.

He quickly stripped the bed of quilts and covers. Then he pulled the bare mattress off the frame, tipped it on edge and dragged it out the door into the main room.

"Come on."

Viney slipped on her house dress and slowly followed behind the sliding mattress. Roy pulled it across the room and let it fall flat

in front of the fireplace. She watched as he added a log to the fire and stoked the coals with the poker. Flames jumped up, and the oak bark crackled. She waited for the flying sparks to burn the mattress, but they died out, vanished in the air before they touched it.

What a strange thing Viney thought it was to see the mattress and Roy both naked in the living room. The mattress looked awkward and out of place there. Bare, it looked like a desolate thing, like a fallow field.

His skin glistening, Roy crouched motionless before the fire. In the soft light, crouching and still, he no longer alarmed her. She studied him from across the room. His back was solid and square. Even with its size and its strength the white back, bathed in firelight, was somehow open, vulnerable, like a child's. Something in her quivered and softened.

He stood and looked at her. His face glowed. It looked polished. "Take off that covering, I want to see you," he whispered.

She hesitated. With him naked and her dressed, she felt courageous, dominant. She had never looked at him like this before. Her eyes skimmed down his chest, down, down to the private parts of him. The erection was no more than a small knob now. Small like

this, it seemed tender and frail. She looked back at his face.

His expression relaxed, and he sighed, "Please."

She felt herself bend and become pliable. She pulled the dress up over her head and let it fall to the floor. His look burned her skin.

She went to him, and he took her in his arms and drew her close. As he pressed her against him, she melted, became liquid.

She touched him. Fascinated with the power she felt under the skin, her hands wandered up and down his back. She felt his hands stroking the curve of her waist, the slope of her hips. Then she felt his excitement stirring against her, and she was again a little afraid. The hardness seemed hostile, but Roy tenderly kissed her, first her lips and neck and then her breasts. He kissed and fondled her breasts, taking the nipples in turns softly between his lips.

He pulled her down to the mattress and was upon her again. She opened her legs to him, opened herself to his entrance, terrible and tender. She was water, a quiet pool. She felt the strange soft weight of his balls lapping against her, and his desire swirled her waters. She was rapids, rushing, swirling rapids. She went all open to him. She held nothing back. She let all herself go into the swirl.

For the first time, Roy was her man, her lover. He felt

beautiful. He was suddenly lovely. For the first time, she didn't think of Will.

A Tree with Ants

"Here, Mama, you sit here." Viney went to the chair Imogene pointed to. She felt like a sheep.

"Ernie, put Grandpa here at this other end of the table. That way we'll still be able to get around him." Imogene pulled the empty chair at the end of the table out and set it against the wall.

"Papa should be at the head of the table, anyway. He is the patriarch." Mary Alice stroked his hair. "I'm just so glad we got him out of that ol' hospital for Christmas." Then she carried the empty chair to the other end of the table. "Here Mama, why don't you use this chair. It has arms."

"That's O.K., Sis. The one I'm in's fine." She settled back against the wood.

"Are you sure? You'd be more comfortable in this one."

Viney wanted to tell her when you're past seventy years old it is impossible for a chair to make you more comfortable, but she decided it was useless. She gripped the table, pulled herself up, and backed out of the way while Mary Alice traded chairs.

"I thought the one without the arms would be easier for her to

get in and out of." Imogene stood up tall. She looked as if she was working up for a fight.

Mary Alice looked at her across the table. Viney took a few more steps back and sighed. These two girls had always been at each other over nothing because of the something they couldn't help. They were both like their fathers, nothing alike, and Viney was tired of wishing they'd get along.

"Come on you two. A chair's a chair." Elvie gave Imogene a hug and whispered something in her ear.

Viney smiled. Elvie was always the peace-maker. She took another step back to let Mary Alice pass by. She suddenly wondered what her three girls would do if she just kept backing up and backing up until she fell out the window behind her.

"It's Christmas, Mary."

"Mary Alice. You know I prefer to be called Mary Alice." She looked around. Viney and the others looked back. She straightened her skirt. "You know Mama picked the Alice after Alice Roosevelt."

"It's Christmas, Mary Alice." Imogene winked at Elvie. "I'm not going to get all worked up this Christmas. Go ahead and sit down, Mama. Everyone else, you can sit wherever you want. I'll go get the turkey." She went to the kitchen.

Ernie pushed Roy's wheel-chair up to the table. "There you go Grandpa. You're at the head." Across all the leaves in the table, Viney looked at Roy. She knew the stroke had changed him, but down there, far away like that, he looked like a thin-faced old man she didn't know.

Imogene came in with the turkey. It was big and brown and had paper tassels on its feet. Everyone made over it.

"Here, Ernie, you carve." She moved his plate aside and set the bird down.

He stood up, as if he couldn't do the job sitting. "It'd sure be nice to have one of those electric knives. That'd be the right tool for this job." He looked around the table and grinned. "Now wait and see, you'll all get us an electric knife next Christmas."

"Yep, you'll probably end up with a whole set of electric knives." Charlie looked at Elvie. "Remember to put that on your list for next year now."

Elvie and Mary were busy putting serving spoons in all the side dishes.

Imogene put the rolls on the table. "Rolls have to be the last thing on a table because they cool off so fast."

"You need a bun warmer. I'll get you that next year instead of

an electric knife." Mary took a roll. "My bun warmer works like a charm."

Charlie raised his eyebrows at Ernie, who smacked his lips. Jack chuckled and looked at Mary. "Boys, she doesn't realize at all what she said, but I'll take it as a compliment."

Mary looked back at Jack with a flat expression. Then the look on her face changed. Her mouth pulled down into a tight-lipped smile and she shook her head. "Men," she said as she slapped his shoulder.

Viney remembered the gifts she'd made. They were still in the trunk of Elvie's car. She hadn't let Charlie bring them in to put under the tree. All this talk of electric knives and bun warmers, and all she was giving the kids was cookies. She'd made dozens and dozens of nutmeg cookies, and gumdrop trees for the great-grandbabies. She'd stuck gumdrops on the branches of twigs and stood them up in up-side-down paper cups. She'd thought it was a good idea.

She looked around the table at her girls, their husbands, their children, their babies. Two of the great-grandbabies were in high chairs at the table, and the oldest girl, Elizabeth, sat up on a make-shift booster styled from the telephone book and Sears

catalogue. Her brother, Ben, was big enough to sit on his knees. Elvie was busy fixing the babies' finger food, and Imogene was up filling Elizabeth's plate. Imogene's hair fell forward around her face as she bowed over Elizabeth, and for the first time Viney noticed that Imma was more salt than pepper. Then she looked from Imma to Elvie to Mary Alice. How could it be? How could these middle-aged women be her girls?

"Mama," Mary Alice smiled down at her, "Shall I fix Papa's plate?" The idea that Roy should be served and cared for like the great-grandchildren shocked Viney. She pushed her hair back with both hands and looked around the table. For a minute, everyone there looked like people she hadn't seen in a long time, people almost unknown.

She nodded. "That would be nice, Sis." Pressing her thumb against her lips and pulling the side of her index finger slowly back and forth, she rubbed her mouth. The cracked skin of her fingers was rough. It almost hurt. "I guess everything's going to be different now."

Elvie looked up. "There's no telling. The doctors say we'll just have to wait and see. They say different stroke victims recover at different rates. There's just no telling."

Viney thought Roy knew they were talking about him because he lifted his head and fixed his gaze on the ceiling. His cheeks sagged and their weight drooped his lower lids. It was as if the muscles under his skin had gone lifeless, turned to clay.

"So why is it the boys always go to their wives' families for Christmas?" Viney looked at Ernie. "Clayton and King haven't spent Christmas with us in years, and for all those same years you haven't spent one Christmas with your own mama. I know because you've spent them with me."

"I don't know. Why is that boys?" Ernie looked at Jack and Charlie.

"It's some unwritten law," Jack answered.

"And we all know better than to break it." Charlie pinched Elvie's thigh. She pushed his hand away.

Ernie pushed the knife deep into a joint to sever a drumstick. "When I think about it, it makes me feel all mean-hearted."

Jack rubbed his palm across the top of his bald head. His hand slid slowly across the skin. "It's something I've just done. I've just done it without knowing why."

"Well." Charlie pulled on the ends of his mustache. "What Jack said about it being a law is sort of the truth. The Bible itself says

that a man will leave his mother and father and cleave unto his wife. It doesn't say anything about the woman leaving her kin."

"But, is that right? Doesn't that make you feel all mean-hearted when you think about it?" Ernie looked at him with the knife held in mid-air. Everyone looked at Charlie. Viney wondered what they'd say next. How could they argue with the Bible?

"Well, everyone at this table knows that you're anything but mean-hearted." Imogene reached up and touched Ernie's cheek.

"Anything but," Mary said. "I remember watching tears well up in your eyes when you sang that ol' song about the boy who had to shoot his dog."

"Shep." Margaret looked at her children. "I remember you singing that song, Dad. You'll have to sing it for Ben and Elizabeth."

Ernie finished carving and passed the platter. "Oh, I couldn't even remember the words." He looked up over Viney. He shook his head and turned from the table. She twisted around to watch him walk over and pull the sheers back from the window behind her. He didn't bother using the cord. Two yanks and the hooks slid on the rod. "I hate these flimsy curtains. I like to look out when I eat."

"But you can see through them." Mary looked at him as if he'd

torn curtains from an altar.

"Only if you squint. I don't know why anyone would put this gauze over a window."

"It looks classy. Sheers are the rage. They create ambiance."
Mary passed Jack the rolls.

"Hell, I don't know about that, but curtains should keep people from looking in. That's what they're for. They shouldn't keep you from looking out." Leaving the sheers wrinkled and uneven, Ernie came back to the table. He looked at Jack. "Why in the world do you need two sets of curtains at the same window? You open one, and you still can't see out. It makes me feel all closed in, hot, like wearing an undershirt in summertime."

Still looking at the window, Imogene sighed. "I should have known better. Ernie's always pulling at those sheers and has them looking awful all the time. I ought to just take them down." She walked over and pulled on the cord until the sheers were drawn behind the open drapes. "There. Now you can see out. I don't know what it is you're wanting to look at. The frozen ground I guess."

"The distance. I want to look at the distance, so the house doesn't seem so small."

Jack took two slices of breast meat and passed the platter. "A

man likes to feel at home in his own house. Mary's always putting little do-dads here and there until I'm afraid to move for fear of breaking something."

"It's my house too, and I want it to look nice. A house reflects the woman's personality more than it does the man's."

"And why is that?" Jack's eyebrows were raised. "The house is just as much ours as it is yours."

"But, we do the keeping. That's why. People don't walk in our place and look around and say, 'My, that Jack is one good house-keeper.' Everyone knows if things are done up or left undone who did the doing. It's all on our head. I'm always doing for you. It seems like you'd be grateful not hateful."

"That's what a marriage is. Two people doing for each other." Elvie cut a pat of butter and pushed it into the top of the mashed potato pile on her plate.

"But the doing is all uneven. Women are expected to do it all, and we're getting tired of it. Things are changing in this world. Women are changing."

"Now, Mary Alice." Imogene looked straight at her. "Don't you go talking for all women. I like doing for my man. I think that's what life is all about. Some of us think doing for others is more

important than doing for ourselves."

Mary Alice glared.

Viney reached up and turned the knob down on her hearing aid. The voices muffled and blended together. She thought that was the one nice thing about going half deaf. Now, she didn't have to listen to things she didn't want to hear. She watched the rest of them talk. They looked silly moving their arms and hands and heads. For a while she watched them jerk and bob around like wind-up toys. Then she looked down at her plate. In the middle of it was a spray of flowers, little blue flowers, forget-me-nots. She plopped a spoonful of dressing down and covered them up.

When the dinner dishes were done and the family was all together again in the living room, it was time to open presents. Imogene read the tags and told Elizabeth who to take the presents to. Viney watched as the colored boxes with stick-on bows dwindled under the tree. She hadn't really seen Imogene's tree until now; she hadn't really looked at it. Now she noticed that it was a long needled pine. Its branches filled the whole corner of the room with dark, rich, vivid green. Wooden ornaments dotted it and dozens of candy canes hooked its branches, but the tree's glory was its garland. Imogene had strung popcorn and cranberries together to make it.

The pale puffed white of the popcorn and the bright slick red of the cranberries alternated, harmonized, and twirled around the tree in perfect turns. Colored lights flashed. Cranberries and candy canes glistened. Red ran into white.

Looking at the flashing tree and her family busy around it with muffled sound made Viney feel heavy inside, frustrated, out of sync. She reached up and turned up her hearing aid.

"Here, I'll help with mine." Mary Alice reached back behind the tree for the pile of presents she'd poked back there.

"Oh, your wrapping is always so pretty." Elvie sighed as Mary Alice handed her a blue foil wrapped box with a white bow on top as big as the box itself. "You still tie bows from real ribbon. It must take you forever to wrap everything up."

"I like having things pretty, and I enjoy doing it."

Viney heard Ernie whisper behind her. "That's a lot of work to go to on something that will never be remembered."

"A real waste," Charlie's voice whispered back.

Mary reached behind the tree for another present. Then squealing, she jerked her arm out and brushed madly at her sleeve with her other hand. "Oh, my goodness, this tree is crawling with ants."

Viney rushed to the tree with everyone else to see for herself. She looked down through her bifocals at the strand of popcorn and cranberries and sure enough, there was a trail of ants, dozens, hundreds, thousands, maybe millions of them. They were organized, moving in two rows up and down the garland. She looked at a candy cane. The ants had found it too. She could see them carrying little bits of the candy off over their heads. The cane was beaded with moisture. Fascinated, she watched the ants who seemed unaware or indifferent to the people watching them. Their legs, no bigger than hairs, moved them on. She thought it must be hard to walk on wet candy.

Finally, she looked at Imogene, who stood beside her. "I bet those ants have sticky feet." Imogene smiled so Viney went on. "That's the problem with decorating with food, Sis. I wouldn't be surprised if your tree's attracted mice too."

"Oh Mother." Mary Alice hugged herself and shook like a wet dog.

"It's true. That's why they started making everything out of glass and plastic. There used to be a time every house had mice and ants." Viney shook her head when Mary Alice shuddered. "The cranberries and popcorn and candy canes sure make a pretty tree

though."

"Well, I can't do anything about the ants now. We'll try to ignore them, and I'll take the tree down tomorrow and get them out of here."

"That's enough to make your skin crawl." Mary backed away from the tree, and Imogene finished passing out her presents.

In a few minutes the girls were picking up the wrapping and stuffing it into grocery bags. Viney thought about trying to save some of the bigger pieces but changed her mind. She did go around and collect all the bows she could find and put them in a sack to take home. She remembered her box of things out in Charlie's trunk. She looked around at everyone admiring their new things and considered leaving her presents there in the trunk. Then she remembered how much money she had spent on sugar and changed her mind. She eased up beside Charlie and asked him to bring her box in.

Viney sat in a big easy chair while Imogene passed out her coffee cans of cookies. All the grandchildren made over the cookies, but Margaret, Imma's oldest girl, made over them the loudest, "Oh, Christmas isn't Christmas without Grandma's nutmeg cookies."

Viney smiled. Margaret had always been special.

When Imogene pulled the gumdrop trees out of the box, Margaret gasped and told little Elizabeth and Ben to look. Their eyes grew wide. When Imogene put the paper cups in their hands they sat down, held the gumdrop trees out in front of them, and looked and looked. "Take a picture. Take a picture," Margaret told her husband.

"I guess you two have never seen a gumdrop tree before." Viney laughed. The look on the childrens' faces was so fresh, new. She hadn't seen a look like that in years. The two little ones looked at the dead twigs as if they were made of gold, priceless, as if they were the most valuable things in the world. Viney's cheeks felt hot.

"Mama," Imogene whispered, "I'm not going to give the babies theirs. I'm afraid they'll get poked on the sticks, and they're too little to eat the gumdrops. They might choke."

"Oh, you're right, Sis. I wasn't using my head." Viney was looking at Ben and Elizabeth, who were still looking at the gumdrop trees.

"You can eat the gumdrops." Margaret plucked one from the branch and put it toward Elizabeth's mouth.

Instead of opening her mouth to eat it, Elizabeth's lips curled down and she started to cry. She looked up at Viney. "Mama broke

it. Mama broke my tree."

Viney pushed herself up out of the chair. She went over, took the gumdrop from Margaret and poked it back on the twig. "No she didn't. See, it's O.K. It's all O.K." Viney brushed the tear from Elizabeth's cheek with the tips of her fingers. The child's skin was smooth, flawless, and hot. "Bring those trees and come sit on my lap."

Viney leaned back as Ben and Elizabeth climbed up onto her knees. "Did you grow them Grandma? Did you grow the trees?"

"Sort of. Well, I guess you could say so. Let me tell you a story about where gum drop trees come from." She leaned forward. "Long, long ago in the land of gumdrop lived an old, lonely king. His wife had died, leaving him alone with no one but their little daughter." As Viney came up with her tall tale, she watched Margaret and several of the other grandkids and in-laws spread the Monopoly board out on Imogene's big coffee table. There were so many of them that there were only enough moving pieces to go around. She watched them argue over who would get the dog, car, hat, horse and who would be stuck with the shoe, thimble and iron. The son-in-laws had turned the T.V. on to watch the Blue and Gray game, Elvie and Imogene were rocking babies, and Mary was feeding Roy a big piece of chocolate fudge.

"So all the princess had to remember her land and her father, the king, by was the gumdrop tree her stepmother had allowed her to bring to this new world with her. The princess has been gone for many, many years now, but her gumdrop tree grows and flourishes in a secret, hidden place. Through a friend of mine, I happened to come by some of the seeds from that very tree." When she finished her story, she knew Ben and Elizabeth were asleep from the feel of them. They leaned in, heavy against her.

The house rattled with noise. She looked around, taking everything in like a wide angle lens. The grandkids laughed and complained, the girls cooed to the babies, the announcer on the T.V. called the plays as the boys groaned or cheered.

Suddenly the images cleared, focused, sharpened. Viney saw that she was responsible for this house full of people. Her blood ran through most of them, and the rest of them loved someone her blood ran through. She realized that this family was her gumdrop tree, her gift to the world, and that here in this house was an accounting of her life.

This truth revealed itself to her in swift caricatures of memories. Hurt. Jealousy. Fear. Self-pity. Her past, horrible and good, and her obscure future all collapsed together in this here and

now, as she saw her life moving in circles, funnelling out. She saw her perceptions and her beliefs mingled with the particular uniqueness of Imogene, Margaret, Elizabeth. She became acutely aware of her own life, realizing that it was being carried on in half-truths in all of these other lives. She saw that only holding hands, barely touching, they formed a circle, an endless unbroken sequence of cause and effect, action and reaction. They formed a family, and here in this slice of time she was the head.

She slipped her arm from around Ben and turned off her hearing aid. Then she pulled him and Elizabeth in tight, leaned her head on the back of the chair and closed her eyes.

And There Was Light

Viney awoke. The first thing she saw when she opened her eyes was a hand resting on her chest. The hand on the white sheet looked foreign to her. With effort she scanned the space around the bed to identify the owner of the hand, but soon, she discovered she was alone in the room. Logic forced her to accept that this was her hand, and when she thought, "Move hand," it slowly waved up before her face.

She looked closer at her hand, at both hands. The look of them shocked her. They were boney and covered with nearly transparent skin which let the veins show through. With a pinch, she pulled the skin up on the back of one hand and watched it stand there in a ridge. She waited for it to stretch back flat, but the skin stayed there, formed like clay.

She studied the hands. The tips of the nails were long and filed. She had kept her nails clipped close. She hadn't believed in keeping these dead cells, in taking time to file and shape what her body was trying to slough off. These nails were manicured by her daughter. She remembered Mary Alice holding her hand, the

rasping of the file filling the room with the rhythm of a four-four beat.

Her fingernails themselves had grown much too large, the pale little crescent moons at their base waxing as if full moons waited there under the skin. The light of ten full moons in her fingertips. She let her hands fall, and the light of the ten little moons shot out illuminating the room. The brilliance blinded her, made her blink. Warmth poured over her; a shower like warm rain water came with the light.

She didn't hear the words with her ears, but she heard them just the same, "It is not yet time. Do not lose heart. Though outwardly you waste away, inwardly you are renewed day by day." And the light was gone.

Every cell of her body pulsed. Suddenly, with the light's warmth gone, the room turned cold. Stark. Its emptiness pressed in on her, chilled her. She shuddered as she understood. Her heart throbbed. The reality of the fact astonished her. She would not recover; she would not be healed.

"Sis, Sis." The voice coming from her throat surprised her. It creaked out as if her voice box was rusted, needing oil. "Sis, Sis." She swallowed hard. "Sis, Sis, Sis-s-s-s-s-s-s." She held the word as

long as she could. She held it until the sound slipping through her teeth became a hiss. Before she ran out of breath, Elvie was in the room, by the bed.

"It's O.K., Mom. I'm here. It's O.K." Elvie took her hand and held it.

As Imogene drove her home from the hospital, Viney looked out the window. The world out there beyond the glass looked new. It was as if the autumn colors of the trees and the blue of the sky had been repainted. The colors shimmered. The cars and the people moved in fast motion. The world had changed. It seemed to be spinning off into a new orbit, a new space. The world she remembered, the universe with her at its center was gone.

Imogene turned the car at a corner, and suddenly Viney could see herself reflected in the glass. Her own image frightened her. It didn't look like herself at all. The face was wrinkled and drawn, and the eyes, the nose, the teeth were bigger than her own. She looked at the reflection of this old sick woman looking back at her and realized she hadn't seen herself in weeks. She looked and didn't blink.

Life had caved in on itself. The daughters she had mothered

mothered her now. For endless days they had spoon fed her jello and cream of wheat and thin hospital soup. One of them, Mary Alice, Elvie or Imogene, had been there for every meal and spoon fed her like a baby. They had washed her face, brushed her teeth, combed her hair, and now she realized that they had hidden all the mirrors.

She ran her fingers through her hair. It had thinned and gone brittle. It didn't feel like her hair at all. She pulled her fingers back afraid the hairs would break, shatter like dry leaves. "I need a haircut, Sis. This old dead stuff feels like straw. I want it all cut off."

"O.K., Mother." Imogene didn't take her eyes off the road. "We'll cut your hair when we get you home."

Viney pressed her hands in her lap and looked past her reflection out the window again. She looked at the houses. They seemed to have window-eyes and door-mouths, faces looking back at her, blank faces that didn't understand. She looked out at the bright shimmering world and blinked.

In the dark with her eyes closed Viney could hear her own breathing. Even without her hearing aids she could hear the echo of the rush of air coming in and going out of herself. In, out. In, out. Her body a bellows, squeezed by invisible hands. The act

involuntary, a natural rhythm. She listened to the natural pattern of her breathing, then she held her breath until she couldn't hold it any longer, then she panted until she was dizzy, then she turned her breathing back over to the grasp of the unseen hands and listened as it regulated.

She wondered at this control, the same control revealed in the patterns of the tides, the seasons, the cycles of the moon. She believed there was no madness in the natural arrangement of life. She believed people caused the madness.

She thought of her mother and father, of their lives and their religion. She thought that their religion had narrowed the world, for they had believed that good was good and bad was evil. She realized how different the religion she had developed was. She realized now that the one belief that had helped her the most in her life was this very idea of a pattern, a plan, a natural rhythm.

If there were perfect rhythm in the world, then even bad could be good. In a dance the steps back are as important as the steps forward or to the side. Both the ins and outs of life formed the pattern. Because of this belief, she had let sadness and pain enter freely into her heart, and now she worked at welcoming death.

One thing she knew was that life was big and she was small. Life had always kept her off balance and encouraged her to wonder what would come next. Now at the end, she didn't want to fight it. She knew death would come just the same, and she didn't want it tearing at her. She trusted the rhythm, and she didn't believe this was the end of the dance, just a rest or a pause.

She opened her eyes and looked into the darkness. It was a shiny black tonight. It looked wet. It always amazed her how many different looks there were to black. This shiny, wet-looking black made her think of space, movie space. She thought of the movie she had watched with her grandchildren about a spaceship being pulled into a black hole. There were holes in space, holes like big vacuum nozzles that sucked everything in. There was a hole waiting for her, and her body was being sucked into it at a furious rate. At the same time, she saw her soul, the essence of herself, bending away from the darkness to the light. The soul bent like a plant turning and reaching its leaves to the sun, pulling toward the light. Part of her pulling; part of her being pulled. Her two selves separating.

She curled her arms around herself and squeezed. She thought, "Why can't I let go of this body? It is only skin and bones, a pod, a shell, a jar." She pressed her hands to her chest and felt her

heart beating, the steady pulse pumping her blood around and around and around again. She was more than skin and bones and blood. She knew this just as she knew the sun was in the sky even when she couldn't see it, and this knowing gave her the courage to sleep.

In her dream, she hovered above the cemetery. She could see the hole gouged out of the earth, the strips of sod stacked in a pile, the box, the people. When the people left, walking into a mist, and the workmen lowered the box, she was suddenly inside it, being lowered down and down. After it settled on the floor of the hole, there was silence. Then a thud as the first shovelful of dirt hit the wood. Shovelful after shovelful came thundering down and the dirt sifted through the box. Dirt in her eyes. Dirt in her nose, her teeth. Then the box collapsed, and the dirt packed around her.

"Mom. Mom. Wake up, Mom."

Viney became aware of the voice and the hand shaking her shoulder. She opened her eyes.

"Mom, you were groaning. You must have been having a bad dream."

Viney looked at Elvie's dark form with wide eyes and nodded.

"Do you want to talk about it? Will it make you feel better to

talk?" Elvie turned on the table lamp. It was her night to stay. Even now, the girls kept up a rotation and never left her alone. In the light the smell of the dirt vanished.

Viney shook her head. "Oh my, if I disturbed your sleep I might have bothered Roy too. Go check on him, Sis, will you?"

"Now Mom, we rented this hospital bed and put it out here in the living room so we could take care of you, and he could rest. He's O.K. I only heard you because I was right here on the hide-a-bed. I was right here and listening for you. I'm sure he's still sound asleep. Are you O.K. now?"

Viney nodded. Elvie looked at her. Viney looked back. There was so much she wanted to tell this girl, this daughter. Words pushed up to her throat. "You know, Elvie, I did everything I did because I thought it was the best thing to do."

Elvie took Viney's hand and stroked it. "I know, Mom, I know."

Everyone came to visit; someone came every day. Old friends. Cousins. Grandchildren. "Bring me flowers now," Viney wanted to tell them. "I don't want flowers when I'm gone." She wanted to say these things, but she didn't. She didn't know what to say, so she was quiet.

Time passed. She watched the world outside her window and lived in dreams. When she was asleep, she was young again. She was strong and able to work, so she did her chores. She planted bulbs stored from the winter in the warm spring earth and ran down trails in search of wild huckleberries. She cooked and cleaned and bathed her children. Peeking into nest boxes, she gathered pale brown eggs and beat bread dough down with her fists.

"Mother, wake up. It's time for your medicine."

Viney opened her mouth like a baby bird. She did everything they told her to do.

Mary Alice put the pills on Viney's tongue and helped her with the glass of water. Then she sat on the edge of the bed, took Viney's hand and started filing her nails. Viney closed her eyes and drifted on the sound.

"I brought some clear nail polish. I thought I'd do your nails up with polish after I file them today." Mary Alice smiled.

Viney closed her eyes. Soon after the filing stopped, the smell of polish filled her nostrils. It made her think of paint. She thought of Mary Alice painting first her nails then her hands then her arms, her face, painting her whole self red like a barn.

Viney dove into the river to wash off the paint. The cool water cleansed her. She didn't have to rub or scrub. The water did all the work. She relaxed and moved with the water.

She was ten, floating on her back, looking at the colors of her eyelids. First they were green, then orange, then red. Ever changing, chameleon eyelids. She bobbed on the current, and she was fourteen and skinny dipping. The water on her bare nipples thrilled her. It stroked her thighs and filled every crevice. She opened herself to it, opened herself to the water. Hot water poured down her legs. A hot rush of life poured from her womb. Water. The earth was formed out of water, and with water it was destroyed. A flood.

Her body bulged with liquid. Her feet hurt, so full of water they throbbed. Her swollen abdomen felt ready to give birth, ready to pop. She begged Imogene to rub her feet, so Imogene rubbed. Viney looked at her, took her in. She looked at her without blinking and didn't say a word. As she looked, a bright beam of light poured into the room and washed Imogene away. It washed every thing in the room away and beckoned her. She went up out of her head, feeling a quick tearing in her heart, and went to the light.

II

IMOGENE

The Tomboy

Every Sunday afternoon in good weather, Imogene and Elvie went out together to pick wild flowers because every Sunday afternoon that it wasn't raining or snowing Grandmother Hammonds took them to visit their daddy's grave. It was only right that they take flowers or leaves or something to decorate his grave. This idea was planted so deep from so long ago that neither girl ever thought to question it. Rather they did what they had done so many times before with no real emotion.

Wearing their second best set of Sunday clothes and broad-brimmed straw hats, they walked now through a meadow of tall sweet-smelling grass. All around them the world glistened green, dappled with the colors of flowers. White. Yellow. Blue. In her lavender dress with little pearl buttons all down the back, Elvie walked the normal way, stooping from time to time to pick a Daisy or a Blue Flag to add to her bunch, but Imogene walked backwards, swinging an empty bucket she had brought along just in case they found any wild berries.

She wore pants, a fine pair of short black pants held just below

her knees with some of the same pearl buttons, white leggings and a crisp white shirt. Under the Peter Pan collar, Grandmother Hammonds had tied a silky black ribbon in a bow. These were Imogene's favorite clothes. She liked how she felt when she wore them, comfortable and fearless.

She looked hard down the trail she had pressed behind her in the grass. She was trying for the first time to make sense out of this flower gathering ritual, trying to imagine her father packed in the earth, trying to convince herself that he was really under that marker, trying to tie her feelings for him to his grave.

She had a clear memory of his long white hands moving on his guitar. She pulled her eyebrows down to concentrate and tried to picture those smooth, quick hands as decayed bones, frozen in a cross on his chest. She tried to see it, believe it, but as hard as she tried, she couldn't make the image real. All she could see was the flattened grass trail behind her.

A rustle in the grass caught her eye, and Imogene lunged forward. In seconds, she jumped up screaming, "Look! Oh Elvie, look what I caught."

With a pleased manner, she lifted her arm to show her sister that she had her finger and thumb clamped just behind the head of

a snake. It was a little snake, hardly a foot long and no bigger around than a piece of chalk, but just the same, Elvie's jaw dropped down. To Imogene, Elvie looked as if the snake were a full grown rattler.

"What's wrong with you? It's just a little ol' gopher snake. See." She pushed the snake up under Elvie's nose.

Cringing, Elvie dodged sideways, dropping the wild flowers. "Yuk Imma, how can you stand holding that slimy old thing?"

"It's not slimy." Imogene flipped her long yellow braid that had fallen forward over her shoulder back behind her and took a hold of the snake with her other hand, too. The length of it coiled around her fingers as it tried to pull its head free. She stroked its belly with her thumb. "It's dry and soft and smooth."

She looked at that pale belly. One row of large scales extended from the neck to the tail. They slid over each other, overlapping and stretching apart as the flexible body twisted and turned. The snake flowed over her fingers. It felt liquid. Its narrow, forked tongue flicked out and in and out and in and out as the body trashed wildly.

"Look at it Elvie, every muscle in its body's working to get loose. Look how its whipping itself back and forth and back and forth. You should just feel how strong it is. So strong for such a

baby. I've never seen such a young one. It can't be very old at all."

"I wouldn't feel it for anything in the world." Elvie wrinkled her nose and took another step sideways.

Imogene moved the snake closer to her own face to study it. She had never held one all alone before. Grandpa Hammonds had always been there helping her, telling her how to do it, but this was her very own snake. She looked at it and realized that it was looking at her, straight at her with its round staring eyes. Waiting for it to blink, she opened her eyes wider and held her breath. She didn't want to miss its blink with a blink of her own. She held her eyes open until they started to burn and burn and blur, and still the snake's eyes were wide open. She blinked. Then she looked again. The snake's yellow, unblinking eyes looked glued on. They looked glassy, unseeing, as if they weren't really connected or sunk into the head. They were bulging, wide open eyes with no lids. She couldn't believe her discovery, but that snake did not have any eyelids. She shook her head.

"Elvie, did you know snakes' eyes are always open? Come look. Come see for yourself that snakes don't have any eyelids."

"I'm not coming close enough to see its eyes, and you're getting dirty, letting a snake crawl all over you like that."

Imogene ignored her sister and continued to examine the snake. She realized that the little arrow-shaped head was also earless. She thought what a strange little animal it was with no legs, no ears, no eyelids.

She tried to imagine the strange, silent, always seeing life of the snake. She tried to imagine crawling on her belly, letting her arms and legs and torso all melt into one long tube. She tried to imagine having a body that folded in upon itself like cloth. She would sidewind, but she would also crawl by pulling her belly scales forward and then pushing them back. Keeping her body stretched out long and straight, she would walk on her belly scales.

"Let it go, Imma. Let it go."

Imogene stooped and put the snake in the bucket. As soon as it was loose, it came straight up the side wall. When its head was nearly to the rim, it toppled over and started climbing back up again.

"Oh come on, Elvie. Look at it. Look how its skin inches along as it pushes itself up. It's amazing how snakes move."

Elvie walked over and looked down at the snake. "Why did you put it in that bucket? I won't eat any berries out of that bucket now."

"Oh, who cares about berries. I caught a snake, and I'm going

to keep it. I'm going to keep it as a pet."

Elvie crossed her arms over her chest. "Grandma will never let you keep a snake."

"It's almost my birthday, and if I tell her this is what I want for my birthday, she'll let me keep it." Imogene started pulling grass and dropping it into the bucket. "I can catch mice for it to eat. There are plenty of mice in the hay stack. It's too little to eat gophers anyway."

She thought of the nest of little mice she had found this morning. She had lifted a flake of hay and there under it were four pink, hairless babies. They were hardly an inch long and their big black, blind eyes were nearly as big as their heads. She had watched them squirm against each other in the light. Their tiny legs were of no use, so they had just squirmed. Imogene knew she should have stepped on them. She knew how fast mice multiplied, and she hated having them scurry around her feet when she lifted the hay, but these little mice had been totally helpless. She had put the flake back down and fed from another bail. She shuddered at the thought of feeding those little mice to her snake.

The snake quit trying to escape and coiled up under the covering of grass. Imogene smiled. "It feels safe now. Come on. Let's go on back, so I can show Grandpa and Clayton. Clayton'll love it."

She lifted the bucket by the bail and headed off. She'd gone several steps before she realized Elvie wasn't coming. She looked back. Elvie hadn't moved. She stood right where she'd been and looked at the ground.

"What's wrong?" Imogene asked.

"I dropped the wild flowers."

"Well, pick them up."

"I can't. What if there's another snake in the grass. There might be a whole nest of them." She shivered at the thought.

"Oh you ol' scaredy-cat." Imogene went back and started picking up the flowers. "Snakes are just as scared of you as you are of them. My snake was trying his hardest to get away. I was just lucky to catch him." She pushed the flowers toward Elvie. "I can't believe what a chicken you are."

"Well, I can't believe what a Tomboy you are. Girls just don't do things like catch snakes."

"I'd rather be a Tomboy than a chicken any day." Imogene started off again with her bucketful of snake.

"That's good because you are. You're a Tomboy, Tomboy, Tomboy."

Imogene pulled her shoulders back and walked tall. She knew

Elvie was looking at her. In a while, she heard the grass rustle as Elvie started to come along.

Imogene's cheeks burned. She was a Tomboy, so she wasn't mad at her sister for calling her the name. She wasn't mad at Elvie, but she was mad. She pulled the saliva together in her mouth and spit. She hated being a girl. She took a deep breath and let the air swirl out her mouth real slow. Being called a Tomboy was actually a compliment she thought. Boys weren't afraid of things, they were strong, forceful, and they made things happen instead of letting things happen to them. She lifted her face to the fierce sunshine and like the light absorbed the fact through every pore of her body. She was a Tomboy. She would be nothing like her mother when she was grown. She decided right then and there that she had no desire to ever be a lady. She turned off the usual path and headed toward the creek.

"Where are you going, Imma?"

Imogene didn't want to answer. She wanted to stay closed up like a box.

"Where are you going?" Elvie shouted louder this time.

Imogene knew she'd just keep asking, so she shouted back over her shoulder, "I'm taking my secret short cut."

"You found a short cut?" Elvie ran to catch up. "You found a short-cut, and you didn't tell me?"

"You're such a chicken you probably won't want to take it anyway." Imogene decided that she wasn't going to say anymore.

"Where is it? Where does it go? How did you find it?" Elvie fired the questions at her, but Imogene clamped her thin lips together. She wouldn't even look at Elvie.

"Sometimes you're such a brat." Elvie quit talking too, but kept following along.

Imogene tried to ignore her. She tried to think of nothing but the snake. She didn't want to frighten her new pet, so she worked hard to keep the bucket from swaying. She had to try to hold her arm still and out from her side, so she wouldn't bump it against her leg. She kept glancing down to be sure that the snake wasn't getting away. She had a vision of it draped over the rim and her looking just in time to see it topple to the ground and slither away.

After a while, Imogene slid down the creek bank to the fallen tree. She had found the tree a few weeks ago when she was chasing a butterfly. She had been so charmed by the fluttering wings that she had nearly ran face first into the upturned roots. To Imogene, the root ball looked like a tree itself. The roots stuck up and out like

branches. Elvie followed down the bank and the root ball was taller even than her. The tree was a natural bridge.

Imogene put the bucket on the ground and carefully lifted the grass that she had put in on her snake. She wanted to be sure she hadn't lost it. It was there wound up in a tight little coil. Without even looking at Elvie, she took the bucket up again, climbed the roots, stepped up on the trunk and started walking. The tree was so big around that the surface she walked on was wide and nearly flat, and it had landed so that the creek water was only about three feet below it. It was easy to cross. Imogene hardly had to work at all to keep her balance.

When she got to the other side, she wanted to just keep on going, but something in her made her look back at Elvie. Elvie was crossing the log that was something in itself, but Imogene couldn't believe the way she was crossing it. She was coming sideways. Imogene watched as her sister moved one foot over a few inches then moved the other one then moved the other one. These little jerky steps were about to knock Elvie off balance. With her knees bent and her hands held out in front of her, she looked as if she were getting ready to jump.

"It's O.K., Elvie. You can do it."

Elvie didn't look, but Imogene saw a smile flicker across her lips.

"Calm down. You're making it harder than it is."

Elvie stopped and teetered for a few seconds. She looked down at the water.

"No. Don't look down. Just look at the log. Turn around so you can look at the log and walk right."

"I can't. I'll fall."

"O.K. then, just keep coming like you're coming. You're almost half-way here."

The creek was so shallow Imogene knew she could wade out and take Elvie by the hand and help her across. She knew she could do this if she had to, but she didn't want to ruin her favorite clothes. She decided to save this idea as a last resort. "Come on, Elvie. You can do it."

Imogene watched her big sister. She watched her without another word, and when Elvie was close to the end, Imogene turned around and walked off. Now that her sister was safe, she was angry with her for acting so silly, so helpless, for acting so much like a girl.

Hollow Moon

"Ernie, I'm going out for some fresh air." Imogene gave the screen door a push and stepped out to the porch. She leaned on the railing and looked up.

High clouds arched above her like a dome, but in that starless sky, the moon waxed nearly full. That oblong moon, its circle pushed out of shape, washed the night with light so the sky glowed grey, a metallic grey. To Imogene it looked as if God had clamped a big aluminum dish pan down upon the world. To her the sky looked hard and close, so close it seemed she could reach out and tap it.

Stillborn. Still born. Born still. She didn't say the words for fear they would echo in the hollow night, bounce off the dish pan sky.

The screen door squeaked open and banged back on its spring, and Ernie's arms were around her.

"We'll have more children," he whispered.

Her mouth opened. She tried to speak. She couldn't say a word.

A Domesticated Cat

The cat meows at the side of the bed, but Imogene ignores it. She keeps her eyes closed and tries to go back to sleep. Suddenly, without warning, the cat springs up on the mattress and bounds across the width of the bed above her and Ernie's heads. Startled, she sits up. The cat leaps to the bare wood floor and thunders around the room.

"That damn cat's gone loco." Ernie rolls over and pulls the covers up to his chin.

"I'll go put him out." Imogene hopes Ernie will say he will do it for her, but he doesn't, so she pulls her feet out from under the covers and swings them to the floor. As soon as they hit, the cat pounces. His extended claws pierce her skin. Instantly, she grabs him up and clamps him under her arm. "You obnoxious thing." She squeezes a little harder, and the cat begins to squirm.

She hurries through the dark house to the door where she snatches the cat from under her arm by the scruff of its neck. Dangling from her hand, it howls and flops and tries to reach around to scratch itself loose. Before it can claw her again, she hurls it out

the door. It hits the ground running and is gone. Imogene looks at the spot where the cat fell. She feels guilty, but justified. The scratch marks begin to burn.

With the door closed behind the cat, the house echoes quiet. She can feel her heart pounding; she can hear it. Suddenly, she feels alone. Even though she knows Ernie and the sleeping children are in the house with her, she feels very alone.

She goes to the window and parts the curtains to look out. The night guard light casts a wide circle of silver between the house and the barn. She notices how unnatural it makes everything look by washing colors into different shades of grey. The shadows are long and deep. The barn looks eerie, and the stock truck takes on the shape of a hulking monster. Its wide unblinking eyes are the headlights. The radiator grill is its gaping mouth with flashing silver teeth.

She looks up at the sky, but she can't see the stars for this artificial light. She can't see them, but she knows they are there. She wishes she hadn't been so cruel.

She hears loud wails, caterwauls, and as she watches, the cat and one of the barn cats, slowly circling each other, come into the light. She quickly recognizes the strange mating dance she first

watched as a child from the top of a haystack. Back then she had thought the cats were going to kill each other. With flattened ears, staring directly into each other's eyes, they had circled, growling deep snarls that seemed to come up from their toes. Somehow, she had known not to try to stop a cat fight, so she had sat motionless and watched. She had seen everything through to the violent mounting. When the male seized the female with his teeth and his claws, with his whole self, Imogene had run.

The pitch drops until she can't hear the cats anymore. Silent, their dance seems especially mysterious, and they look ghostly in the eerie silver light. She lets the curtain fall.

Since she doesn't want to go back to bed with Ernie, she goes to the couch and pulls the afghan off its back down over her. She wants to be alone, but the cats circle in her mind. Mating is a kind of death, she thinks, new birth is a kind of dying. She blinks in the darkness. She feels angry. She's still mad at the cat and mad at Ernie for making her be the one to get up, but most of all she's mad at nature.

It is spring again, and she has her own brand of spring fever. She is tired of being a wife, tired of being a mother, tired of her life, and she has a deep longing for something she can't identify. She has

lived through the cycle of the seasons long enough to know that spring is her hardest time of year. She knows this, but still she fails to prepare. She forgets what the season does to her until it sneaks up on her and does it again.

Imogene wonders at herself. It seems natural for people's emotions to slump in the fall, to go deeper and deeper down as the days turn grayer and shorter, to be at their lowest when morning and afternoon and evening all look the same. Fall is the time of bare trees and rotting leaves and death, but spring brings life. It also never fails to bring her this grief, and for some unknown reason, she mourns.

She rolls toward the back of the couch and snuggles into the cushions. When you live in the country, she thinks, you know that spring is not just sticky green leaves. It's not just daffodils and tulips and fruit tree blossoms. Spring is shedding animals that have to be brushed, weeds that have to be pulled, and mosquitos. It's not just baby lambs and rabbits and ducks, she thinks, it's baby rats as well.

In the morning, Ernie opens the back door for the meowing cat. It runs into the kitchen and over to its empty food bowl. Imogene is busy making Ernie's breakfast so she ignores the cat. He meows and

bumps his head against her leg. Over and over again he rams her with the top of his head and meows and meows. When she dishes up the eggs and finally looks down at him, he sits and looks up at her with unblinking yellow eyes; the pupils narrow black slits.

"If you're hungry, go catch some mice. That's what you're here for." She pushes him with her foot. "Go on now, go earn your keep." The cat rolls over on its side and waves a paw in the air. "I'm not playing. Go on now." She shoves him a little harder, but the cat doesn't move. "I thought cats were supposed to be independent." She gives up on him and takes the food to the table.

She doesn't think Ernie even noticed that she didn't come back to bed last night. She was up before him, and he hasn't said a thing about it. Eldon, Margaret and Rosie are at the table eating oatmeal. That's what they wanted, but Ernie won't eat oatmeal. He says he can't stand the texture. She puts his plate of eggs and toast in front of him and sits down herself.

"There's no wind this morning." He pushes some egg on his fork. "I think I'll burn that pile of brush."

All three sets of young eyes look at him. With food still in her mouth, Margaret asks, "Can we help?"

"Sure. I can use all the help I can get. We need to get out there

soon though. The job needs to be done before the wind blows up."

Without another word all four of them start to eat faster.

"That'll make some bonfire." Imogene looks out the window at the pile of brush. It's a huge pile of tree and garden prunings.

"Can we roast hot dogs like last year?" Eldon looks at her. She looks back at him and wonders why they always ask her everything even when their daddy is sitting right there.

"And marshmallows?" They all look at Rosie and smile.

"It figures you'd be the one to bring up the marshmallows." Ernie pats her on the head. "You eat those things like popcorn."

"Sure. We'll have hot dogs and marshmallows." Imogene knows she will be the one to tote everything out and back in. She realizes why Eldon asked her; they all know it's her job.

Later, she stands holding a spray nozzle. She has stretched a garden hose out to the burn pile just in case. Ernie pours a gallon or so of diesel fuel over the branches and clippings at the edge of the pile. He quickly strikes a match and touches it to the wet wood.

"That'll get it going." He steps back as the flame spreads. "You know, I watched my uncle burn a pile twice as big as this one when I was a kid."

He tells this story every time they burn. They've all heard it

before. Even little Rosie has heard it more than once, so they all smile at each other as he goes on.

"He poured two five-gallon cans of gasoline all over it. Drenched it with the stuff, and threw in a match. I was a good twenty feet away where he had told me to stand, wondering why he took off running like he did after he pitched the match. I barely had time to think the thought before the pile exploded into flames. It sounded like a bomb went off, and as far away as I was, I could feel the heat. Ol' Uncle Orville's hair was singed. He didn't get far enough away quick enough, but he was one lucky soul." He looks straight at Eldon. "Never start a fire with gasoline. Diesel won't explode like that." He shakes his head. "I can still smell that gasoline fire and Uncle Orville's singeing hair."

By now, the fire is really going at the one end of the pile. They all watch the flames, and Imogene's heart starts to pound. She's not sure if she's feeling excitement or fear. Ernie and the kids are standing down at the burning end kitty-corner from her, so she can see their faces. She looks from one to the other to the next. They are all glued to the fire. The way they all look hypnotized, she thinks there must be a little bit of firebug in everyone.

The kids come running to her side. She can tell they think

they are missing something by not being able to see from all sides at once. Ernie follows. She thinks he is moving for the same reason.

She stares into the flames, watching the branches and twigs char and crumble and thinks of Moses and the burning bush. "Isn't it interesting that God showed himself to Moses in fire, fire that didn't burn?"

"How could fire not burn," Rosie asks.

"It was a miracle," Eldon tells her.

"Well, didn't those people worship fire?" Ernie asks, "I mean if they could think a calf they made themselves out of gold was a god, fire must have really seemed mighty."

Imogene looks at him and nods as he moves back to the other side of the pile. He looks like a dream through the ripples of heat waves in the air. Sometimes his thoughts surprise her. The fire really starts to roar as it ignites a branch full of dry leaves. Fascinated, she stares back into the orange flames as she fingers the spray nozzle.

A rat nearly a foot long suddenly runs out from under her end of the brush pile. It zigzags madly out in the open, and Imogene realizes it is giving birth. A baby hangs half way out and drags along the ground.

"Oh look," Margaret squeals when she sees it, "it's having a baby."

"It is?"

"Oh, it is."

Trying to get a better look, all three children start running after the rat.

"What a time to be having a baby." Imogene looks at Ernie and sees a big grin on his face.

"Yeah, that little rat's probably thinking that's one hell of a first step."

She's not surprised at his heartlessness, but she feels sorry for the rat. She knows she shouldn't, but she does. "She probably left a whole nest of babies in there."

"Probably did," he chuckles, "I thought that smell of burning hair was in my mind, but maybe it's her nest of little ones."

She sniffs, but doesn't smell anything like burning hair. Breathed in deeply, the smoke stings her nostrils and burns her eyes until tears run down her cheeks.

Still chasing the rat, the kids are way out in the pasture now. She looks around wondering what she should do about them.

"Eldon. Kids. Come on back now." She calls them because she

can't imagine even a rat having to go through so much during birth.

She spots the cat sitting on a fence post licking its paw. As she watches it starts walking along the fence rail. For the first time she notices that a cat walks by stepping its back paw into the spot its front paw on the same side just left. The cat walks easily along the narrow board. It seems to glide. That cat doesn't have a care in the world, she thinks. All it has to worry about is itself.

When the fire is burned down to smoldering coals, she winds up the garden hose and brings out the makings for hot dogs in her metal dish pan. They sit on saw horses and use straightened hangers for roasting sticks. She thinks it's very strange to roast hot dogs over cremated rats, but for the children's sake she doesn't say so.

She opens buns and squirts catsup and opens pop tops. She wraps a napkin around the end of Rosie's hot dog and notices the glob of catsup running down Eldon's chin.

"I guess I should have wrapped yours up too," she says as she points to the catsup. He scoops it off with his finger. Then licks the finger clean.

"Well, I hope you don't get worms," she says, wondering if she should have made them wash their hands. She thinks it doesn't

make sense to wash your hands when you're eating in the dirt, so she forgives herself.

Before she has swallowed the last bite of her hot dog, Rosie opens the marshmallows and passes one out to everyone. Imogene has never had the patience to roast marshmallows like she likes them with a perfectly browned crust and melted clear through to the center. Since Ernie likes them burned, she always does his and he does hers. They worked this out years ago, but now, when he just starts carefully roasting her a marshmallow without saying a word, she feels taken for granted.

She lowers the marshmallow on her hanger close to the coals. When it catches on fire, she holds it up and watches it burn. When it is all bubbled black, she blows out the flame and pops it in her mouth.

"I thought that was mine." Ernie looks shocked.

"You roast your own marshmallows," she says with a full mouth, "and I'll roast mine." She doesn't even look at him. She wants him to know that she can take care of herself. She wants him to see she's independent, independent as a cat. She loves Ernie, but she's mad at him for being a man.

She looks at the hot dog mess, knowing she will be the one to

clean it up. Marriage isn't what she'd thought it would be; she'd expected more. She works right alongside Ernie, but he doesn't work right alongside her. She'd thought it would be give and take, but it's turned out to be a lot more give.

She stares into the burning embers. After ten years of marriage she finally understands a woman's role. She remembers her Grandma Hammonds saying, "A woman's work is never done." She'd thought that meant that as soon as the dishes were done, more were dirty, that as soon as the laundry was done, more needed washing. Now she realizes that it also means there's no time to relax. There's always something or someone needing at a woman.

Suddenly, Grandma Hammonds rises up out of the coals and shakes her finger at Imogene. She says, "Now Imma, remember we're here to serve not to be served. Go wash their feet." The vision is so sudden and real that Imogene jumps. She blinks her eyes and looks again but nothing's there.

"What's wrong," Ernie asks, "Someone walk on your grave?" He likes making fun of old superstitions. He told her long ago that those shivers that sometimes run up your back and make you jump are supposed to mean someone just walked on your grave.

"Pretty close." She turns to look at him. "My grandma just

came from the grave to shake her finger at me."

He raises his eyebrows. "Well, did she tell you what for?" She can tell that he thinks it's a joke, and since it's too personal to laugh about, she gathers up the dinner things and goes to the house.

She can't shake the vision even though she knows it was all in her head. When she's feeling guilty and depressed the only thing that helps her is hard work. She tries to think of something she's really been putting off, some sort of spring cleaning that she would really hate to do. She thinks of the feed room. She hates cleaning it more than anything else. There's no light or window so the room is lit only by the open door. It's full of empty bags, and when you lift them, mice and spiders and stink bugs scurry off to dark corners.

Her grandpa had a mouse run up his leg once when they were moving a haystack. She remembers him jumping around all wild eyed before he dropped his pants and got rid of it. She'd never seen him in his underwear before. She doesn't know which had the biggest impact on her, seeing how he acted with the mouse in his pants, or seeing him with his pants dropped to his ankles, stripped of his dignity. She pushes her own pants legs down inside her boots and goes out to the barn.

In the feed room doorway, she stomps on the floor, hoping to

scare at least the mice away. She hears rustling, takes a deep breath and starts pitching the bags out the door. She throws them one after the other, in a big hurry, before she loses her nerve.

When all the bags are off the floor, she stands up and scans the shadows of the medicine shelf for any garbage. She notices the empty horseshoe box she'd slid up there when the horseshoer left it. Feeling guilty that she hadn't put it in the garbage then, she reaches up and takes hold of it. Just as she pulls it down a swarm of black tubes wave up out of it. Shocked, she lets out a yell and drops it to the floor. As she watches a nest of baby chipmunks emerge, their long black tails twitching. Before she knows it Ernie is behind her.

"Are you O.K?" He slides a hand around her waist. "I heard you yell."

She leans back against him. "Look." She points to the chipmunks. "I thought their tails were snakes. It surprised me, nearly scared me to death."

Together they watch the baby chipmunks. They all hide behind full feed bags and eventually make their way to the same trail up a two-by-four stud in the wall. They are not very old, so they move pretty slow. Finally, one after another, they gather in a bunch in a hiding place between a rafter and the roof.

"Look at them," she says, "They think they're hid, but we can still see them."

"Their mama taught them an escape route. It's all they know to do."

She sees one looking at them with shiny black eyes. For a split second they make eye contact before it turns and pushes its face into the bunch.

"Should I put the box back for them?" She picks it up and sees that it's lined with fur.

"No. This way the mother will have to move them. We don't want a nest of chipmunks in here in the grain." He takes the box from her, stuffs it into one of the empty bags, and starts stuffing other bags in on top of it.

As she starts crumpling bags up too, she tries to imagine what the mother chipmunk is doing while all this is happening to her nest. Since she didn't have to leave for food, Imogene thinks the mother must be taking a break by running on the woodpile. Chipmunks always play tag there, running in and out of the crevices between the stacked firewood. She wonders what the mother will think when she comes back and finds her babies huddled in the hiding place.

That evening when Imogene goes to draw the curtains, she

sees the cat sitting on the porch railing. He looks straight at her with something in his mouth. In the twilight, he seems to wear a twitching black moustache. She looks closer and realizes the cat has one of the baby chipmunks in his mouth. It's not dead yet because the tail is wrapped over the cat's face and is moving. She imagines the cat approaching the nest of chipmunks swiftly and quietly on padded feet. She imagines it springing. She feels sick, and wonders why God lets cats torment their prey. She blinks, looks again and draws the curtains.

Bequest

After Imogene finished the dishes, she went to the living room. The only empty place to sit was on the sofa next to her mother, so Imogene sank down on the cushion there. Her mother, Roy, Ernie and the children were all watching T.V., so she tried to get interested in the program too. She stared at the screen.

These monthly visits from her mother had been something to be endured from her earliest clear memories, yet somewhere in the fog of childhood there was an awareness of this woman as a constant presence, a comfort, a warmth. She could feel the body heat of her mother now. It had filled the inch of air space between their two bodies, and made the goose bumps on Imogene's arm go smooth. She tried to pull up some clear recollections of the time before her mother had married Roy, before she had gone off to start a new family, but time had blurred them. She glanced at her watch and wondered when her mother and Roy would leave, when this visit would end. Roy coming too was new.

"Look at that hand." Her mother held her hand out in front of Imogene's face. "Just look at how big the knuckles are getting. I

guess it's arthritis."

Imogene held her own hand up next to her mother's for comparison. The image before her shocked her. She saw twin hands, two left hands nearly matched. Time had worn on her mother's hand. It was true; the knuckles were enlarged, and the skin had thinned. Blue veins bubbled up and ran in a web there on the back of her hand, but the size and the shape of the hands were the same. The contour and length of the fingers, the set of the thumb, even the shape of the nails was identical. Though her mother's were shorter than her own with no white showing at the top at all, the cuticles grew in the same shape in the same position on the fingertips.

"Our hands look alike."

"Oh, your knuckles don't look like that."

"No, but the rest is the same." Imogene took her mother's hand, and turned it over. She compared palms too. Her mother's was covered with thousands of fine little lines that hers didn't have, but the shape, even the bulge of the fleshy parts was the same.

Imogene studied the two palms, amazed that she and her Sunday-once-a-month-mother had twin hands. She had believed that she looked nothing like this woman, for she was a carbon copy

of her dead father. She had pictures to prove that, yet here was plain proof that this mother whom she didn't really know was also part of the pattern from which she was cut. She was her blood, her flesh. Whatever she had done, whatever she hadn't done, this woman was her mother.

Imogene reached over and took her mother's right hand from where it rested on her knee. She pressed her own left palm against her mother's right. "Look, a mirror image."

They sat there, palm against palm, feeling the pressure and warmth of the other's existence, and looked straight at each other for the first time in years.

A Mother's Gift to the Bride

Today is Margaret's wedding day. Imogene made this appointment to take her to a beauty shop this morning to be "professionally pampered." She never would have come up with this idea on her own, but she read about it in one of the magazines Margaret has had scattered around the house for months. In bold red letters, the caption on the cover caught her eye: "A Mother's Gift to the Bride." Wanting to do something special for Margaret, Imogene took the article's advice.

Now, driving down the highway, Imogene is wondering if this is such a good idea. Margaret hasn't said a word since they left the house. She has just kept her head turned and stared out the side window. Imogene's concerned because she knows when you look out a side window at this speed, you see nothing but a blur. There's something mysterious about Margaret today. She's not herself at all.

Imogene taps her thumbs on the steering wheel and tries to imagine what is going on in Margaret's head. She tries to remember her own wedding day, but realizes that it was so different there is really no comparison. There was none of this planning. No flowers.

No invitations. No cake. The preacher came to the house, and she and Ernie stood up together in the living room facing him. Grandma and Grandpa Hammonds stood up with them as witnesses, and it was done. Getting married had just been a bridge to cross. For Margaret and Grant getting married is an event.

"The Hair Harbor is the name of the place. You know that little grey building on Lincoln with the porthole windows and the anchor out front?"

Margaret turns to look at Imogene and nods, but she doesn't say a word. Imogene doesn't know exactly what she expected, but she does know that this isn't it. She drives on.

Silently, they park and go in. The place has a fishing net, holding starfish and cork floats, tacked up to the ceiling. Before they have a real chance to look around and take it all in, two beauticians swoop down on Margaret.

"You must be our little bride," one says.

Imogene sits in a chair with a tilted hair dryer on its back and watches as they wash and set Margaret's hair and do her nails and face. It's like watching a stranger, and when they are finished, Margaret doesn't look like herself at all.

When they bring her to stand in front of Imogene, she doesn't

know what to say. They've painted Margaret's eyelids peacock blue and ratted her hair. Her lips are orange and her eyelashes are a heavy black. She's all sprayed and powdered, and Imogene thinks her daughter looks like a plastic Barbie doll. She just smiles and pays the beauticians and drives back home with Margaret in silence.

As soon as they get home, Margaret goes to the bathroom and washes her face. Imogene goes in and sits down on the toilet seat as Margaret starts to brush out her hair.

"I'm sorry," Margaret says.

"No, I'm sorry." Imogene can't think of anything else to say. There is a lot inside her, feelings swirling around, but her mind is blank.

"I like the nails." Margaret holds out an arched hand with spread fingers. Her nails look like they've been dipped in peach juice. They look almost good enough to eat.

"Me too," Imogene says and she means it.

Margaret pulls the brush through her hair. "Can you believe how they made me look?" They both laugh, and Imogene feels the laughter shatter the ice around them like a pick.

"It just goes to show that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. They thought you looked wonderful."

"Well, it wasn't all bad. I like the nails, and I felt like a princess when they washed my hair."

"You've found the silver lining."

When she gets it brushed out, Margaret's hair shines like a horse's summer coat. She stops brushing in long strokes to fiddle with her bangs. She has a cowlick there in front just like her mother's. Imogene touches the swirl of hair above her own forehead with her finger tips. She has always hated this cowlick, but now she remembers when Maggie's hair grew out how proud she felt that she had one too. She thinks these sorts of family traits are relentless. They can't be stopped. It's in the blood.

Margaret drops the brush on the counter top and blows out a puff of air that makes her bangs fly up. "Why did you pass this ol' cowlick on to me?"

"It's in the blood." Imogene says this though she knows Margaret already knows it. She reaches over to take her girl's hand. "If I had my way you would have only gotten the good from me."

Margaret smiles. "I guess you can't help but be like your mother."

The words sting and comfort at the same time. Imogene nods. "Even occupations pass from one generation to the next. Teachers

raise teachers, farmers raise farmers, doctors and lawyers raise doctors and lawyers."

"Carpenters raise carpenters." Margaret says this because Grant is a carpenter. Imogene admires what he does because she thinks it is a dangerous job. She has watched him balance on beams of an unfinished roof like a tight rope walker, and noticed that the big hammer he swings with the waffle face could take his thumb right off if he hit it. Margaret goes back to brushing her hair.

"It goes deeper than that." Imogene folds her hands in her lap. "I think the way people live and believe passes on too. Even weaknesses go on and on. Drunks raise drunks, criminals raise criminals."

"Ministers raise ministers."

Imogene nods because she thinks it's true. "I think a family is like a train headed down a track." She swallows hard. "It's not easy to pull the switch to change the rails. It's not easy to change the direction of an engine powered by a full head of steam."

Later, at the church, Rosie and Margaret's best friend, June, help her slip into her dress. It's a long white satin gown with little pearls stitched to its bodice. There is nothing practical about it, and Imogene knows this is the only day of Margaret's life she will ever

wear it. When she and Ernie wouldn't buy it for her, Margaret worked in the corn fields to buy it herself. She spent hundreds of dollars for a dress she'll only wear a few hours. Imogene doesn't understand, but she keeps quite. She feels proud of her anyway for working to get what she wanted.

As her children have grown up, Imogene has watched carefully to see all the ways that her girls and she are and are not alike. She thinks Rosie is a lot like her own sister, Elvie. While she thinks Margaret is more like her. Still, she has noticed that many of their ways are all their own. They are separate human beings, alike but different.

Rosie takes a hold of the hem of Margaret's dress and gives it a flick like she's shaking out a table cloth.

"What are you doing?" Imogene asks.

"I'm poofing her train." Rosie smiles up at her mother. "The clerk at the store showed me how to do this. It fills the skirt up with air and gives it body, so it doesn't just drag along like an old limp rag."

"Poofing her train? I've never heard of such a thing."

There's a tap at the door so Imogene goes to open it. Her mother, Viney, and Roy pour into the room like water. They go right

past Imogene.

"Oh, look at you." Viney takes Margaret's face between her hands. "You are a beauty."

"I brought you something." Roy holds up a penny. The little bit of copper glitters. "It's a 1903 Indian head." He holds it out flat in his palm. "For good luck."

"Oh, put it in her shoe. That's what you're supposed to do." Rosie lifts Maggie's dress up to her knee, and Maggie slides her heel up out of one shoe. When Roy stoops down to drop it in, Viney looks at Imogene. Imogene looks back with a blank face. Suddenly, she realizes that Roy is the only grandfather her girls have ever known, so she swallows her pride and smiles.

"That's your something old. Your dress is your something new. Now, you need something barrowed and something blue." Imogene looks around. Mary Alice, her half-sister, has been standing in the open doorway. She comes in now digging in her pocketbook. "I have just the thing too." She pulls a blue hankie out and waves it in the air. "It's blue silk from China, and it's both borrowed and blue." She takes Margaret's hand and closes her fingers down around the handkerchief.

"Thank you Aunt Mary." Margaret looks at June who just

smiles.

Before Imogene knows it, Elvie is in the room too. She hears her talking to Margaret. She says, "We get married to complete ourselves. It's a beautiful thing." With so many people in the room, Imogene backs up out of the way and leans against the wall.

She thinks it is true that we get married because we know we are missing something, but after we are married we realize that we lost something else through the gain. She knows this isn't the time or place to mention this fact, and she has already told Maggie that getting married means losing her independence.

Imogene thinks Margaret is so young. She's eighteen and just out of high school, and Imogene tried to get her to wait. She told her that especially when the children come she will have to put other's needs and wants ahead of her own. The scene going on before Imogene's face shows how weak her argument was. If she's totally honest with herself, she thinks one of the most basic functions of a woman is to take care of others anyway.

Soon Ernie comes into the room because it is almost time for him to walk Margaret down the aisle and give her away. He stands by Imogene and squeezes her hand. Rosie lifts Maggie's veil off the hanger hooked over the top of a closet door. The headpiece is a

wreath of silk flowers and pearls, and the netting falls all the way to the floor.

Mary Alice swoops the veil out of Rosie's hands. "Oh, let me help."

Rosie and Margaret both look at Imogene, but she doesn't know what to do. Margaret looks at herself in the mirror, and the rest of the people in the room all watch as Mary Alice lowers the headpiece onto Margaret's head and pushes the combs to attach it into her hair. They all let out a collective sigh and tell Margaret how beautiful she looks.

Ernie looks at his watch. "It's time." His voice is thick in his throat.

Mary Alice stoops down to poof Margaret's train. Imogene shakes her head. She doesn't know how this half-sister of hers knows these things. Then they all follow in a line out the door behind Margaret and Ernie. At the door of the chapel, Viney and Roy and Elvie and Mary Alice all go in and are seated. Imogene kisses Margaret's cheek and looks into her eyes. She thinks this is the last time she will see Margaret Thomas. The next time she looks in her face like this she will be Margaret Moore.

Kenneth, Elvie's boy who is the usher, takes Imogene's arm and

leads her down the aisle to the pew right up front. Grant smiles at her from where he is standing up by the pastor. He looks bigger than usual in his tuxedo. He looks like he's seven feet tall.

The organist starts the Bride's March, and everyone stands. When Imogene looks back and sees Margaret coming down that aisle on her daddy's arm, all in white and looking like an angel, she feels a mist building up behind her eyes, and she finally understands why those other mothers cry at their children's weddings.

The Stare Down

Imogene took a hold of her mother's bloated feet. It was as if the life had already gone out of them. They felt like plastic. The skin was stretched slick. Cold.

"Harder, Sis. Please rub 'em harder. They hurt so bad."

As Imogene rubbed, the socks pulled back and forth, slid across the skin just like socks slide across linoleum. She rubbed and rubbed.

"Harder. Oh, harder."

With Imogene bent over the foot of the rented hospital bed and her mother lifted in the curved mattress, their faces were close. The gray face with its big nostrils and dark shadows of eyes was strange, ghostly. Without blinking, the eyes looked at her as she rubbed. They looked and looked and looked and didn't blink. Imogene looked right back into them. They were still her eyes, eyes so dark you could never see the pupils, eyes dark and liquid. Their eyes fixed. It was a stare down. All the words from the years of void crowded into that stare; all the unasked whys. There was no hypocrisy, no false sentiment, only "Why?" reverberated in that stare. Imogene's arms

were tired, her fingers ached, but she kept rubbing. This physical pain was minimal, nothing really. Her mother was dying. Imogene blinked. Fortified with the stoic calm of the dying her mother had won; she closed her eyes.

With her mother's eyes closed, her presence was gone. The body in the bed did not resemble her. This sallow, shriveled body looked like it was about to give birth. Her mother's abdomen was swollen to the third trimester bulge. She was filled with fluid. It oozed out of her pores and wet her sheets. For days, they kept sheet upon sheet doubled under her, and still they had to change the bedding several times a day. Water was her element now. Water. Her mother's world had turned in upon itself. They had brought her home to die.

Twilight Cocktail

Imogene left the pharmacy with her prescription of Brompton's Solution in a bag. She opened the door of her old pick up truck, put the mixture of heroin, cocaine, and morphine in on the seat, and climbed in beside it. The doctor had called the concoction a cocktail. She sat there a while, feeling the pain throb in her back, in her sides. Then she drove off slowly.

It was still morning, but even at this hour tall buildings shadowed the streets. Stopped at a red light, Imogene saw a man bent over a trash can by the curb. She watched him sort through the top of the heap until he lifted something out. He folded back the wrapper to uncover a half-eaten hamburger and took a bite. Imogene shuddered at the thought of a life so irregular.

Back at her motel, she put on some jeans and a cotton tank top and packed away the polyester pants and blouse she'd been wearing. She packed her city heels and put on her boots. She couldn't wait to get out of Las Vegas. She'd been here three days waiting for the test results. She wanted to go home.

Out on the interstate, she watched the buildings of the city

shrink in her rear view mirror. Long legged jack rabbits leaped across in front of her, and way far off in the distance, she saw a coyote stalking something. She looked at the backs of her arms propped before her on the steering wheel. The skin was tan and thick and leathery from years of baking in the sun. It wasn't anything like the doctor's chalky, transparent skin. She remembered seeing the blood pulse through the vein at his temple when he told her she had cancer. A malignancy, he'd called it.

She watched the road, amazed again by the illusion of dark watery patches ahead that seemed to disappear just as she reached them. This was the only kind of mirage she'd ever seen.

Her old calloused hands gripped the steering wheel tighter as she pulled off the interstate onto the gravel of her own driveway. Her back ached. She was anxious to get home, but still she stopped for her mail. The mailbox was full of catalogues for summer bulbs, the usual junk mail, and bills. There was also a letter from Rosie. She put the mail on the seat next to the cocktail and drove slowly on down the two mile stretch to her home.

As she drove, she pulled one of the bulb catalogues out of the pile. There were yellow and pink and white cala lilies on its cover. She thought of the big posters of white cala lilies she'd noticed on

the walls of the doctor's office before he'd come in to tell her. She couldn't believe they'd hang lilies up in a doctor's office. She guessed some people liked those flowers, because here they were on the cover of a planting catalogue, and they were often in gardens. Her granddaughter, Elizabeth, had even carried a bunch of them flat over her arm for her wedding bouquet. What an odd wedding bouquet it had made, too.

She dropped the catalogue and shuffled through the pile for Rosie's letter. She knew what the letter said without opening it. She was sure Rosie was still trying to convince her to sell the place and move in with them. Imogene couldn't imagine living in her son-in-law's house. She'd been on her own too long. Besides, she would never willingly part with this place.

This place was her dream, and it was all she had left of Ernie. They'd spent their youth working for it and just when it was theirs, he'd fallen over dead in the bathroom. He was in there shaving when his heart stopped. She heard him hit the floor and went running, but it was too late. The children were all grown, so she'd been left to live alone. She'd done a pretty good job of it, too. She pressed down on the pain in her abdomen with her fist.

She pulled up by the barn. She knew Charlie, her neighbor,

had been looking in on her place while she was gone, but she wanted to see for herself that everything was fine. She sat there looking at things, taking it all in. The dogs were home. They were at the truck door wagging their tails and waiting for a pat. The chickens were in the coop. The windows of the house were all solid, and the door was locked with the outside padlock just as she'd left it. She looked out in the fields at her herd. She had a nice herd of white-faced cattle.

One of her heifers was down. It only took minutes for Imogene to realize that she was a first-calf heifer in trouble.

Imogene reached under her seat for the length of rope she kept there. Carrying the rope, she ran to the fence, pushed down the middle strand of barbed wire, and squeezed through over it. She ran as fast as she could over the earth between her and the heifer until she came close. Then, she walked slowly. The heifer heard her coming and looked over her back at Imogene with wide eyes.

"It's O.K., old girl. I'll help." Imogene touched the heifer's hip. The exhausted animal watched, but didn't move. There was a little hoof poking out of her backside. Imogene quickly reached inside the heifer and found the other hoof turned back, crooked. Gently, she straightened it and pulled it out next to the other one.

"I know. I know," she cooed to the heifer. "This business is

hard, even when things are lined up right." She wrapped the rope around the two hooves and pulled. She waited. "Come on now. We'll do this together." She watched for the heifer to push with a contraction. "Come on now." She hoped she wasn't too late.

The heifer turned her head away and bore down. As the heifer pushed, Imogene pulled, and soon a little nose emerged between the two front legs.

"O.K. That's a girl. The head's the hard part. After that, the rest of the little thing will slip right out." The heifer pushed, Imogene pulled, and finally, the calf was born. It was a limp little thing, but it was breathing.

The mother stretched her neck out, and with her chin on the ground closed her eyes. She was too tired to clean the calf. Naturally, she would have nuzzled and licked it, but trauma and fatigue kept her from being able to mother. Imogene shook her head and stooped down to lift the warm, wet bundle. Pain shot up her back and around her belly, but she made her body carry the calf to the house.

It was not that night, but the next that the little calf finally got to its feet. Imogene had given up on it. She knew if it didn't stand it would die. It seemed giving up on it made it thrive because when

she went to check it before bed, expecting to find it dead, it was up on its spindly legs. She flipped on the porch light, and it batted its long white lashes down over its eyes. She warmed up some milk replacer and made it a bottle. It ate. For the first time, it ate like it was hungry.

Imogene hadn't been hungry in a long time. She forced food down and then struggled to keep it down. The doctor had said the nausea would get worse, the pain would get worse, much worse, so for now, the cocktail sat in the refrigerator, untouched.

The next morning, she took the calf to one of the holding pens. She knew she was stuck feeding him until he was started. His mother wouldn't take him now. She hadn't cleaned him, so she wouldn't claim him. Imogene had hoped his mother would come around. A lot of times cows will, but first-calf heifers are kind of crazy. Often, as with this one, problems dulled their instincts.

She watched the calf snort and kick up his heels in the sunshine. She watched him buck and prance about on his wobbly legs. It was as if life had finally taken a hold of him, and he was determined to find strength where there wasn't much. While she watched him she realized what she had to do. She had spent days wondering and worrying, but now she knew that she couldn't let

herself become an invalid.

She watched the calf, knowing that he'd have to be sold. Seeing his will and determination, she would have left him a bull. Most bull calves are castrated in the first days of life, and she'd always done the job with rubber bands. With a special tool she snapped the small, heavy band tight above the testicles of the baby bulls. Then in a few days, bag and all would shrivel up and fall right off. She watched him, admired him. She'd have to sell him, and his new owner would decide.

"Bully for you, my little bull," she shouted. He stopped prancing and looked at her. His little ears were pricked out, and he was listening. "I'm going to call you Bully." He stood there looking straight at her as if he knew what that meant.

She pushed hard on her abdomen, trying to push the pain away. She thought of the cocktail. She'd placed the big bottle in the middle of the top shelf of the refrigerator, right where it was the first thing she saw when she opened the door. She knew the pain would get worse. She knew what was growing inside her would steal all her strength before it stole her life. She knew. She had watched it happen to her mother.

She had gone to the doctor for help, but he had told her that

she'd waited too long, that her stomach and intestines and liver and everything were held by the fingers of a malignant tumor. He was amazed that she was still functioning so well. He'd said she had a high tolerance to pain. He had told her to move to a nursing home, and she had promised to work something out with her children. Then he had given her the prescription, sixteen ounces, a pint, just like a large cough syrup bottle. He had told her that the prescription had to be filled within seventy-two hours, that she had to go to a special pharmacy because few mixed this drug, that it wasn't refillable, that in the future she would need a fresh prescription for every bottle. She had looked at him with wide eyes, and he had told her not to worry about addiction, that the drugs were highly addictive, but they would dull the pain. He had given her no hope. She had a lot to do.

Back at the house, she read the cocktail's label: STARTING DOSAGE 1/2 TSP EVERY FOUR HOURS FOR PAIN--TAKE AS NEEDED UP TO 3 TSP--DO NOT EXCEED 3 TSP. IN A FOUR HOUR PERIOD. She put the bottle back and closed the door. Then she began loading kitchen things into big brown garbage bags that she pulled off a roll. All these everyday items she planned to pack up and label for Goodwill. No one else would go through her things. She

couldn't stand the thought. She'd been on her own too long. She had to leave enough out to get by on: One frying pan, a plate, a fork. It was like moving.

In the evening, after she had done the other chores, she went to take Bully his bottle. When he saw her, he came running. She was mama to him now. While he ate, his little tail switched back and forth like the pendulum of a clock. Her cracked fingers touched the white curls on his forehead. Those pure white curls were one of the sweetest sights she'd ever seen. They were so white and so sweet. Ernie had always said that there was nothing like the sight of a baby white-face. He'd said the red of the red next to the white of the white was breathtaking, and that those little perfect curls on the forehead were the perfect touch of God himself. She played with the curls. She pulled them out straight and watched them bounce back where they belonged. They were soft like she remembered Margaret's, Eldon's and Rosie's hair being when they were babies. She remembered playing with the curls on their heads when they nursed.

Life had been good during those years of babies and their growing up. Ernie had loved being a father. Every evening when he came through the door, the first thing he'd do was kiss the babies.

Then, when they were old enough to meet him, he'd always pull his cap off, kiss the top of Margaret's head and drop the cap down on top of the kiss. He told her not to move it or the kiss would get away. She'd peek up at him from under the bill of the cap that dropped down over her eyes, and he'd kiss her again on the lips. Next he'd drape Eldon over one arm saying, "How's my little man?" He'd dig his fingers into the little boy's arm pit and make him squeal. Then, still carrying Eldon, he'd pick up little Rosie, blow on her belly, and carry them both to the kitchen. When Rosie got bigger, he carried her on his shoulders, and when she got bigger still, she rode piggy-back with her feet stuck into his back pockets. She did that until the day one of his pockets tore lose from his jeans. Imogene remembered the look on both their faces at the sound of the rip. They'd looked at each other like two Halloween Jack-O-Lanterns with big round eyes and big round mouths. Then they'd all laughed. Ernie had started it, but they had all laughed. They'd laughed all evening because he kept walking around with the torn pocket flapping down.

Bully butted the bottle trying to get more milk to come down.

"That's enough for you now. You don't want to scour."

How she missed Ernie. She knew he wouldn't have died if he'd had anything to say about it. To the very end he was planning and

dreaming. He hadn't known his time was coming.

Imogene patted the little calf's head and left for the house. She pushed on her back as she walked, rubbing the ache.

That night, she couldn't sleep. She left the lamp on when she went to bed. She looked at her dresser, at her things, at the dark pushing in at the window. For now, she wouldn't sleep in the dark.

Imogene was awake to watch the sun come up. She was awake to hear the unseen birds start singing one by one until all the world seemed to be awake. The sounds of day were loud compared to the quiet stillness of the night. At 6:30 she called Charlie. She'd called when she got home to let him know she was back and looking after her own place again, but now she called to tell him she was coming to visit Ada. She also called Goodwill and got them to agree to come all the way out to pick up her things by promising to give them her stove and refrigerator and truck. They would be coming Monday. She told them she wouldn't be ready to leave until then. She had two days to get everything done.

She put her Christmas Cactus and her other three house plants in on the floor of the truck and headed for Charlie and Ada's. They were good friends. When Ernie died, she'd called them, and they'd helped her out with things. Charlie was the one who had

taught her to pull calves and give shots and pills to the sick ones. He'd helped her know who to get for herding and branding and hauling her mature cattle. She'd learned a lot from him, and Ada was her best friend. She'd come over every morning for a week after Ernie died. She'd made coffee and listened to Imogene talk about the things Ernie had done and had hoped to do.

One of these quiet mornings Imogene had told Ada that she planned to keep living out her and Ernie's dreams alone. "Ada," she'd said, "there's not a man alive good enough to be a step-father to my children or a second husband to me. No one could take Ernie's place, and I'm smart enough to know it. Now that the one I wanted has been taken from me, I don't need a man." Ada had understood because she felt the same way about Charlie.

Their children were all grown and gone by the time the two couples met. Their offspring had all moved away, gone to different cities. On another Saturday long ago, during the first dinner at Charlie and Ada's, they'd all laughed about their kids moving away from the somewhere they, themselves had worked so hard to get to.

As Imogene drove, it began to rain. She rolled her window all the way down and breathed in the smell of the summer rain. There was no smell in the world like that of the rain falling on the hot

earth of the desert. It was the smell of life, rich and musky. Life. She'd had a good one. She pulled over to the side of the road and stood out in the rain. She looked up at the sky and let the drops land on her face. They were warm. The rain cloud moved on, leaving the earth barely moist.

Hunched over her tomato plants, Ada pulled a big weed just as Imogene drove up. She smiled a greeting, shook the dirt from the roots of the weed and hurried over to the truck. As she walked, she dropped the weed and rubbed her hands on her apron, streaking it with muddy smears.

"What did the doctor say?" she asked.

"That I'm getting old."

"We all know we're getting old. We don't need any doctor to know that. Did he say why your stomach keeps aching? Were you right? Do you have another ulcer?"

Imogene took a deep breath. Part of her wanted to tell Ada, fill her in on her plan. She looked into her friend's kind muddy colored eyes. She couldn't tell her. She just couldn't.

"He just said I'm sick and gave me some medicine to make it better."

"Well, at least he gave you some medicine for your trouble. You

already knew you were sick. Is the medicine helping?"

"I haven't taken any yet."

"I don't blame you. I don't trust those ol' doctors either. They just want to dope you up so you can't think straight. I've told you before I think you just work too hard. Well, it's good to see you. I'm glad you're home."

When Imogene got out of the truck, Ada hugged her. She smelled of lavender soap.

"I brought you and Charlie a Christmas Cactus and some other plants for taking care of things while I was gone."

They had a nice visit. Then Imogene went home and filled a whole roll of garbage bags with everyday things needed for living. Then she labeled her picture album for Margaret, the wooden rocker she'd rocked her babies in for Rosie and her desk cabinet for Eldon. They were all she had worth anything. Everything else she labeled for Goodwill.

After feeding Bully in the evening, she wrote Ada a letter. She told her all the things she hadn't been able to say that morning and asked her to look after Bully until he was started. She addressed the letter and even wrote Ada's phone number in big numerals after her name.

That evening, she took down the cardboard box with the white string around it, which she had left until now on the top shelf of her closet. She undid the string and pulled out bundles of letters from old friends and young men all long gone from her life but saved in this box. She took out the sash she'd worn draped over her shoulder when she was harvest queen and the picture of her at that same dance with Howard Black. There was also a picture of her sitting in a tree with Richard Stevens. She looked at her young self smiling out at the world as she held onto the arm of grey-eyed Richard. Sometimes, she remembered that she had been alive before she was married to Ernie. She took out the glass doll that she'd saved all these years off her favorite birthday cake when she was a child, the award she'd won in a spelling contest as a junior in high school, and a hairless bear Ernie had won for her at a carnival before he was her husband. She took everything out of the box except two letters from Ernie. When the children were small, he'd gone back east to his father's funeral. The trip would have been too much for the babies, so he went alone. One of the letters was from him saying that he had arrived safely. The other was from him saying things were taken care of and that he was coming home.

Imogene had the letters tied together with a purple ribbon. She

pulled the ribbon off and opened the first letter. Ernie had always printed. He had terrible hand writing, so he printed when he wrote. He printed in careful capital letters. All the capitals made the letter look important. For Ernie to write, it had to be important. She didn't read the letters. They didn't say much. Instead, she studied the carefully printed characters and worked to remember the look of the hand that wrote them.

She had a vanilla candle on the table. She had always loved the smell of vanilla. When she was young, she'd dabbed it behind her ears as perfume. Now, she lit the candle and touched Ernie's letters to the flame. They were written on thick coarse paper that didn't really burn but only smoldered. While the letters smoldered, Imogene carried them along with her to get the ash bucket from beside the fireplace. She held the letters over the bucket and watched the black ash move over them. When all the white was almost gone, she dropped the crinkly black shadows of letters into the bucket. She put the doll and the bear back in the box and labeled it for her new great-grand-baby. She shook her head at the thought of being a great-grandma. She was getting old.

She spent the rest of the night reading the other letters and watching them burn. She burned the pictures, too. By dawn, her

house was filled with the sweet scent of vanilla mixed with the smell of ash and soot.

When the sun came up on Sunday, everything was nearly done. Imogene did the chores. Every time she did them, they took a little longer. She felt her body slowing down, getting weaker. She knew the pain was going to win. Afterward, she wrote Margaret and Rosie a long, long letter. She tried to explain things and asked them to talk to Eldon. She explained that she thought they were stronger and that they should help him. She wanted them all to know about the cancer and understand why she was doing this, so she put all the details she could think of in the letter. When she finished, the shadows of afternoon were stretching out long.

She went outside and stood on the porch looking her place over. The cattle were grazing, the chickens were pecking the ground for food, the dogs were chewing on old bones they'd dug up from some secret hidden place. Everything looked just as it always looked on any other late afternoon.

She went over to her garden and inspected the little cucumbers coming on the vine. They were no bigger than the end of her finger, but they would grow. She knew they would grow. She knew that the cattle would be grazing the same way tomorrow, that

the chickens would keep hunting for food and laying their eggs, and that the dogs would always bury bones and dig them up again. She knew the sun would keep coming up and that it would keep going down, and that everything would keep going on in the same way.

She did the evening chores, stopping to rest often. She did everything the same way as always until she fed Bully. She usually held his bottle over the fence for him, but this time, she took a feed bucket into the pen and turned it over for a seat. She sat down and held the bottle under her arm, so that Bully had to come real close to get it. She watched his eyes roll back with the pleasure of drinking the warm milk. It didn't take him long to empty the bottle. When he started to butt the bottle, she put it behind her back and let him suck on her fingers. He sucked and butted wildly, hoping for more milk.

"You silly little thing. You aren't going to get any milk out of my fingers, but sometimes, just the sucking is enough."

She put her other arm around him and rested her head on his back. She listened to him work at her fingers. She listened to the sound of his breathing. She enjoyed the soft warmth of him against her face, and she liked the smell of him. He smelled like life.

Later, she sat on the porch and watched the sun move below

the horizon. She sat there in the long twilight watching the world grow still. The twilight of this big flat land was one of the things she loved. In some places, it was dark as soon as the sun set, but here, the day held on. Its glow held on and lit up the evening with warm lavender, pink and blazing orange. She sat in the glow of the sunset and looked out at the horizon. It was the point where she could see no further, but she knew it was not the end. She knew there was so, so much beyond.

When it was finally dark, she thought of being inside the earth, down away from the sunshine. How cold, how dark. She'd never liked the dark. She'd never liked night. Sunsets nearly always made her cry. She couldn't stand the thought of the ending of a day, especially this day. She went into the house and added to Margaret's and Rosie's letter, saying that she wanted to be cremated and scattered across her land. She folded up the letter and put it in an addressed envelope. Then, she put it in Ada's letter out in plain view on the table. She wanted the Goodwill people to contact Ada not the girls. She wanted Ada to be the one to tell them.

She opened the refrigerator. The bottle of cocktail loomed right there at eye level. Her fingers left prints where she touched the cold frosted glass. Finally, she lifted it, carried it across the room

and sat down in her rocker.

Her first puppy had died of distemper. She could hear her father's voice telling the little girl she was then that everything was going to die. He had died and left them. Her mother had died right under her nose. Ernie had died, and she'd watched while they buried him in a hole in the ground. Now, when she closed her eyes, she could see caskets covered with lilies and dark pits of graves gouged in the earth. She knew everything died. She'd watched cattle die, chickens die. She'd even had a child die.

"I'm going to die," she said out loud to herself. "I'm sixty-nine-years old, and I'm going to die. Sixty-nine. That's old you know." She got up again, and carrying the cocktail, she walked to the window. She looked out at the sliver of a moon. She could see the trumpet-shaped crowns of the white daffodils she'd planted along the fence. She could almost hear them blowing.

"Why do I feel so young?" she asked the moon. She stood there looking out over her land. She was going to die. As sure as the sun would come up tomorrow, she was going to die. There was something in her body eating her up, and she knew what was coming.

She went back to the rocker, sat down, looked straight out into

the darkness and drank down the whole bottle.