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This thesis is a work of fiction. It is the first book of a three book novel. The novel attempts above all else to tell a story, and beyond that, to explore problems of creation, implicit in everyday life and in the passage from which the novel takes its title, Adam's address to God in *Paradise Lost*: "Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay,/ To mould me man? Did I solicit thee/ From darkness to promote me?"

FROM MY CLAY

by

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Committee Chair

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For Charlie Newman
(1938-2006)

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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CHAPTER I

Even before Jules was born it seemed likely that there would be something wrong with her head, something serious.

“You should consider,” the doctor said. And Colter wanted to listen to the doctors.

I said, “What is there to consider?”

Every week I would stand outside my house and wait for Colter to pick me up. We tried different doctors. Colter drove me all over the state looking for a different opinion. Then when I was eight months along he just left me outside my house waiting for him to pick me up. Which I sort of knew he would long before. He tried to tell me he would. I held my hand on my stomach, wondering what it meant that the baby wasn't kicking, wondering if I wanted it to.

But when the time came, the doctors were like it's a miracle and some nurse tucked the baby into my arms and the doctors swore that she was just fine. Even when she was a baby I liked to tell Jules the story of her birth so she would know how lucky she was that she was kept at all and so maybe some day she would believe in miracles.

For all Colter knew, the delivery had killed me. And for all he knew Jules had no eyes. For all he knew she was paralyzed or brain dead or a boy and sometimes it seemed like she was all of these. I kept taking her back to the doctor just to be sure. Check her ears I said, did you check her heart, listen to her heart, is it wrong?

The first time I felt the soft spot on the back of her head it felt wrong, it felt too soft, not like what people mean when they say soft, it felt more like a soft spot on a piece of fruit, like rotten. Then Jules talked baby talk for years longer than anybody else her age, it was baba and wuice and wilk, and it went on for I can't remember how long, some ridiculous amount.

No matter how many times I took Jules back in, the doctors would tell me that she was just fine. They flipped through the pages in the chart not even pretending to read it. It was hard to listen when they were wrong once already and maybe they got it right the first time. I took her to specialists. I took her to a child psychologist. "Very well adjusted," he said and then he offered me a colleague's number in case I wanted a second opinion. "Open your mouth," I would say before she went to sleep, "and say ahhhhhhhh," and I would look down her throat but it was just a dark tunnel.

When Jules was four and her nightlight broke she cried the whole night curled up on her bed instead of getting up and telling someone. I found that disturbing.

Once when she was five she brought a dead rat to my door and left it there like a cat. I opened my door and there was a little carcass. Sometimes I wished Jules' somebody, anybody, maybe even my own mom, would just drive up, take her, and drive away. I never knew what to believe. Everyday it was something different.

On her first day of first grade, the school called and made me pick Jules up. She had liberated the class guinea pig, peed her pants, got mud all over her face, and lay down on the ground with her arms crossed over her chest. She pretended to be dead. When anybody tried to get her up she shushed them. "Please. It's a funeral," she said.

And I had to run out on the pinstripe suits, all the male mannequins at work, to go pick her up and take her back to the store, and say over and over, “Don’t touch that.” Of course she only had one friend, unless you counted her pet hedgehog which had tried to run away. Little Mary Roberts. They had all their classes together. Little Mary Roberts was in a wheelchair but I wasn’t ever sure why. She always had her hair in her face and she mumbled things like, “Come to my birthday party,” even when it wasn’t her birthday, even to adults.

“She likes to celebrate,” Jules said.

Little Mary Roberts and Jules sat in the back, chewing on their hair and looking out the window, that was what I always saw, when I was called to the school.

Her fifth grade teacher had asked, “Where is Montreal?” Jules had pointed on the map to South America. According to Jules the capitol of the United States was New York City, the natural resources of China consisted mainly of bones. That was geography. Mrs. Nagy called to see if Jules had ever been tested.

“Like for drugs?” I asked.

“Like I.Q.”

And I wondered why I never thought of it before. She took us down the hall.

The school counselor’s room was inspiring I’m sure to some. There were framed posters on the walls of eagles, mountain tops, the moon, and other things high up and representative of what has not been conquered exactly and is there to look up at from very far below.

“How are you feeling Jules?” he asked.

“Fine thank you,” Jules said looking down at her hands.

“Okay, what we’re going to do, Jules, is we’re going to play a game,” said Dr. Oswald, taking out a pack of flashcards with drawings on them. “Do you like games?”

She nodded yes even though I knew she didn’t. On each of the flashcards something was missing. Jules had to find what was missing and tell us what it was. On one flashcard there was a little girl with only one arm (“An arm,” Jules said), in the next a boy with no hair (“A hat,” Jules said), in another a little girl with one leg, in another the door to a house was missing (she said, “The house is missing a way in), on the last flashcard the ground was missing (“Nothing is missing,” she said).

“Okay. Good,” Dr. Oswald said. “Why don’t we play a different game?” This one was Trivia. He had a list of questions in front of him that presumably someone better qualified had come up with and he read them one by one.

What is the difference between a liquid and a solid?

How many days are there in a week?

What is a piano?

How many words can you think of that start with the letter q?

How many bones are there in the human body?

How do birds fly?

Who was George Washington?

What is the black plague?

How do you spell tomorrow?

What does a Pope do?

What is a star?

What is a microscope?

What about the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria?

What is a number?

Sing me a show tune.

Why are there seasons?

How many planets are there in the solar system?

Where is Mars?

Where is Detroit?

Where do we come from?

Find Paducah on this map.

Find London, Bombay, Saskatchewan, Hong Kong, Sheboygan.

What is 10% of 100?

How many verbs are in this sentence?

Jules stopped answering him after the show tune she hummed quietly. It was from Oklahoma. She picked the dirt from under her nails.

What is clay?

What is photosynthesis?

What is water?

Jules?

Dr. Oswald took a puzzle out of his desk. He took the puzzle apart and told Jules to put it back together, all five hundred pieces. Jules just sat there.

“Jules strikes me in many ways as a very average young lady,” Dr. Oswald said when he put down his pen.

“What number did she get?”

“Very average, but also a little resistant to authority figures.” He crossed his arms against his chest. “I recommend activities. Find her interest, something she could be good at, be proud of.”

I was like, “Ballpark figure? It was an I.Q. test, was it not?”

Dr. Oswald recommended swimming. He was the school’s swim coach and offered to try Jules out for the team. Of course she didn’t know how. She was scared to get in the water.

“And if that doesn’t work?”

He said, “Get an MRI.”

I had pictures already of the insides of Jules’ head. I put the pictures in front of a new doctor at least once a year. None of them thought anything was missing.

After the meeting with Dr. Oswald, I sat Jules down in the hall and told her, “Lots of people don’t know how to swim. You don’t have to.” But she said she did.

I jumped into the green water and splashed her. I swam in circles, darted up and down from the bottom of the pool and tried to show her that a body could move all over and not touch anything but touch. Maybe that’s what heaven will feel like or being an

angel floating. I tried to show her just that feeling of water that must explain why God made water holy instead of some other thing like rocks.

“Get in the water,” I said.

“You get in the water,” she said.

“Are you kidding?” I said floating on my back. That explains everything about Jules. She stood there looking at her reflection wavering on the surface and scratching the plastic swim cap that went under her chin.

“Other mothers just throw their little babies in.”

“So?”

“So they swim happily. They’re like happy little seahorses. Just jump or climb down the ladder. You’ll float. I promise.”

After three hours Jules kneeled down and put her hand in the water and I had to call it a day. Nobody could have lasted longer. We gathered our things and took her floaties off, while, the next pool over, a line of girls perched at the edge. A man shouted and all the other girls made it to the other side.

On the way home Jules looked out the window and began to cry. She took her dry swim cap off and threw it on the floor. She had cut her own hair and when it fell out of the cap I could see slivers of scalp like where the soft spot used to be.

I asked for patience and the secret knowledge of the thing that was wrong with Jules. The doctor had said before she was born that the problem he foresaw might be hydrocephalus, which was a buildup of water on the brain, or he said it might be something worse. I wondered if Jules’ brain was drowning. When the minister had

baptized Jules he had held her head under a fountain in the entrance to the church. Because she was only a baby he said that he was just going to sprinkle a little on her head but he held her under for two seconds. I remember thinking hold her under, hold her under. Five months later Jules had played baby Jesus in the church's Christmas Pageant. The doll they'd used the year before frightened the children when its head fell off in the middle of a carol so they wanted to try a real baby. Jules lay in the straw of the thatch crib and she only cried a little when the wise men came and other parents came up to me after and said she is perfect, she is the perfect baby Jesus.

Jules didn't want to try again. She was scared of the water. I took her for a scratch test. I took her to the minister. And sometimes I admit I would tell Jules the story of her birth not so much so she'd believe in miracles, but so she'd understand that there was something wrong with her and tell me what it was. The only effect it seemed to have on her was to make her seek out the sick and the dying.

She signed up for Meals on Wheels instead of swim team and I had to drive her. Then all the sick people in the county opened their doors to us. I took her to them. I took her and handed her over like a basket.

On the route Miss Klara waved from her window. Some days Miss Klara couldn't talk, other days she was blind or had double vision. In her front window a piano cast two shadows over a wheel chair and a tall vase with grasses coming out of the top. The wallpaper was a pattern of peacock feathers. Jules brought Miss Klara a tray with two silver tins.

We sat with her at her dining room table, Jules on the right of her, me on the left. Miss Klara could only talk with the right side of her mouth so she talked to Jules and it seemed like she ignored me on purpose.

“I got a part in the school play,” Jules said and unzipped her backpack.

“Congratulations,” Miss Klara said out of the right side of her mouth. “Which part?”

“Yeah, which part,” I said.

“It’s the Miracle Worker. I’m playing the mom.”

Miss Klara was really excited for her and asked her how she wanted to celebrate.

Jules said, “Read lines with me!”

And that’s what they did.

First, I couldn’t understand why Jules would tell Miss Klara before she would tell me. Second, I couldn’t understand why she hadn’t tried out for the part of Helen Keller which she obviously would have won because of her past experiences and what life was like for her, you know what I mean.

Miss Klara read Helen Keller and Jules read Helen Keller’s mom. They needed an Annie Sullivan to sit with the little girl and tap on her hand until she understood W-A-T-E-R but Jules had only brought two scripts and they just left all of Annie’s lines out. I sat by the piano and flipped through sheet music and for some reason felt like everybody else in the world could read music and I couldn’t and there was always some way to feel different than everybody else in the world.

Miss Klara gave her blank face. But Jules, Jules looked like a different person, like a mother. She rocked her dilemma in her arms: should she send her daughter away for being different than the other daughters, should she cage her daughter, would her daughter hurt herself, and did she even know she was a person, did she understand words—Jules delivered the character less in the lines and more in her eyes which didn't take in any of the light in the room and the way she seemed to look out of those eyes as a different person as though there were different people inside of her, dozens of people, or who knew how many there were, what were they doing in there I wondered—had she failed, was it all her fault, she had made up her daughter's body with her own body, if there was something wrong with the daughter was something wrong with the mother, and a cold moved through me, all the blood in my face rose up to the underside surface of my skin and burned, and I had to do something to stop it. I had to stop the play.

I knocked the piano bench over as I stood up clapping.

“Can't we finish?” Jules asked.

“No,” I said clapping, “no, that's quite enough for today.”

But the hot blood didn't fall back down from the surface. The cold didn't stop moving. I shivered. I decided I had a cold.

The next day I called off work, and I asked Jules, “Do you want me to take you to the pool?” But we didn't do that.

“I'd really like to take you to a movie,” I said.

I lay in bed and stared at the wall. I was tired. In Jules' room, there was a silver bell on her nightstand, for when something was wrong with her. I sat on her floor and held it in my hands.

I looked for Colter's number in my nightstand. I called once, just to see if the number was still his. When I heard his voice I hung up. Then I called again.

A woman said, "Hello? Hello?"

The woman said, "Who is this?"

But I didn't say anything.

"Who is this?" she said again.

Little Mary Roberts came over and I could see her and Jules out the window in the back yard cutting themselves open with a knife and smooshing the blood together. Apparently they were blood sisters.

"Put that down," I said to the window.

They couldn't hear me so I rang the bell. Both girls looked up at the window and laughed. Apparently they were also playing lets pretend we can't hear her and that game was funny for almost an hour. Then they played lets make mom something nice. Little Mary made a macaroni necklace. Jules made a paper snowflake.

"Aren't you about three years too old to be making this?" I said.

Little Mary said, "Put on your necklace." And I did and it was cool against my neck. Jules let Honey crawl around the bed.

Little Mary said, "We should redecorate this room if you're going to be in here all the time. Do you want us to draw you some pictures for the walls?"

“Don’t you have your own house?” I said.

Mary said, “Why? Do you want to come over and play?”

Jules hugged Honey. She told me once that she thought that he would live forever and never need to go to the vet, never stiffen or change colors. That’s what I thought about then, falling asleep, watching Jules lie at the foot of my violet comforter and she was petting his spines, like they were soft like reeds.

CHAPTER II

“Listen to me.” I said, “Listen to me,” to Miss Klara but that day was one of her deaf days. I said, “I’m running away from home, for real this time. No one can stop me. I took Honey, my hedgehog, eleven dollars, and a blanket. But before I go I wanted to bring you this.” It was a flier from my play. It had my name on it and everything.

“And I wanted to explain why I’m not coming over anymore and you won’t ever see me again. Today was just like this Christmas we had once. I remember I was still learning to read. My mom took me to the midnight service. She curled my hair, wrapped me in a green dress with a huge black bow at the waist, and painted my lips with some fancy dark lip gloss. She said Jules ‘you look nice time to go show everyone.’ But when we went inside and sat in the front row of the balcony, the minister turned off all the lights so I’m not sure what all that was for and nobody could really see anybody, like we could just see each other’s dark thoughts. The minister lit a candle. He said, ‘This is the light of the world.’ He held the flame up to the unlit candle of a man sitting in the first pew, who held it up to the man beside him and so on and on. Each person passed the light of the world on. So each person made some of those thoughts go away. Wax spilt all over me when I leaned my candle to take that light, and the wick was wet or faulty or something, because it wouldn’t take, my candle wouldn’t light, and, in the end, they skipped me. So it was darker around me than it was everywhere else in church. And everybody else’s light was just bright enough to bring out the haze about me. My mom

held open the hymnal. I sang the first line of Silent Night along with everybody else, then the line under it, but everybody was singing some different line. Nobody had explained choruses to me. So I stood there in my haze on the balcony, in the middle of all that dark stained glass, and I moved my mouth senselessly. My mouth made odd shapes, odd sounds. And when my mom put her hand on my head I thought maybe she was saying, its okay, you don't have to try so hard. But then I thought, no, she's doing it for the woman standing behind her who just pointed at the back of my head. I thought maybe if I jumped off the balcony I would fall into the light of the world and it would be like falling into the sun. And everybody knows that the sun is god's mouth. Wait. You all right?" I asked and shook her arm a little. Miss Klara smiled at me. She was so stiff. Her nurse said she'd be back in a minute but it'd been half an hour. I said I didn't mind but I didn't know it was a deaf day.

"Listen to me. Everything was fine for weeks. And then today my mom said, 'Are you having trouble sleeping Jules?' And I said no. Then she told me I was a sleepwalker which I'm pretty sure I'm not a sleepwalker. I always wake up in my bed right where I'm supposed to. But she wouldn't let me give my final performance because maybe I was a sleepwalker and maybe I would sleepwalk off a cliff if we didn't take care of it right away. I said I was fine. Then I had to call the understudy to tell her she got my part and she was like 'well, you weren't that great.' And when I hung up my mom said again how nobody thought I would come out okay, how when she was on the delivery table and it was twelve hours into having me, her heart started beating so fast they had to give her extra drugs, and just when she thought her heart would explode she made a deal with god

she couldn't tell me about, but it involved what she'd do if he let us live and me not be sick. Then she gave birth to me. Then she gave birth to a jellyfish. That's placenta! So like when you're inside your mom you're hugging a jellyfish which I would rather do that forever than whatever it is I'm supposed to be doing out here." I was going to tell Miss Klara that I thought my mom was the one who was sick—she was so exhausted all the time and paled whenever I opened my mouth.

Right then a clamor, I heard a thing. Something moved in some other room of Miss Klara's house and the sound made everything strange. Maybe, I thought, something just fell off a shelf, maybe it's not alive. But the sound sounded alive.

I said, "Did you hear that? Did you hear that? Miss Klara?" And Miss Klara smiled at me blankly. I couldn't make her stop.

I heard the noise move through the house. I followed the noise down the hall, tracing shadows across the peacock feather wallpaper, over the pictures of men and women from a long time ago, so long ago they must have been dead inside their old lacy clothes. Something moved in the corner of my eye in Miss Klara's bedroom. In the middle of the room was a hospital bed, the kind with big buttons connected to it that make the head of the bed go up and down. It smelled like pee. I looked under the bed. Not it. I opened the closet real fast and jumped away. But it wasn't in there. Two full length mirrors hung on opposing walls, over the peacock feather wallpaper. I looked for the noise and a saw a line of myself in the mirrors like a line of rockettes only it was me and I wasn't waving a hat. I held my nose and a hundred other mes held their nose.

“What are you doing?” the nurse asked my reflections when she wheeled Miss Klara into the bedroom. “What’s wrong with your nose?”

“I heard something.”

“Miss Klara, did you hear something?”

When Miss Klara just smiled, the nurse said, “See, there’s nothing there.”

But I heard it. I would have sworn on a bible. I could hear and I heard it. The ear doctor said I could.

I went to Mary’s house and tried to tell her about the thing, how it was invisible, how I heard it moving through the sick lady’s house, and how maybe I could hear sickness like some dogs can smell sickness, they sniff the part of you that’s wrong, and Mary said, “What?” So who was there to tell?

“You can stay here if you want,” Mary said so that’s what I did.

In Mary’s house there was games and a ramp to everywhere like chutes and ladders. And in Mary’s house whenever Mary said anything we said “Tell me more!” But the best thing about Mary’s house was that when my mom called, Mrs. Roberts said, “Gee, I haven’t seen her,” and hung up the phone. Because in Mary’s house we were all on one side, which was Mary’s, and Mary let me on her side.

I thought I could stay there a long time. But after a couple hours I could tell that Mrs. Roberts didn’t like lying anymore. She was an honest person. So I said I was going home but I didn’t go home.

Mary’s house was on the nice side of town. I walked up and down the sidewalks holding Honey in my arms. The houses were so nice. There was a light on in every house,

it was evening, and none of the shades were down, so you could look in the windows and hope the people inside would look out and see you, but that never happened. Each house was different than the other houses. One looked like it belonged on a hill somewhere warm like a jungle. Another had a curved roof like an igloo. Another looked like it had been flown over from a different continent. There was a fat gold man on the lawn. I said “Hey fat man!” Then I played where do you want to live.

The living room was where the living happened so that was the most important thing to me. One house had a lit chandelier in the window dangling over a long table set with shining cups and saucers. Also there were doilies. Welcome to the tea party the window said! I walked up to the door and knocked on the knocker. Nobody came to the door.

Then I saw another living room that was like the first. It had a chandelier. It had a cake plate, the kind where you put the cake on a pedestal and cover it with glass so no one ruins it and it stays separate and safe from people wanting it too much and behind the window there was a girl my age eating a piece of another different cake. I rang the doorbell.

“Is Johnny here?” It was the first thing I thought to say.

“I think you have the wrong house,” the girl said. She looked at my hedgehog like she was confused.

“I’m pretty sure this is the address he gave me. Can I come in and use your phone?”

I thought maybe she would let me sit in that nice living room for a minute while I waited for Johnny, who I made up, and there was all that cake and maybe she would like to give me and Honey a slice and also a glass of milk, like she would want to be friends.

“I don’t think so,” she said closing the door.

I sat down on her front steps. The girl came back out.

“You can’t sit on the porch either,” she said.

I petted Honey who was lying on the steps, his head under his quills so he looked like he had no face, only spines.

“Get off the porch,” the girl said from the window. Her mother came and stood behind her.

So I picked Honey up again. And then I walked a long long way and it could have been forty miles. I walked until I found a store. Eggs and milk and macaroni and cheese which was my favorite. I bought all that and doughnuts and I ate a sprinkle one right there, and walked all the way back to Mary’s street. By then it was dark and getting darker. I looked up at the stars that were starting to show themselves and I couldn’t make any shapes out of them. There weren’t enough and they weren’t close enough together. And I wondered if that was just one of those things grown ups said—I see a bear, I see a hunter—to make me feel dumb. And I wondered what we were supposed to do with the light. And I walked all the way back to the girl’s house.

I took the carton of eggs out of my back pack. The first egg felt cold in my palm. It was the perfect shape.

I catapulted the egg at the window. Then all twenty something of those never born chickens hugging the insides of their shells and they crushed and made the house disgusting. They slunk down the front door like slugs. They dripped from the shutters and splattered on the porch like bird poop falling from the sky on the heads of everybody in that house. A white splattering rain. By then the milk didn't smell that good and I threw it on the door. Then I went to the garbage can by their mailbox, took out the trash bags and emptied them on the front lawn. And I said, "This place is rotten!" in case anybody was listening.

And I kicked around an old tv dinner. And then I did something that I won't ever tell anybody about.

And I was ready to go back to my house, where we would have let that girl in, even my mom would, so our house was better than hers was, better than anybody's, except for Mary's, or Miss Klara's, and it was good I thought so, because that was when the policeman came.

He gave me a ride home. He admired my hedgehog, and told me, "No more pranks, kid. You know you really upset those people inside."

"Can you put on the flashing lights?" I asked.

He said, "I mean it. No more pranks." And he walked me to the front door where I put down Honey, and held out my arms like I was about to hug something, like a sleepwalker, sleepwalking a maze of streets. I opened my mouth real wide so she would get the effect. And I didn't focus on anything, I let my eyes open real wide and didn't blink and that was part of the effect too. When my mom walked down the stairs she was

holding onto the banister and I could see in her face that it was like her dream come true.

And I was happy from time to time to make it true for her. And I thought she barely heard what the policeman had to say about me. She was so happy I had made it true.

But maybe it was true all along, and how could you know, how could you really know, and standing there letting the drool fall from my open mouth, with my arms out, I did wonder where I went at night. Did I get up? Did I get up and come back? Why did I come back? And if I stayed still, where did I go?

CHAPTER III

Months of nothing doing. Trees gave me the evil eye before they dumped leaves. We let them coat the top of the lake. Float and sink. Gathered the ones on the grass in plastic bags. Couldn't do all ten acres. Obviously. Left the woods as woods. The lake as the lake. Cleaned up the grass. Rachel went in to get us ice water. Came back with the trees' stunned glare.

"What the hell is this?" she said.

Followed her in. She pressed down the button on the answering machine.

"Listen," it said. "It was girl."

"Colter. Did you hear me?"

In her third message Ally said, "Hello. Hello. Hello."

"Last year I bought her a pet. A hedgehog. She loves her hedgehog. You should see this thing. It looks like a dirty sock. Right now she's trying to open its mouth and feed it something she caught in the yard."

"Listen," Ally said. "I have a cold."

"What is this?" my wife said.

I tried to explain as she packed her things together, drove off to her sister's out west. At least she didn't take her ring off. That meant something to me. Didn't know what to do with it. I considered what I had. Drove too. Drove.

My stepmother cracked the door against the chain and said, "He's busy."

I said, “Hello Coleen.”

And she pulled back the chain. I could hear my father humming as he worked in the back room. Walked towards his door, and could make out his new hobby in the greenery, the tiny bridge over a painted river, two companies of toy soldiers facing off.

When I got to the door my father looked up, said “Hey Big Shooter.” Then he closed the door in my face.

I knocked on the door, like the old man’d closed it on accident, or the wind, in its fits and starts, had slammed it shut. Didn’t open. I wanted to talk to my father.

That night I slept in my childhood bed, whole room quiet as a child standing over me, or a child at the window looking up, or a child hiding under the bed. It was quiet. Got up and called Rachel. Didn’t answer. Went back to bed and stared at the ceiling. Thought about what I’d done. By breakfast my father had locked himself in the room again. I knocked on the door. But the door didn’t answer. It was so quiet. Whole house was.

When I was little, and my mom left us, my father used to do it all the time. Refuse to come out. I had to slide my report cards under the door. Did the same thing with the bills. Left him dinner on a plastic tray. Once the neighbors had to help me open it. When they got inside he was catatonic. Six years old, looking it up—catastrophe, catatonic, catnip—I flipped through the pages of the dictionary, thought when I grew up I wouldn’t be anything, I wouldn’t have to help anyone.

My stepmother sat down. Said, “You’re making it worse, Colter. Maybe you should go.”

“Maybe you should,” I said, then regretted it. Probably she would.

I walked down the street. Past the swings in the park where teenagers had spray painted the slide. Children kicked and threw mulch in each other's eyes. Creek and hollow. I walked by ten little girls but none of them were mine. In three years, give or take, they'd be breaking into windows, stealing car radios, smoking an apple they made into a bong. I had a little girl and she wanted to come stay with me.

When Ally first found out, she came knocking on my door. Hadn't seen her in two months. She had been the one to break it off. But there she was again. She said, if I wanted, she'd like to name the kid after me. When I took her to her first ultrasound they smoothed a gel onto her freckled stomach. Doctor looked at the thing, the thing floating in the strange black fluid and static, cleared his throat and left us there, came back with two more doctors. Three doctors stood over Ally flipping through her chart. One of the doctors had a lazy eye. The lazy eye said there was something wrong with the baby, like even if it made it through the delivery, which they couldn't say it would, there would always be something wrong with it.

"Consider," the doctors said.

"Consider," I said. I'd walked outside her door and sat and watched the clock move. On the hospital walls there were paintings of fall, orange leaves and a red barn which I would have knocked down if I could. Ally had no idea what she was doing in there, saying she wasn't going to consider. As I walked back to my father's house, past the piles of leaves, the swings, hawthorns, I swore, I heard her coming for me.

But there was no one. No one and empty houses, a broke down subdivision, gravel road, concrete one. I walked up a dead end until I found the noise, a Dalmatian, bleeding from its ears onto the gravel, kicking its hind legs around.

“It’s okay,” I said to the dog, sneaking up on her.

She let me pick her up and carry her in my arms all the way home.

She had no tags so she could be whoever I wanted. Got her blood all over my shirt. I wanted to call her Polka, the dance not the spots. Put her in my dad’s bathtub, and washed it all out of her coat. The bathtub was coated in dregs of dried blood and fur. Polka jumped out and shook herself all over. I was going to teach her to sit, shake, lie down, fetch sticks. Wrapped her in a towel, felt like I was making up for lost time.

My stepmother knocked on the bathroom door.

I said, “Come in.”

She stuck her head in. Said, “Enough is enough. If you can’t get him out, I’m calling the police.”

We walked down the hall. Polka trailed wet paw prints on the wood floors. My jeans wet where the dog had splashed me.

“Listen to this,” my stepmother said pressing her ear up against the door.

“I don’t hear anything.”

“Listen,” she said. “Do you hear that sound?”

“Get away from the door,” I said.

“Do you think we should break it down?”

“We’re not breaking it down.”

“That. That right there. What’s that?” my stepmother asked.

I pressed my ear to the door, my eye up to the keyhole.

“Go away,” he said.

“Dad. What are you doing?” Pounded on the door until my palm stung.

Stayed up all night and worked at my old childhood desk. The one my knees didn’t fit under anymore. I was supposed to be designing a print ad for an airport and I was trying to make the clouds look just right, like you would want to fly through them. Like each flight would be first class. Ice clinking in the glass in your hand. I worked all night into the morning, listening for what was happening below me, for what he was doing down there, half-blind, sitting in the first light the window let in. I shaded the edges and looked down. Cut up and looked down at the floor.

Found his checkbook in one of my desk drawers and a magnifying glass, a ball of yarn, and an old videotape. Maybe it was the home movie where he punched me in the face and I fell into the Christmas tree. Or the one where we carved pumpkins together and we both smiled into the camera when we were done. Sincerely. With all our hearts. First I ripped out a check from the checkbook, made it out for two thousand dollars. Thought why not three. Put it in an envelope. I would have made it out to the little girl but I didn’t know her name. I made it out to Ally. Hoped she would buy the little girl something special, like a doll house with lights that go on and a garage door that opens, like a regular pet, whatever the little girl had always wanted was what I wanted Ally to buy. Hoped it would mean something to them. Polka was lying on my feet. She looked up at my face for hours, just waiting for the moment I’d look down at her.

“Don’t get mad,” I told Rachel when she finally picked up. “I know you’re already mad. Don’t get madder.”

“What did you do?” she said.

In the background I thought I could hear her sister whisper, “Just hang up.”

“Rachel, I want you to come home. I want to go home. And I want to bring someone with me. Don’t get mad.”

“You want me to not get mad?”

“I got a dog,” I said. “She’s perfect. Can I bring her home?”

Hung up on me like her sister told her to.

There were other things I had never told Rachel about. Like the time when I was little, and I came upon four boys were beating up the neighbor kid, I never told her what I did when I came upon them. Didn’t tell her that the reason I left Ally when she was almost due was that my father called in the middle of the night, said, “Can you help us?” And I said, “Yes.”

The ambulance came, one fire truck, one police car. Colleen called like she said she would. The firemen took the door off its hinges. EMTs carried my father out on a stretcher.

At the hospital I stood over his bed. Whatever else my father had done, he’d fallen off a table and broken his hip. His eyes couldn’t focus or wouldn’t, it was always impossible to tell which was stubbornness, what was spite, which was like blood clotting behind his eyes or who knows. His scruff was white, he tried to scratch his cheek. Looked at him and closed the blinds so he wouldn’t get caught in the glare of the

window. There was a bruise on his arm, purple, under his yellowing skin, I could see darken.

“I came to tell you something,” I said.

He closed his eyes. When he closed them I wasn't sure that there was anyone in there. Went to prop up his pillows so I could make him face me. Instead I took the pillow from behind his head. And I wished that one of the doctors would come in and tell me to consider. Felt the edges of the pillow squish in my hands as I considered. And I went to the buttons on the heart monitor, everything else was plugged into. Pressed one button but nothing happened. Just wanted to make something happen. Pressed another and a nurse came.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

I said, “I was just leaving.” And I did.

By the highway, greenery, the light green grass, the green bridge over a blue river, and as I got closer, every once in awhile, the glassy green buildings of companies reflecting clouds. Polka stuck her head out the window, sniffed her nose around. Closer to the address Ally repeated on my machine, 3 Honey Hollow Drive, 3 Honey Hollow Drive, 3 Honey Hollow Drive, the highways turned into neighborhoods, where on sidewalks young mothers pushed baby carriages with one hand, walked dogs with the other.

3 Honey Hollow. Looked at the house a long time. It was a red wooden house with a short gate in front that squared off a garden of white flowers. Old house. Like a barn. Kind of old house that has secret passages, underground railroad hideouts in the

walls. Tire swing hung in the tallest tree in front. There was a tiny American flag jutting out of the right hand corner of her lawn, same as every other house on the street.

Put Polka on her leash and walked her up the drive. Heard something out back. Walked Polka around, where out in back, a little girl. Just wanted to see her once.

My daughter in the backyard. In the wheelchair, hair all tangled in front of her face, she picked up a dandelion from the grass, put the dirty weed in her mouth, chewed it up, made a face, and swallowed. Dirt smeared on her cheek. She picked up a ball and threw it up in the air, raised her arms up to catch it. It clocked her on the forehead.

I stood at the gate. Did I know her? Shouldn't I have felt more? Like how she needed me?

My daughter wheeled over to where the sprinklers shot up making rainbows, hummed, "What a glorious feeling. I'm happy again."

Stood at the gate, waiting to feel what I was supposed to after thousands of years of fathers, generation after generation, and further back, the feeling that was supposed to have accumulated over all that time, got farther away from me. To see my hair in her hair, or my eyes in her eyes. Wondered for the first time if she was really mine. Even Polka just sat there like this isn't it, she isn't, what's next, throw the goddamn ball.

"Hey," I called out. "Hey you."

The little girl waved.

"What's your name?"

"Mary."

"Mary," I said.

“Let’s play with your dog,” she said.

Polka wasn’t interested. Up close, her brown eyes darkened and waved goodbye.

Went back to the car, got a pen from the glove compartment.

I’m sorry I can’t help you, I wrote on the envelope. Put the check in her mailbox.

After a week back at home, I took Polka to the park. Threw a Frisbee high up in the air.

“Go get it,” I said. “Go get it. Go!”

On the trail a man held the back of a bike with one hand while a little girl pedaled and pedaled. Her big old helmet shone in the sun. Couldn’t hear what she said when she looked back over her shoulder to make sure he was still there.

CHAPTER IV

I was always pale. I got paler. I was tired for months before I went to the doctor. And I spread my legs, where, in between, the doctor said something had spread, my cells had spread, so that I kept opening and opening. I told the doctor I didn't believe him. At the second opinion (she said there's time) and as the third and fourth confirmed (there's time, there's treatment, there's time) I told them they never knew what they were talking about. I wasn't going to let them blast me with round after round of light. Right there on the table with my feet in the stirrups, I said "There's nothing wrong with me."

The next thing I did was take Jules to her doctors. The pediatrician for her wet cough and the optometrist for the color of her eye whites which could be brighter, and the way she squinted looking up in the yard. I took her to the child psychologist, and after, asked to take a look at his notes. I took her to her hypnotherapist. Jules was scared now not only of water, but the thing that she called "the thing at Miss Klara's," whatever that meant.

The hypnotherapist waved his pendulum in front of Jules' face. He counted back from ten and told her, "You're safe. You're safe, Jules, and it's safe to tell us what 'the thing' is."

"I heard it," Jules said.

"Heard what?"

"The sound. I heard it again."

The hypnotherapist put a box of crayons and some colored paper in front of Jules.

“Jules,” he said, “I want you to draw a picture of ‘the thing.’”

Jules held the crayon with her left hand, even though she was right handed. That made me think she must really be under and the way her eyelids fluttered like she was trying to open up. But she didn’t draw anything. She just broke all the crayons and the hypnotherapist said, “Well, good. Now we’re making progress.”

The thing really was, that whatever it is, you have to catch it early. Whatever anybody thought of me, I still wanted to catch it for Jules.

Even when I was tired I made sure Jules made it to all her appointments. She never asked anymore why she had to go. At the optometrist I held myself up by the back of the chair she sat in. I was that tired. All she had to hold up was a black paddle over her left eye.

On Jules’ eleventh birthday I hung streamers from the light on the porch and a Happy Birthday banner. I got her everything she wanted. We stayed at home. I didn’t want her going out, wanted her to see all the things she had at home. And I wasn’t sure I could go out. I couldn’t tell her that though, so I told her she was grounded. Jules didn’t care and ran laps around the yard. I lay in the hammock. When the sun started to set I watered the flowers. Jules dug up weeds and played with them. She liked the garden. She played with the clay that clung to the weeds, she made a clay pile. I sprayed the clay and Jules shaped it into little people. Whenever they were dry she said, “Mom over here, over here,” and I wet it down again, and Jules would thumb them into little beings and blow on them, like a dandelion or a candle on a cake.

When Little Mary Roberts came over she brought balloons and a piñata. They beat that thing with a bat well into the night and made me take the last turn. Tootsie rolls, lollypops, and bazooka joes burst from the donkey's insides. I smashed the head of the donkey open and there was gum inside. Then suddenly there were spots in my eyes under the bandana which I had peeked out of anyway. The spots were blue and I put my arm out to touch one. And the ground moved up so I missed it. The ground moved the wrong direction. And I was hot, my knees buckling. And I still tried to touch that spot.

I woke up and the world was blurry and white, the bed, the curtain, the paper gown they put me in that crinkled as I sat up to take it all in, the blur of white which seemed like it could have been heaven if there was a little bit more going on like disciples coming to touch my forehead, or a rising fog, but it wasn't heaven. I thought maybe there was something wrong with me after all. Where Jules had come out of me, that part was dying.

A doctor came in and she wanted me to spread my legs again and I wouldn't do it. I didn't want anything else coming out of me. I made her go away.

Jules peeled back the curtain and smiled at me.

"You're awake," she said.

"Yes," I said.

"I'm fine," she said and sat down.

"It was heat exhaustion," I said.

They kept me for days and nights for observation and more tests. There were always more tests. The doctor came in and asked Jules to wait outside, where I heard a

bunch of doctors giving her high fives, radiologists, pediatricians, anesthesiologists, they said “What’s up Jules?” And everybody recognized her from some other time and place. Me, I didn’t know the oncologist who was taking my hand.

“You should start treatment tomorrow,” he said.

I said, “I need time to think.” I let my mind go blank. White blank. I called Jules back in the room and we played I spy and everything we spied was white. When it wasn’t visiting hours Jules was with the sitter doing calisthenics because that’s what I told the sitter to do. “Keep her healthy. Don’t let her watch TV. Do jumping jacks.”

Before they let me go one of the doctors tried to get a hold on my hand again. I sat on it.

She said, “Do you have other family?”

And I nodded yes.

And she said, “Do you have a husband?”

And I nodded yes even though that was a lie.

“It’s time to tell them,” she said. “Are you going to tell them?”

“I will tell them.”

But I didn’t tell them.

Jules pushed me to the door of the hospital as we left, they made me sit in that wheel chair, and Jules seemed so strong I was going to give the babysitter an extra twenty dollars. Jules said, “My turn! Push me!” And I pushed her best I could around in a circle so everything seemed like it was back the way it was before.

The next day I wanted Jules to stay at home with me. I didn't know why she wanted to go away. So I told Jules, "Don't go to Little Mary's. I'll take you to the park. Do you want to go to Florida? I'll take you to the beach and turn you into a fish."

But we didn't do any of those things. Something came up to the surface of the skin and burst. There were little explosions. I would feel fine for hours, days, hours, then I'd feel like someone stuck their hand through my side. Soon enough, my skin would turn to the color of wet clay. That's what I thought about as I patted foundation onto my face in the morning.

And Jules still didn't know anything, not even how to sit in a chair like a normal person. At breakfast she sat at the kitchen table and started a fight between our neighbors, sneezed in the fruit bowl, cried make me something, and broke a lamp, all without getting up from her seat.

"Go catch up with your friend," I said. She didn't listen to a word I said.

Jules' clay men sat in the back yard like gnomes, or those ceramic frogs that people put out, or sundials with sayings about what time is. Some of the clay men had beards. One had a walking stick. The clay men sat there for a month at least. They sat out there weathering in the sun and in the rain and under the shadows of clouds. Then I don't know what she did to them.

I ran through all my sick and personal days. I was already tired a lot of the time. Men came in and sometimes I would get out the roll and measure the widths of their chests and the length of their arms. Sometimes I would think, well, that is a good length for an arm to be. I was tired. I would think about this one or that one. Maybe he could get

me the ties from the top shelf. Maybe he could help me take down the boxes of shoes from the stock room. Maybe he could hold this door open while I push this other thing through. It was suddenly hard to push. I would find the man a nice dress shirt that brought out his eyes and his wife would come in a fancy wrap and praise the eye I had for it. In the bathroom I would brush the hair off my shoulders that was falling out of my head. They told me it wouldn't fall out without treatment but there you go. Then when the man left I would refold his shirt carefully if he hadn't taken it with him and put it back on the shelf. If he had taken it with him I would go and get another and put it in the space he left behind.

Every time a man came in the bell over the front door jingled. One day a man came in that looked just like one of Jules' doctors.

"That isn't your color," I said when he reached out for a coat and held it up to himself. He took a coat off a mannequin and held that one up to himself. The man and the mannequin stood side by side.

"Better," I said.

He tried on fourteen coats. By the time he had left all the mannequins were half naked and he was going to pick me up on Friday to take me to the movies.

Jules opened the door. She was wearing a headdress, slippers and a winter coat.

"Are you him?" Jules said. "Are you here for me?"

The man said he was there for me. Jules closed one eye and looked him up and down.

"Are you sure?" she said.

We saw a picture about a woman whose sister dies. The sister leaves the woman custody of her niece. The woman knows nothing about children so she gives the child away. She moves to another country so the little girl will not find her. Secretly, she seems to hope the little girl will. All of this happens in twenty minutes. Still, everyone in the movie says it's too late.

I could tell twenty minutes into the picture that my date only looked like a doctor, he could never take care of Jules, he hogged the popcorn, and he couldn't help me either, he didn't open my door, so there was no reason to call, no reason for another movie, no reason even to let him walk me in.

Colter didn't want to help us. And I thought, and I had to think, who will be there for Jules now?

When I walked in the babysitter was painting her nails gray. Jules was asleep on the couch. I sent that ugly baby sitter home and sat down and made two lists of possible candidates: people who like children and people who do not like children but would take a little girl in anyway if she lost her mother when she was so little. I put Colter at the top of both lists. Then my younger sister who I didn't talk to. Lorna.

Jules drooled asleep. I wrote a long letter to Colter then tore it up. I got up and packed a suitcase for me and a suitcase for Jules. I mapped out the shortest way to get to Colter and wrote the route down. I pulled out all our road maps. I called Colter. Called and called until he finally picked up.

When we hung up I sat down and stared off into space by her snoring body—dreaming maybe of a desert, if I had to guess, where the water around Noah's Ark had

dried up, where she was the one animal in the land where water had been before it was gone. That was what I guessed. And I wished that I had time to dream. I stuck the directions on the fridge with a magnet Jules had made in kindergarten. It was felt, a green felt oval, with a picture of Jules in the center, looking out at me smiling.

CHAPTER V

My mom took me to her store, which was a mysterious place full of browsing dads. She'd quit washing her hair and doing the dishes, quit driving Meals on Wheels, and getting dressed, to lie in bed and ring her bell. The job seemed like it would be the last thing to go and it wasn't time for the last thing yet. In the window display my mom made, the headless men had a nice time. One headless man put his finger on a globe. Another was opening an umbrella. One served with his racket over an invisible net.

I snuck into the display to enjoy myself too and tried to pry the birdie out of his hand but it wouldn't budge and my mom hollered my name, "Jules!"

"Now Jules," my mom said. "While I finish talking to Mr. Washington, what I want you to do, is look around the store and find the thing that you think is the nicest. We're going to bring the nicest thing to your father."

"Okay," I said because that was serious. My mom said I was going to live with my father on trial. The trial was one month long which is a long time. In a month you can find out all sorts of things.

I wished I knew what he wanted. I picked a checkered sweater vest, with brown and yellow checks, walked up to a man with a beard, tugged on his sleeve, and said, "Do you like this? Would you like this as a gift?"

"Not really," he said so I picked up a bright white coat, like polar bear white.

"Do you like it? What if it was fur?" I asked.

“I wouldn’t know, kid.”

So I asked other men too if they had any children and if they liked polar bears.

I put on a bowtie. When I went to see how it looked, most of the men in the store gave me a thumbs up. One dad said, “I don’t think that’s your color,” but I didn’t listen. At the counter I said I would like it gift wrapped please, and in the car, I held onto the box, with the bow tie in it, and the bow on top, because I didn’t want to let it go. I hoped my dad liked bows and there were other things we had in common.

“Does he know I’m coming?”

“He’s excited to see you,” my mom said, turning on a roundabout. We went around lots of times because she didn’t know when to go, but I liked going around and around, and did it really hurt to go around one more time? No, it was nice.

“Are you sure he wants me to come?”

But she was too busy driving to answer. I wondered what she’d said to him, about what was wrong with me. If it weren’t for her maybe he would have come for me a long time ago and said, “Jules I have changed my mind and would like to know you.” He had never done that but if he said that thing about wanting to know me when we got there, I thought, I would still let him and maybe we would play catch in his front yard, even though I am a girl. Sometimes the men in the display played croquet. I thought that maybe could be our game.

The highway was lined with trees for a long time. We followed the trains on the railroad tracks and a green river. My mom pulled over and she threw up behind the bathroom door in the gas station. She said she had a cold but she smelled like Mrs. Levy

from Meals on Wheels, like sour grapes and wet dirt, smelled like eight months. I hugged Honey, my back up against the door.

I knocked and said “Are you okay?” too loud but she didn’t answer.

“Will he like me?” I asked. I could hear my mother gurgling water.

“He will like you,” she said and spat.

Mary had asked once, a long time ago, in truth or dare, “How many kids do you want when you’re grown up? Ten? What do you want their dad to be like?” and I didn’t know what a dad should be like and I didn’t know how to do any of the things a dad was supposed to teach you. I didn’t know how to ride a bike. And I didn’t know how to punch. But once I was daydreaming on a Sunday morning and the man up front said Our Father, Our Father. Then, I saw my father. It was him, he was in the ocean which was somewhere I wouldn’t go, and it was raining. Which was just like something my mom said one time, something she found in a magazine, and she had put down her coffee cup, and said, “That doesn’t sound right. 96% of people have the same feelings about their fathers as they do about god?” And that was just one of the ways I knew that wherever my father was it was some place that we couldn’t get to by car.

In the gas station my mom let me pick out a bell. I was collecting bells with state flowers. Bells and hair from other people’s hairbrushes and lost shoes was what I collected at home and my mom was fine with the bells. “Collect bells,” she said. “Stay away from my comb,” she said. The bell had hyacinths on it. My mom could pick it up and ring it.

“Where are we?” I asked.

“It’s complicated,” she said.

Outside white blurred by like the car was spinning, and it was a little. There was nothing but white for hours, white and wobbly, the way my mom’s driving made the whole world feel as if it were white, and there were cut down trees and stumps that were white, sticks that were white, white fields. Nobody drove by to keep us in our lane so my mom drove in both at the same time. It was hours before we saw something out there. A rotted out barn.

“Let’s pull over,” I said.

“What for?”

“I want to go in the barn.” But my mom ignored me.

“Please,” I said holding tightly onto Honey, because I wanted to see something good. “I bet there’s a horse in the barn. I bet there is. A pretty one. A black pony.”

“What?” my mom said.

“Let’s ride it.”

“I’m sorry?” She stopped in both lanes, climbed out, held herself up by the roof, and I thought she was going to yell or spit something up and fall into it, but she just rubbed her forehead with her hand and turned around.

“Mom?” I said.

She held her hand over her mouth for a moment and got back in the car.

“Can I drive?” I asked. My mom had let me drive on her lap before. One time I did a good job. Another time I almost hit an old man walking by. He’d slammed one hand down on the hood and waved his cane at us. I looked down the road, like, just let

me, but my mom didn't let me. When we finally saw another car, it was an old lady zooming and she honked, and passed us by, giving us the finger. My forehead leaned up against the frosted window.

“OK,” my mom said. “It is OK to be passed by.”

She drove until she was too tired to, pulled over onto the side of the road, and passed out with her head back on the headrest. I fell asleep too. When I woke up she'd turned the lights on and they lit off into the road and the other side shagged with black trees. A deer crossed into our light and stood there. My mom coughed. I put my hand on her forehead.

“What are you doing?” she said.

When I was a baby and there was no one else to check on me, in the middle of the night, my mom would come to my crib and cry because I was still breathing. That's what she told me. She'd cry and pick me up, not caring if it woke me, which she said it always did wake me, and I would scream and cry, and she'd rock me in her arms in the dark, both of us crying, because I was alive.

I was checking on her. I had it figured out. But I wanted my mom to tell me again that I was wrong.

“Stay here,” my mom said, leaving the car on and closing the door.

I drew a picture with my finger on the window, turned the dials on the dashboard radio and I didn't know where we were and I found a station that was raffling something really nice off. It was two tickets to an island far off in a different part of the world and the person who won got to take whoever they wanted. It was their choice. And I thought I

had heard of the island before. People went there to meet the strange animals. And I thought about who I would choose and I changed the station to listen to a cha cha and watched for her.

“Sorry it took so long,” my mom said when she opened the door. Then she drove me to my dad’s house and left me on his driveway. She said she didn’t want to watch me go in. She said I should call if I needed anything.

I took Honey and the box on the dashboard with the bow on top and walked the long driveway in the snow, in the very middle of the driveway, and for awhile the dark trees on both sides seemed to curve over my head like a tunnel so long and dark I wondered if it had an other side and if I would come out of it. I was afraid of the tunnel. I didn’t know where the tunnel went. The smell was cold, which wasn’t really a smell. “Who’s there?” I said when I heard something move in the trees, but I wouldn’t look back, like when you’re real high up you’re not supposed to look down or you will fall and I walked down the tunnel and the branches and the shadows of the branches reached for me and at the very end there was a wood house by a frozen lake and the lake was steaming and I walked and I held onto Honey and the box I was going to give to him.

When I rang the doorbell a dog barked inside, a light went on, and I had waited a long time. I knocked real hard on the door. The dog barked and tried to scare me away and it would have worked if I had anywhere else to go.

My dad opened the door. He was tall. Pale. I crouched down to show the spotted dog I was OK and he did not have to eat me. He sniffed at Honey. My hands were full so I couldn’t pet him. And I looked at my hands. My dad was so tall. My dad’s face looked

like mine only mine had spots like the dog. I was like a dog. That's what I thought about saying.

“This is from both of us,” I said.

When my father opened the box a little light came out. It was a shiny bow tie. He looked at me like he was confused. He closed the box and he opened the door wider so I could walk in.

CHAPTER VI

“You can put your things in the pink room,” I said shutting the door.

Jules was two weeks early. I’d agreed to let her come for a month, to get to know me, to give Ally time to figure things out. Ally told me what was happening to her. Told her to send Jules. But she was early and I wasn’t ready. Wasn’t ready.

“His name is Honey,” Jules said, held him up. “Go ahead. Shake his quill. Or not.”

“Where’d he come from?”

Almost asked the question twice, thinking maybe there was something wrong with her ears. Maybe her ears were wrong because she was a quarter him. Or maybe, if something was really wrong with her, it was just what there was that was Ally and me together, and whatever that was, it was something that wouldn’t make it, something so fragile it was cruel to watch it try.

Someone knocked on the front door. Opened it to Ally. Thinner than I remembered. Older. Older. Like the red was falling out of her hair.

“She forgot her suitcase,” she said, handed the little box to me.

“Do you want to come in? For a minute?”

At dinner, we sat around the kitchen table and looked at each other. Jules stared down at the table. Her eyes were light, that light blue that’s almost milky, and they

avoided me, looked into the center of the table. I'd put out a bowl of corn, some bread, ham, things I'd cooked up. Ally looked down, didn't touch her food.

"I'm finished," Jules said. "Can I be excused?"

"Yes," Ally said.

Jules wandered around the house, hedgehog in her hands, looked at the things that hung on the walls, family pictures, paintings of horses given to me. I wondered if Jules had allergies, if there were things she couldn't eat, things she couldn't do. I didn't know.

"I'm sorry," I said.

Said, "Don't be."

"Have you told her yet?"

She shook her head no.

"What are you going to do? What am I supposed to do?"

Ally said, "Most of the time she's fine. Bedtime's ten thirty. Don't let her spend too much time with your dad. They'll only encourage each other."

Wouldn't let me help her out to her car.

One thing I'd had time to do was to make up a room for Jules. The old study. Painted it pink. Bought her dolls and put them in a corner of her room. A rocking chair. At first Jules laid on her bed and looked up at the pink ceiling and the pink walls of that bedroom, not saying a word, even when Polka laid down beside her. Stood around Jules' doorframe, watched, and waited for her to do anything. Waited. Went in and read to her from a book that was supposed to be for eleven year olds. Said so on the back cover. Checked when I bought it.

“See the caterpillar?” I said pointing at the caterpillar. Pointed out the caterpillar tents. “See? See the white things in the trees?”

Jules did. The more I read the more she petted the dog and the hedgehog, trying clearly to give them both exactly equal amounts of affection. Eyes closed, she looked like she could have been blind, feeling over and over the difference between the spines of a hedgehog and the fur of a dog, until she felt her way into the sight of their faces. Tried to find a way to ask what she wanted from me.

Said, “I’m glad you’re here, Jules.”

Her eyes stayed shut. Just read till I could tell she had really fallen asleep, breathing sleep-breaths.

I’d moved my father in couple weeks before. My stepmother had left, so it was either my house or a home. I’d always known it was coming. Always. Taken all the locks off the doors. Unpacked his boxes. Made his bed and cooked his food. Still he almost never left his room.

“Don’t you want to come out?” I said, knocking there.

Spent my days with my head in my hands designing pamphlets for a group of survivalists in Pennsylvania, terrified. If I had time left over, I spent it looking after Jules, who broke my father’s glasses, my bifocals. She jumped around in the living room, knocked over a vase that was my mother’s. I watched it shatter from the hall.

“I’m going for a walk,” Jules said. She left the vase where it was and the front door open. Didn’t take her coat. I got down on my knees and picked it up.

Then each day Jules stayed, she roamed farther away from us, first by the shed I'd built out back, then the hills behind it, then I couldn't say, she strayed farther and farther from our house and I called from the window, "Jules, time to come home."

The third night it started to get dark and Jules hadn't come back. I took a flashlight and went out to look for her, wandering through the pine trees, calling her name. "Jules. Jules." Walking until the trees thinned out, "Jules. Jules." One hawk in a tree eyed me and followed me up the hill, waiting for me to drop dead. "Jules." I turned on my flashlight and waved it on the ground lighting up the ice below me, all the way up to the top of the hill where Jules crouched in a cave she had made out of the snow. The cave was melting. Jules had ice chunks in her hair. Crawled out like some kind of cave-girl.

"What were you thinking?" I said. "You weren't thinking." Took her hand and walked her down.

"I'm sleepwalking," she said.

"I couldn't help it," she said after awhile.

I brought towels and blankets. Made her chicken soup, brought her a bowl but she didn't want it. She wasn't hungry. Brought her hot tea even though I wasn't sure if it was okay or if it was like coffee, and kids weren't supposed to have it. She didn't want it anyway.

After Jules rocked in her rocking chair, hugging Honey to her chest, I heard her walk down the hall and knock on a door.

"Grandpa?" she said.

And he opened the door for her.

I found Jules and my father, the next morning, walking hand in hand down the interstate. They were going to “the adventure.” Jules had asked my father would he go with her before the sun came up.

“What the hell,” her new grandpa had said, “Let’s do it, Snowflake.”

“What were you looking for?” I asked opening the side door.

They both snubbed me when I made them get in the truck, gave them a Time Out. They played checkers in Jules’ room. Connect Four, Operation, Toy Soldiers, and War. Then Jules helped my father build a birdhouse. “Here is what you do when the roof caves in,” he said. Jules nodded. They balanced his checkbook.

Jules had a way with him. I had to sit my father down and ask for his help.

Said, “Tell her it’s okay to play a game with me.”

“Croquet,” she said, hours later, when she got the message.

“We don’t have croquet.”

“Do you have a bow and arrow? Horseshoes?”

“We have dice,” I said.

“Let’s go to town and get croquet,” Jules said.

Instead we took a walk with Polka out around the frozen lake.

“Maybe sometime in the summer, you could come back and swim in it,” I said.

Summer. Couple geese would come and drag the lake across itself. Water cold that burns. Unfrozen water. Couldn’t see yourself in it. Reeds rose out of it like spines.

She could chase the water birds out of the rushes just to see them ferry away. She could skip stones one side to the other.

“No,” Jules said.

“We could go fishing.”

“No,” Jules said.

Then I thought I should just give up. I knew I couldn’t do it.

Later, Jules pointed at the walls in her bedroom. “Can’t that be something else?”

It was her way of asking, I thought, if I wanted her to live there for good, if it was her room for keeps. Probably it would be, unless Ally changed her mind.

Said, “They’re your walls.”

Lugged in all the cans of paint I had lying around in the garage. Jules didn’t want a color on her walls, she wanted pictures. A thick jungle with birds of paradise and parrots and gorillas beating their chests and a waterfall and snakes and baby monkeys eating oranges. She let me paint the oranges.

“What are you doing?” Jules asked the next morning over the cut ups on my desk.

“I’m making something.”

“For who?” Jules asked.

“They’re like Boy Scouts only grown up.”

“What do they do?”

“Talk about things, like making kits and building forts. How do you think it looks so far?”

At the top of the fourth page it said *A Hundred Ways to Avoid Dying*. It's not like I decided what it said.

"It looks good. But you should put some gorillas in there," Jules said.

I drew in some gorillas for her to look at, waited until she forgot about the whole thing, took them out.

Soon it would be Christmas. Jules made her mom presents out of macaroni and popcorn and paper. She kept gluing her fingers together. My father said when the snow died down he'd make Jules a tree house in the back yard. We put candles in the windows even though you couldn't see the house from the road. Cut down a tree from the back yard. Bow sawed it down. Hauled it into the living room, put on tinsel, and strings of lights and when I was finished, I let Jules put the star on top.

Made her bed. Did her dishes. Made her breakfast, lunch, dinner. Made his bed. Did his dishes. Took him to the doctor. If Ally didn't get better, didn't know what.

I went out back where there were a pile of dead trees waiting. I took the axe from the shed and I hacked the wood up. Hefted the blade over my shoulder. Let the weight fall and split the wood. When it didn't cut through I hacked so hard I thought my arm would come off, hacked and hacked it into little pieces until out front I heard something at the door. Wasn't divorce papers. Still, so that everything was impossible. Ill-conceived. Impossible. I hefted the blade. Did what I could. Made her bed.

"Jules," I said, "Have you liked living with us?"

Jules nodded yes.

“I bet your mom misses you horribly. You know she’s coming to get you tomorrow.”

Jules nodded yes.

“I bet she could really use your help right now.”

When Jules didn’t answer, I said, “Your Grandpa’s going to miss you.”

Jules nodded yes and looked down at the puzzle she was putting together.

My dad and I sat on the front porch when she went to sleep. I brought him a cup of coffee to warm him up. We sat and we looked down the road at what was coming.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“I’m going to build that tree house,” he said turning around and walking back up the stairs. It was getting dark outside.

I went back into the house, saw all the cut outs of trees on my desk, ready for printing. And the gorillas lying on the side. My pamphlet was full of advice, the advice of militia men, the advice of soldiers, the advice of old women that made the most sense to me.

Don’t count the stars you can see with your eyes. Don’t take ashes out of the fireplace with your bare hands. Avoid weeping after sundown. Don’t shake out a cloth or rug after dark. Try not to sit with your back to the ocean. Don’t ever, ever rock an empty rocking chair.

Maybe. Put the pamphlet back down on the desk. Went outside where it was so cold I could feel when I breathed how the air touched the very bottom of my lungs and

left me. Went back to where the axe was propped up against the shed and pill bugs crawled out when I picked it up.

CHAPTER VII

We were doing Annie in drama class. I didn't mind being an orphan. I was really good at it and Sandy was my best friend. I only minded when I had to go to history and we were supposed to think about what Christopher Columbus was like. I went out into the woods behind the school when I was supposed to be Christopher Columbus, and I didn't want to be Christopher Columbus. I wasn't into the ocean blue.

Pocahontas came with me, she had one feather sticking up, and this other girl too, who didn't have a big part to play. We walked and walked and pushed Pocahontas down the leafy trail into the one marshy part of the woods, like the group of marsh birds I saw in the thick brush, and the girls threw handfuls of mud at me and I threw handfuls back. I walked through it getting mud up to my knees. It was so cold the mud was almost solid but it wasn't solid. Pocahontas got me right in the face. She said it was a mud party. And I smeared the mud over and from my arms, fingers to shoulders. It was slimy, thickened. I put rocks in my pockets and walked deeper and deeper into the mud and plopped down letting it get all the way up to my neck, letting it spread between all the hairs in my head, and it was like I was a different shape, a funny one.

The school called my mom. She met with every single person who worked there, including the janitor, while I sat in the hall. Then my mom closed the office door behind her.

She said, "Last straw. You're not going to school anymore."

The mud dried a grayish color and it got all over the seats in my mom's car. I looked in the side mirror at what was behind me and it was tilted and nothing was closer or farther away than it should have been, even my gray face.

"I was exploring," I said. But she didn't listen.

I didn't want everything to be different. I had to go up to my mom each morning and she would tell me what my assignments for the day were.

On my desk I had a box and cardboard paper, feathers, glue, lefty scissors, beads, and cut out pictures from all the countries in the world. My assignment was to make a diorama and keep it down. I kept it down. It was very quiet. Outside my window the branches in the trees didn't move an inch.

I thought I could go to a warm place like Tahiti and bake in the sun. I wanted to go to a place that was a jungle that had tall palms way above my head. If I had to I'd cut through the palms with my machete to make my way through and Mary would come. And Grandpa could come if he wanted to. And there would be gorillas and giant flowers that are wild and we would make friends with the gorillas and eat the grass with them and lay in the tall grass and drink the water that falls from the sky one drop at a time into my mouth. We would climb up to where the water comes from and above that because we would be the best climbers. And go up. We would go high up to where the animals are that people never see and only some people know that they are there, and they are there, and what are they? It is a beautiful thing to be meant to live with the animals no one has ever seen, even if you haven't seen them yet. It is beautiful to know they are there and

that you belong to them. And that you don't belong to the things that just happen to be around when you open your eyes.

When I was finished I went downstairs carrying it in my arms and I said, "This is my diorama of the jungle. It is an important place to me."

My mom was laying on the couch in the family room, awake but not, and there was a big bowl on the floor she could use if she couldn't make it to the bathroom. In front of her, daytime television, where each of the characters had many lives, and they were good one day and bad the next, and what I took away from the shows was that someday I would get amnesia and my whole life would move away from me and that was one thing I knew was true and when I didn't want it to, it would all come back in one big flash.

"Pass me the bowl," my mom said.

I put my jungle in the window.

When I remembered things I remembered things I never should have heard. Like I remembered overhearing my mom say what it meant to be a mom. I remembered her saying, "Jules— Jules will never die."

She pulled the blanket over her head, the one great aunt Tilly had quilted. On it there was a family tree and it was green and blue, red and yellow, an all colors tree, with white thread for stitched leaves. At the bottom of the tree it said: THE KEPPLERS. And there were lots of empty branches. At the top there was my mom's name and mine. We both had a dash next to it with an empty space, like the space outside the window between the trees, the space up higher, and I knew that it went higher, and higher, and it would never stop. And my mom said, "The light's hurting me. Close the blinds."

My dad came into town and I was supposed to work upstairs on that day's assignments while the grown ups talked about what would happen to me. I did what I was told. I wrote "The Pine Tree: A History Through the Ages."

Trees in the pine family are different than other trees. They are evergreens. They have many defenses like needles, like porcupines and hedgehogs. A pine can be a thing and it can also be the thing it does. Certain trees do different things than other trees. There are varieties.

A good place with trees is called a grove. A bad place with trees has many names such as ditch, cemetery, or yard. Some trees prefer to live in a bad place. Some do not care where they are planted. Pine trees love things and miss them terribly until they waste away. You can do that anywhere.

Although the pines never die they do get older and older. New growths on pines are called "candles." Encyclopedia Britannica P says that it's bad to keep too many pine trees together because they spread fire. Their resin is so flammable the trees can become explosive. When a person places an angel or a star on a pine tree they are asking it not to be dangerous anymore. They are asking for the house to be a good place. In conclusion, in other places there are sycamores and cherry trees with flowers.

When I showed it to my mom she told me to start over and write it again. But I didn't want to start over.

Weeks went by without me seeing anyone my age. I thought I couldn't do it, be around grown ups all the time. There was something in them that I didn't have, something small but also very big that I didn't have. So I snuck out the back door and took a bus all the way across town and it was the wrong one, and maybe I will always be riding that bus, even in the next life, and I held my backpack and Honey in my lap so someone could sit beside me. If they wanted to, they could have that seat. I walked Honey up the driveway and knocked on Mary's door.

"Come out right away," I said knocking.

She wasn't home because she was at school. And I had forgot. And Mrs. Roberts hugged me. I took the bus back home.

Dr. Bennett wasn't one of my usual doctors. I guessed my mom thought I should try someone new. He led me into his office which was a playroom where there were paints, and clay, stuffed animals, and a sandbox full of sand with little plastic shovels and a chair where he sat and took his notes.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do," I said.

Dr. Bennett said, "You don't know what to do?"

"I don't know what you want me to do with this stuff."

"You don't know what to play with?"

"No," I said and Dr. Bennett smiled and wrote that on his clipboard.

"What do you think of the stuffed animals?" Dr. Bennett asked so I picked up a stuffed animal cat and petted its head.

"Do you want me to play with the cat?"

“Do you think I want you to play with the cat?”

“I guess so,” I said so I played with the cat but it didn’t move and its plastic nose was just a plastic nose.

“I don’t think I know how to play right.” I put down the cat and moved over to the clay station and I made a mask out of it, an animal mask like a rhinoceros with beads for eyes.

“This is for you,” I said, putting it up in front of his face.

“Time’s up,” Dr. Bennett said. And when I went back the next time someone had rolled my mask up back into a ball of clay, and it still had the beads in it.

I talked my mom into letting me go to Mary’s slumber party, even though she was supposed to be a bad influence because of the mud fight. Mary invited twenty people but only I came. There was a crazy book on her bookshelf called *Earth, Water, Fire, and Air*. The book said these are “The Elements” and if you show enough respect to them, and really love the world, which is made up of only these four things, you can make anything happen. We made a circle out of salt on the striped carpet in her bedroom, and we sat in the salty circle, me on the floor and her in her chair, and we read from the book and said nice things about each of the four things.

Like Mary said, “I really like snow.” Which I did think was nice.

“I think chimneys are sort of neat,” I said.

“Sometimes they smell good,” Mary said.

“OK. What about water?” Mary said.

“I think you covered that with snow,” I said. Then we were ready for the magic.

“What should we make happen?” Mary asked and closed her eyes, like whatever she imagined, it would be so.

“I don’t know. What do you want to happen?” I asked.

But Mary liked things the way they were so I let her keep them that way and deep down I was happy for her and that’s what I was thinking while outside the other nineteen girls toilet papered the trees in Mary’s yard.

It got to where I couldn’t tell if my mom could hear what I was saying. Like I would say, “Do you want me to bring you the paper?” and she would just look at me.

“Do you want to go to the doctor?” I asked jumping on her bed. Her mouth was open. When I sat down beside her I thought hard to come up with all of the things I always wanted to tell her. I wanted to make her very happy.

“I don’t feel good,” I said at the foot of her bed, an arm swept over my eyes.

She wanted me to write a report on Eskimos, and I did it, but I didn’t think I was learning things I was supposed to. I always wondered how you could really know anything. Maybe that was because I didn’t know anything. If my mom thought I was smart enough that I could learn she would have let me keep going to school and she was the one who was supposed to know me better than anybody. One thing I found out in my report was that they don’t really have twenty-nine words for snow. Sometimes a thing is just a thing. Just snow. And just snow is good and nice wherever it falls over you the word snow is just right. And another thing I learned in the report is how sometimes old people drift away from you on ice floes.

At my dad's hotel, when he was on the phone with grandpa, and grandpa's babysitter, I was supposed to wait patiently before we went for ice cream, and if I waited patiently enough, also, we were going to stop and he was going to get me another treat. It could be anything. But I snuck out the door of his hotel room, and followed the burning smell down the hall all the long way to the pool.

The door to the pool was heavy and there was a sign on it that said I was too young to go in by myself but I did. I looked at the big rectangle of water. I pulled up the bottoms of my pants to my knees and put my feet in the hotel pool and the water was green and white with little waves and I wondered how they did that, made it look like a little sea with little icecaps. I sat there for a long time letting the water kind of lap my feet, and it was like I was wondering without anything to wonder about, as I sat there and let it lap and looked down at me.

An old man with shadows under his eyes was sitting in the whirlpool and I had to wait for him to be done. He sat with his eyes shut. I waited patiently. I looked up into the skylight over me. The man was smoking his skin. His reddening skin gave off smoke where his arms stretched on the upper edge of the whirlpool. He looked like he was having a heart attack, like his heart was coming out of his body in the smoke. And I had heard water can make that happen. If it's too hot in the whirlpool your body will give, and drown, and even if I didn't already know about water, there was a sign hanging over the whirlpool that said danger hot, and his skin looked burnt from being in the water too long and just being on him too long. And I closed my eyes and when I opened them he had disappeared.

I walked towards the deep end of the pool and I looked down into the green water. And I thought about seeing for myself. I could see into the bottom of the pool in the drain but the holes were hard to focus on because of the way the water moved.

The white was the light moving through the water. And I guessed it all came from the skylight. And that's where I jumped in. And the water let me jump in. It made space for me. And I opened my eyes and looked and everything was different. My hair moved through the water in front of my eyes and I looked so carefully I let myself take that in with the water. And that was different too. It could make me different too. And I crossed my legs which helped me sink to the very very bottom where I was and where I waited until I saw what happened when I didn't hold my breath.

CHAPTER VIII

Jules put a stool by the kitchen sink to do dishes. She put another one by the washing machine. She brought me water and aspirin, learned to cook, and who to call for take out. Sometimes her arms were my arms reaching out across the room. Her fingers were my fingers when they punched in the numbers on the phone.

Did she get it right? One time she got it right and handed me chopsticks. Mostly she flooded the floor and the kitchen smelt mildewy for weeks and weeks at a time, until we just got used to the smell. Did she cheat when she checked her assignments? Did she put gold stars at the top? Jules couldn't lie. And she put a washcloth on my forehead that was cool and warm at the same time.

Jules. Like the rocks in her head. Jewels. I still tried to poke around in there. When she was out with Colter I broke into her diary—KEEP OUT—it said on the cover and there was a fake golden key sticking out of the lock.

A diary is a stocking stuffer you give someone when you don't really know them at all. When I gave it to her she said she was going to write in it everyday. It only had two entries, and in them, she had just written down her horoscope like it could explain the day better than she could. Jules was a Cancer. Oversensitive. A water sign. But I had heard that it wasn't just the sun sign that mattered, it was the moon sign, and the alignment of the planets in the houses, and I didn't really get any of it, or know what they were, what planets over Cancer.

I sat with my back very straight on Jules' bed.

I did wish that someone had given me a diary at some point, or if they had, that I had filled it up. I wanted to fill in her diary for her because I didn't have my own. I mean I flicked the end of my pen against the pages thinking of what I would say. I knew in the last week of my life I wouldn't be able to say what I wanted. How I'd be past the point of blinking yes or no. I'd seen people die before. Who hasn't, I guessed. And I could feel it wasn't the last week yet, when I ripped out a page. Like that was just one of the things I could do.

Most of the time I still went to work. The men packed around me with their wallets out. I had double vision so I could never tell how many customers were waiting. It was hard to remember what they wanted from me. A man came in that wanted a shirt in sea foam.

"No," he said, "Not topaz. Sea foam."

In the storeroom I looked and looked for what he wanted but everything was a blur of gray. I dragged out the ladder and tried to climb just one step up, to see what was up there. And I missed the rung and sat down and waited for the shapes to settle. I thought I sat there for an hour. When I went out the man was still there flipping through a rack of hanging coats.

"I said sea foam," he said. "Sea foam."

I had to convince him he had fall coloring and needed something else.

"Go get the chestnut shirt, then," his double said. "Go. Go. Go."

On New Years Eve the three of us, me, Jules, and Colter, went outside on the front lawn to watch the sky light up. Little Mary came over. And there was sparklers in all the children's hands. They really were something in the coming dark.

When Colter and I went inside, he wanted to talk about what was going to happen to us.

He said, "I'd be happy to stay as long as you need. That's all I wanted to say."

"I think you should," I said.

"If it means Jules won't be around sickness all the time, then I think it's a good idea."

"Show's how much you know."

Jules loved sickness. It was her favorite thing right after Honey and chocolate milk. I watched her out the window playing thumb war with Little Mary, who could barely move her thumbs, in the falling sparks and neighborhood shadows. Even from the window it was pretty clear Little Mary won. It was getting darker. Jules climbed to the top of the sycamore tree, the one whose bark was all stripped off to the yellow and white and purple underneath. And I guessed she thought the extra five feet up would make her even closer, closer than the people for miles and miles that would stop and look up. Above the tree something did fly quite high up into the air and burst like a star. Then Jules climbed around in its dark smoke. I smelt the fire in the air. I could smell it. See the dark smoke move around in the dark. And I felt the smoke moving in me, a heat moving, my legs go weak, I started to steady myself, put my hand up on the tile in the kitchen, like

I was putting my hand up in smoke, and it was always that way when I lifted my hand, when I collapsed.

The doctor wanted to cut me open. He wanted put something inside me. Almost like I was a surrogate. Or like it was the Annunciation. Wings flapped in the corners of my eyes.

“You’re kidding, right?” So when that doctor got fed up with me he wheeled me across the hall to dump me at another different doctor’s door.

“A seed,” the other doctor called it, moving a tiny gold framed picture of his kid around on his desk. “It’s a different kind of radiation than we’ve talked about before.”

It was supposed to be my best chance, the chance I had left and if I took it, it would make me poisonous, in my skin, my sweat, and tears, so that I’d be quarantined. If I let them do it, and put it in me, I wouldn’t be allowed to see Jules for two months.

“Just being around you would make her sick.”

“What if she’s already sick?”

The doctor rubbed at his brow.

A fly was buzzing by the window. I put my purse in my lap. And I couldn’t believe a fly could fly through the sliding glass doors on the first floor, down the hall, to the elevator, ride up and find that office, all that work, just to buzz on the windowsill, and what kind of hospital has flies?

“What kind of show are you running?”

“It just flew in the window,” he said. “I’m sorry. We’re you serious about the elevator?”

“It could have,” I said and it wasn’t like I was saying the fly could push the floor buttons, just, he didn’t know what it could do.

“Is that all?” I said.

I went home. Of course, I didn’t take his seed and I thought about writing a letter to the board about renaming the whole thing. The same thing happened two more times and the doctors just stood there saying the same thing. But I knew all about seeds and men and doctors. I knew if I had listened to doctors Jules wouldn’t be alive. If I listened to the doctors maybe I wouldn’t be dying. If I had listened to the doctors everything would be the opposite of the way it was and the way it was meant to be.

And when it happened a third time and they took me to the hospital I knew probably I wasn’t ever coming out, no one had to tell me.

A penlight shined into my eye and behind it, lighting up all that empty space. It was a doctor who leaned in over the light and blurred into and out of three doctors. Sometimes more. He said it was in my brain. All those extra doctors. That’s where the double vision came from. He gave me something that made it all, the room, the bed, the clipboard at the end of the bed, the window, even duskier. Later that first night, when I could still talk some, he pulled up a chair and sat down. His last name was stitched on his white coat. Keller. Keller kept drugging me through the IV pole and there were four bags hanging there half full.

He crossed his legs. “The nurses said when you came in, you didn’t want any treatment. I’m just trying to understand, and I’m looking through your chart, and Ally, I have to ask—why let it get so far?”

Keller looked young enough to be my son and it showed when he opened his mouth. He could be triplets. He had one of those faces that looked like it would never grow old, hair that wouldn't gray, even his glasses seemed contradictory, boyish in a way he didn't intend. When he put them on his nose he looked above them, and below them, like that was where it was clear. The glass was bright. I wondered if he would be the last person to see me alive, and if he'd see me clearly.

"We can make you comfortable," he said over the tops of his glasses.

He brought me paper and a pen, and whatever I asked for. I had this idea I would write down instructions for how to raise a girl like Jules. Because it is a complicated thing. I was too tired to hold the pen up. I tried to use both hands, couldn't, and I needed my other arms, my other hands.

First I would have written... Don't let her play dead. And don't attend her little make believe funerals. When she comes to my funeral don't let her wear pajamas or galoshes or a headdress or whatever she has in mind—she'll hate herself later when she realizes what she's done. She needs at least four blankets on her bed. Otherwise she gets cold. Don't let her and her little friends start a cult. If they do this in your backyard and the other parents find out, they'll never let it go. Don't let her stay awake after midnight. She's unhappy the next day and walks around in a fog. Don't let her close her door at night. Sometimes she sleepwalks out the window. One time she told me she was stolen by gypsies in the night. Try not to be charmed when she lies. Sometimes she is allergic to dairy, corn, plastic, wool, power lines, and the sun. Most of the time she likes to be told the story of her birth. If you don't remember the story, because of how you left, let her

tell it to you. Tell it back to her. As much as you can. She also likes the parable of the mustard seed. That's the one where Jesus is explaining what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. He says it's like the mustard, which is the smallest of all the seeds but it grows into the biggest tree, big enough that it has room enough for all the birds to fly into its branches. Probably there are other trees that are actually bigger. Don't get into that. And don't take her near water unless you're ready for tears. Maybe you should buy one of those handkerchiefs that don't wear out. I think she still believes that if she works hard enough she can do or become anything. But she doesn't have anything she wants to become. Maybe you could come up with something. So she'd be a little less lost. You could try that. You could try but no one will ever love her more than me.

All I finally got down was: *Don't just leave her standing out in front of a house, waiting for you to pick her up, and never come. Don't leave her in a driveway. That would be a sad story for her to have to tell.*

Keller started to tell me a story about his life, when he was little. He was trying to reach out to me. He had a fort. He had a brother. I couldn't follow him back there and I let out a yawn. His brother got something. Not what I had. I was worn out, wearing out, and the doctor's voice trailed off into nothingness and then he was nothing.

My feet numbed. Then my calves and knees. The numbness moved like a dress that's pulled up. The way your arms get pulled in and your hands and the dress goes over your head and gets stuck. And you feel like such a fool. You can't even get out of a dress. That was what it was like except the dress was my body. Jules.

“Is this the medicine?” I said looking around in an empty room and that was the last thing I said. Staring at the ceiling listening to Colter read. I had things to add but it was too late. The people in the movie said it was too late. On the other side of my bed there was a window. I would try to focus on the window, really look at it, without seeing what was outside, so the gray and green trees blurred again. I wanted to see what was there clearly. I got to know each inch of glass, each smudge, each knick. The smudges were real. Jules laying beside me. I wanted to talk to her. I looked at the glass. I couldn’t remember what I was supposed to be doing there. I would look down, see the top of her head, how she hadn’t combed her hair, how one strand was shorter than all the others, and I would go to open my mouth to say something about that spot. It was lost to me. She was lost to me as she laid beside me. I knew she was there on my side and for three days I tried to tell her why she was mine. Three days was how long Jesus was in hell.

And I always wondered what he did down there, walking around on a lake of fire, and was he still pulling people out of the lake, was he still fishing for souls in the firewater, or when Jesus was in hell, did he just walk across the lava and feel what it did to the soles of his feet. Did he still think his dad had left him? Did he blame his dad? Is that what it always came to? Did he not pull anyone up or did he look down into their burning faces and choose.

I had let the sickness spread and spread out over my life. I had let her arms be mine because my legs were hers. So how would he choose for me? How would we be pulled apart? I thought I would lie there like I was floating away out onto it, onto what spread, in a wooden boat. I thought it would be like that and row your boat and the dream

that would be misty. And would the boat catch on fire? And would it take me anywhere I wanted to go. I thought we would all be a child again with nothing wrong with us, and the world would be inhabited with nothing wrong, the banks would be full of mustard trees and their branches would reach out to me and in the branches there would be children, climbing birds. And I wasn't one. And what I meant was I thought everything would go back.

But I didn't go back or get to do any of those things. I couldn't see Jules. Everything was empty as an empty room. We weren't meant for empty rooms or going after what we wanted. We were meant to live for someone else. I tried.

CHAPTER IX

The old man was lying in a big sprawled out X on the grass outside and he wouldn't get up. I didn't know what it was that time. It was dusk. The air getting colder. The things in the trees that woke up and came out at night or slithered out of their holes were waking up. Things that would crawl down to him if he didn't get up. Suddenly it seemed like we were living in the painting on Jules' wall.

I said, "You have to come inside. Just come inside." Crouched down over him to shake his arm and he just let it roll in my hand. I lifted up his eyelids and peered down to see if his eyes were rolling around in his head.

"Get away from me," he said.

"Dad," I said. "You have to come inside."

But he wouldn't. He was in the grass. Tried to lift him but I couldn't, he was heavy, rigid. Didn't know what to do with him so what was new.

"Please," I said.

When he didn't answer I went in and made a pot of coffee for when he would get up. Jules was asleep, thank god. We were supposed to get up in the morning, go back to the hospital. I sat at the window watching it darken until I couldn't see his body out there under the tree in the grass anymore.

When Ally and I first met I remembered I was wandering around inside her store with a girl I knew, looking for a suit for my new job.

I remembered her saying, "Put that down," when I picked up a charcoal blazer. "Seriously. Put it down," she said, got a navy one. How right there she was, how in my face. How she picked out the tie and shirt. Told me when the other girl was out of earshot where and when to pick her up, what we would be doing. When I went to pick her up she didn't make me knock on her door, she was already outside waiting. Even when she was pregnant, she was always out there waiting for me.

To pass the time until he came in, I got out the ad I was working on for a train. All I had left to do was to pick a type, get the numbers right. Couldn't focus on the numbers. I opened the door to my dad's room and walked in slowly. Half expected him to be standing behind the door instead of lying in the grass. By his bed there were a couple of Red Coats, toy soldiers. A knife, some wood working I guessed he had started. The wood had a half shape carved into it, half a face. I took the knife and the wood, went and sat by the window. I thought I would put the other half of the face in, help him finish.

Polka rested her head on my feet and fell asleep. I tried not to move, not wake her. Didn't really know what I was doing, spooning out a little piece of wood with the edge of the blade. Tried to carve out another little piece next to it. Then I carved out the hollow for one cheek, until what rose up was a nose, took me well over an hour, putting in the other eye, it came out crooked and cockeyed, monstrous. Pock marked, scarred, blotchy, misshapen. Its ears were lopsided and its mouth was all askew like part of the lip had been ripped down. Three hours and I wondered what I was letting happen to him while I sat there whittling away at the wood.

In my closet I looked for the shirt and coat Ally had picked out for me and I thought maybe I would wear them to the hospital the next day, stood in the mirror trying them on, black and striped, on the mirror on the closet door. All of it made me look small, old, like a failure.

“Get up,” I said, shaking his arm, when I went back out in those clothes. When he didn’t answer I tapped the side of his face.

“Dad. Enough. Get up,” I said, tapping harder.

“Get up.” I stood over him and nudged him in the side with my foot.

“Go away,” he said.

“I’m serious. You’re going to get up.” I nudged him again in the side with my shoe.

I kicked him.

“Go away,” he said.

Kicked him in the side as hard as I could. He didn’t even flinch. Could feel his ribs through my shoe, how my foot came down where the ribs almost met in the middle, kicked down in the center. Thought not his face. And I grabbed a big rock.

Behind me I heard the door shut. Jules stood there watching as I looked down to see what she saw. It was all messed up. He was messed up. I walked towards Jules. She went back inside before I could get to her. Locked me out. My own front door. I let the rock fall from my hands.

I knocked on the door softly so I wouldn't scare her, rang the doorbell, had to get the key hid under a rock to open it. Walked down the long hallway towards her room. It was locked too. Her bedroom door. Locked.

And I said, "It's okay, Jules. He's okay. You can come out." But I guessed, well, why would she come out.

"Come out," I said anyway. "Jules?"

CHAPTER X

Grandpa was the navigator. I carried Honey and all our stuff in four big bags like a hunchback behind him in his shadow on the road, his map out, his crooked finger up in the air, like he was trying to feel for which way the wind was blowing.

“To Alaska,” he said. “Dog sleds.”

He had drawn up a map. The map was all different colors and blue and white and green. It had circles that went out like ripples and other symbols I didn't know. It only took thirty minutes to draw it out perfect and he let me help color it in with my colored pencils. Grandpa was navigator and I told him we weren't going to Alaska, we were going to the hospital.

“OK. To the hospital,” he said.

We came to a fence where cows were sticking their heads up to see us.

“What kind of cows are they?” I said, plugging my nose with one hand and reaching up for a cow with the other. She had sweet black eyes, she was sweet black and white dotted, and she moved her nose around in the air.

“Brinded.”

“I'm going to go in,” I said.

Grandpa smiled. “Put your fingers together like this,” he said making an upside down chapel. “Boost me now.”

But we didn't get too far with that. I stepped up one plank because that part wasn't too hard for me. I reached up towards that sweet cow's spotted ear and whispered in it. The stars started to show themselves and everything mooded and we went and sat down by an old empty shed and trees horseshoed around it. I took a peanut butter sandwich from one of the bags. And we ate it under the shadows of the shed and the needles on the branches.

"You ready?" I said.

"A minute, Snowflake. You got an apple?"

I did. Halfway through, he chucked the core over his shoulder.

"What if went to South America?" I said leaning back.

"We could climb Macchu Picchu," he said.

"What if we went to Africa?"

"Kilimanjaro's really something," he said.

"And if we went to Europe?"

"We'd climb the Tower of Pisa," which it made me sad to see how much he must have wanted to climb that fence and he couldn't and everything we were going to climb was the tallest.

"Don't forget the Great Wall," he said.

"What if we fell off?" I said.

"Someone would catch us," he said standing up.

"No matter where we fell?"

"That's right."

And there we were, we walked down the road and when cars came we hid in the bushes. We came to a highway and Grandpa held an arm back to make me stop. Then he said, “Go! Go! Go!” and then we were running across it which was hard with everything on my back weighing me down and the cars coming honked.

He said, “Keep up the pace! Keep up the pace!”

And Honey didn’t like it when I ran. And by the other side Grandpa’s feet hurt. He was worse than I had thought, and fogged up. We sat by the side of the highway with Grandpa’s thumb up in the air. A van pulled over onto the side and asked where we were headed. Before we said where, the driver said he wasn’t going there.

I said, “That’s funny,” as he drove away.

Grandpa fell asleep with his back up against a tree. He could sleep anywhere.

One of the things my mom told me she wanted me to have was a scrap book from when she was little. Most of it I didn’t know what to make of and I thought probably I would only understand later, but in the back there was a black and white picture of her smiling when she lost her first tooth and a picture of her smiling when she lost her two front teeth. The more she lost the prouder she looked out at me. When Grandpa snored I could see he had lost a lower front tooth and it made like a whistling in the middle of the snore sound.

I knew I had packed it but I couldn’t find it in any of the bags and that was what I did while he slept. I looked for her missing teeth.

When he woke up Grandpa told stories about riding the rails, how the only thing he ate during the whole Depression was oatmeal, oatmeal, oatmeal, and about all the

good people who took him in back then, when he had nothing. Everybody had nothing too, but, still, when they could, people took him in, and let him ride in the back of their cars and let him hide on their trains. But I guessed there wasn't anybody like that these days. Or he wasn't related to them. Or it was me that made them not want to let us sit in the back of their vans with dark windows.

I said, "Tell me about my step-grandmothers."

He said, "All of them would like you, kid."

It was getting colder and scarier and we walked through a meadow and the meadow was long. It was so long I thought we might be in it forever. It was getting to be so early that the black grass was wet and green too, black and green at the same time, and we were walking through dew and I took my shoes off so it would be even nicer and my feet would feel how.

"My mom would hate this," I said.

"She would?"

"I wish she was here," I said.

"That's not nice."

The wet grass stuck between my toes. The wet grass smooshed where my feet went and left half footprints.

"I bet we could make grass angels," I said.

"Grass angels?"

"It's wet enough."

But we didn't do that. At the other long end of the meadow up on a small hill there was a white farm house with a light on above the door and it looked like it was right out of Grandpa's stories, that wooden house. We walked up towards it and I put my finger over my lips like shhhhhh Grandpa.

Inside it was like it was a different time. There was an old man taking off his hat and hanging it on a hook, in the warm yellow light like some old photographs. His old wife inside was knitting with her feet up. Even the phone above her was from a different time, to use it you would have to put your finger in a circle and slide it all the way to the right for each number, then let it slide, slide. And the man went to the kitchen and brought his wife a plate of cookies and milk.

Probably if we stayed at the window we would learn a lot, we had a lot to learn from that house. The longer I looked the more I figured out what was happening. The old woman knitted. She could do it without looking down, as she listened to the television, the expressions on her face were sweet, the way they changed as she listened to her history channel, and probably I could have stayed there for hours, watching her eyes move. What the woman was learning about was the Hundred Year Wars and the War of the Roses and there was something all of those wars had in common. And I couldn't always tell what the man was saying over the television but it seemed nice and careful and that was what the man and the woman did, they talked to each other and listened to each other, and they listened to the history like they thought they were a part of it and Grandpa scratched at his cheek.

"Shhhhhh," I whispered when Grandpa started moving towards their truck.

“Shhhhhh,” he whispered back at me, and waved his arm like follow me, follow me, duck down.

I opened the passenger door to the truck real slow like. Grandpa was inside jingling the keys in the ignition.

Looking over my shoulder, as we drove out, blowing up dust and gravel, I saw the old man on his front porch with a rifle pointed up in the air and the old man pulled it back in against his shoulder and I said, “Go!” but probably he never would have fired a shot. And didn’t.

“Do you feel bad?” I asked.

“Yes, I feel bad.”

“We could still take it back.”

“I don’t think so,” Grandpa said.

“To my mom!” I said.

“Where?” he asked looking over at me and he was the kind of the driver that I had to keep telling look out, look out, look at the road! And he got out of the way of a possum just in time.

“I think we should stay with her from now on.”

“It wasn’t his fault,” he said.

And I looked out the window. And I had always wanted to go to somewhere far away and maybe that was why everything was happening. If I hadn’t wanted it, probably me and my mom would both be fine, back in our old house with Honey, and I would be going to my old school, and Mary would come over everyday and play rock, paper,

scissors, and we would do stuff like start a bonfire. Sometimes I would have to go see my doctors, but at least I wouldn't have taken something from the nice old couple and I could tell the doctors thank you for your time and I wondered if Grandpa and I should have brought Polka with us and when I looked up I saw Grandpa scratch his cheek under his black eye.

CHAPTER XI

On the fifth day, when Jules, Honey, and Colter's dad came just before sunrise, I told the doctors they could take me home. They could make me comfortable there. A nurse wheeled me out to Colter's dad's truck that chugged for two miles, clacked, and stalled.

"Does this happen a lot?" I asked.

"You bet," he said and fiddled under the hood until it smoked. Eventually some young girl in a truck pulled over and fixed us up.

When we got home Jules dragged in a sleeping bag and a cot because they wanted to have a sleepover on the floor in my room. They clung close to me, like I remembered Jules doing when she was three, and how could I make anybody feel safe? Jules came and sat on my bed, went to pull back a hair behind my ear, and changed her mind.

She looked at me hard and said, "You take care of me." An insult, a complement, or maybe she was telling me what to do, I couldn't tell.

I needed pills at specific times Jules kept track of, could barely move, had to ask for Kleenex, a blanket. I had to ask for things. I wet the bed. Someone had to get the sheets. Someone had to open the window. Jules climbed up and unlatched it. I wished she would just pull the shades down. She opened my mouth and dropped something on my tongue. She was the someone. She had the something. Then she and her grandpa played a

game of twenty questions, in which they tried to include me, in which the answer was: I am a rat.

Later Jules crept back into the room wearing a fairy costume, a size too small, and she stood holding the yellow gauzy tutu in one hand, in the other a wand with red ribbons dangling the color of our hair. The end of the wand was a bright yellow star I had glued on, part of an old Halloween costume. She looked littler than she really was. Jules stood over my bed and leaned in very close to my face.

“Make a wish,” Jules said and knocked my forehead with the wand. With one hard tap, everything turned black, I was blind. I was blind. It was like my eyes had fallen back inside themselves, and they stayed that way for the rest of my life. I was blinded.

“Did you make it?” Jules said. “Mom?”

“What?” I said.

It was eight in the morning and it was dark, dark, dark.

Downstairs my sister Lorna was knocking on the front door. Even she came to my bedside eventually, like the rest of the town. I couldn't see them, but they could see me, and they pulled up chairs to take a look at where they all would end up.

“It could be worse,” Lorna said. “You could be in some country where there's no aspirin. Where there's no mosquito nets. Here. I brought you this piece of cake.”

I laid my hand out real flat and waited for her to put the plate on it.

“What can I do for you?” she said. “What can I do?”

When Colter came by he said, “Look at you. Just look at you.” If he was my mother and I was on my way to a school dance, maybe it would have sounded right, and I had never gotten a chance to say anything like that.

Colter’s dad wanted to know what it was like.

“I’m hungry,” I said.

“For what?”

“This and that. I never asked you what happened to your face,” I said.

When it was the minister’s turn, he came to the front of the crowd and said, “It must be a comfort to know Jules will be well taken care of.”

Then he wanted to hold hands with me. He wanted to put my name on a list and have the whole congregation pray for me next Sunday.

“What would you like us to say about you?” he said.

I thought about that for awhile. Some of the people standing in the back had suggestions about what I should want people to say about me.

Little Mary said I looked tired. She said, “You’re out of it Mrs. Keppler. Look. I brought you this picture I drew.”

“What’s it of?” I said holding it up for everybody.

“The squiggly blue lines are wind. Do you like it?”

“Can I bring you anything?” someone behind her said, someone I couldn’t recognize.

“Will you draw me a picture?” Little Mary said and put what I could only guess was a blue crayon in my hand.

In the evening Colter drove back to the hotel but Jules and her grandpa stayed with me. We whispered to each other in the dark.

Like I woke up to Jules whispering, “No they don’t. They don’t test on animals.”

“Do so,” her grandpa whispered back. “Rabbits and rats, for one example.”

“I don’t believe you,” she said.

“They make the animals sick. Then they give them the medicine to see if it fixes them. That’s how we get medicine.”

“I think that’s wrong,” Jules said.

“Well,” he said, “You’re wrong. Wait till you’re older and see.”

In the morning the two of them both put their faces in my face to listen for my breath. Jules put her hand on my heart. It was cold. The way they leaned in. They both watched and waited to see what the painkillers would do to me.

“Told you she’s breathing,” Jules said. Her Grandpa went and got a mirror. Then we whispered to each other in the dark.

Like later I put out my hand and whispered, “Did you forget to give me something, Jules?”

“Forget what?”

“I don’t know. What didn’t you give to me?”

“I gave you what I was supposed to give you,” she said. “I followed the chart.”

“Where’s your grandpa?”

“He’s feeding Honey out back.”

“I don’t feel right,” I said. “Give me more of whatever you gave me. You didn’t give me enough.”

“I did,” she said.

She gave me more and it wasn’t enough.

Even though I was blind, Jules waved her hand in front of my face.

“Stop that,” I said.

“How many fingers am I holding up?” She said, testing me, to see if I was still there, after she gave me more and more.

Jules said, “What year is it, Mom?”

“What day?”

“Who’s the President?”

“Do you know what’s happening in the news?”

“Can you tell me where you were born?”

“Can you tell me your mom’s maiden name?”

“What makes a song nice?”

“Why did you pick the house you picked?”

“What face am I making?”

“Can you remember what day it is, yet? Last time you got it wrong.”

“Is it black when you can’t see?”

“How did you pick my name?”

“If you had to pick between a butterfly and a mockingbird, which would you pick? And why?”

“Are there cornflowers in the garden outside? What did you plant in your garden?”

“Can you remember what I made in the garden?”

“What’s your favorite meal?”

And I had stopped answering after where I was born. It was a hospital. I was born in a hospital. In a city.

“What day is it?”

“Do you know what’s happening in your favorite show?”

“Follow my finger.”

“Make a fist.”

“Is it light outside?”

“Do you know the times of day? Can you tell one from another?”

“What is a desert island? What would you take there? How would you pick?”

“Does your stomach hurt?”

“Are you thirsty?”

“Do you taste metal in your mouth?”

“What can you see?”

In the hospital they must have wrapped me in a pink blanket. I couldn’t remember of course. They must have swaddled me and quieted me when they took my picture. Did a nurse rock me? How is it all baby pictures look the same? Mine didn’t look like that. I didn’t feel right. The light in the baby picture was gold.

“Give me more,” I said.

“What decade is this?” Jules said.

“No one ever really came up with a name,” I said.

“Then tell me, What will the next decade be like?”

“Will people live on the moon?”

“Will we wear different clothes than we do now?”

“Will we say different things than we do now?”

“Will they give our country a different name?”

“Will we still have shows?”

“Do you want me to keep going?”

“Why did you keep me?”

“Mom?”

It was dark. The voice, moved around the room like the room was full of dummies, like Jules was in every corner, and a dog barked, a door slammed down the street, those came from Jules too. She sat on both sides of my bed. She made an engine turn, made something move in the branches outside the window, and scrape the glass, and our doorbell ring, and a glass shatter on the floor, and the fan turn. She made the garbage truck go by and the sprinklers turn on. I could hear the pop and the hissing of the water, left to right and back, left to right and back, and there was water, water, and in the dark, there was dark water on dark grass. For the kids. I think she made a plane fly over our heads. She sat on both sides of my bed and the sprinklers were so loud they may not have been sprinklers. She might have made it rain, and how could she, how could she, and something like the morning paper hit the front door downstairs and there was news, there

were things that were still new, and I would have picked the mockingbird. Probably I would have picked her every time.