CHAPTER 1

at the age of sixteen, I suffered recurring nightmares. I was running as hard as I could while my destination on the horizon receded to a pinpoint and vanished like the white pop of an old television screen winking out. Awake, I lay in a trance at the bottom of a pool, suffocating beneath an invisible, silent weight: people's voices reached my ears across a great distance, and the reflection of my body was always before me, wavering in myriad and grotesque distortions.

It was the year Dad lost his job. He was given severance pay, but finding new work was only half the problem: part of his salary was our family's tenancy in the parsonage. I spent the first of those suspenseful weeks in a quiet circuit between school and the dinner table, navigating the maze of moving boxes to disappear into my bedroom each night.

To spare my little sister the final dismantling of our home, Dad arranged for both of us to leave for Great-aunt Margaret's a week

before he and Mom would arrive with the moving vans. As a six-year-old, Callapher nursed anxieties about the move that were as imaginative as they were ridiculous. When she first learned we would be leaving the flatlands of southern Ohio for the Appalachian Mountains, she locked herself in the bathroom and cried for an hour because she was afraid she would fall off. Dad said, "We'll just tie a rope around your waist and secure it to the table." But Mom arched her eyebrow at him, so he stopped. Mom kept her eyebrows perfectly groomed, delicate and sharp like the moon crescents above the painted long-lashed eyes of Callapher's *Gone With the Wind* collector Barbie.

I envied my sister the naiveté of her fears. But after saying goodbye to my friends, I was surprised to realize there were none I would miss terribly. I felt a little ashamed of the fact, but at the same time strangely proud: proud that I didn't need anyone. When we boarded the bus for Great-aunt Margaret's, the sunrise was just a line of budding pink on the horizon. Taking my seat, I felt a flutter in my stomach, the kind you get when the crush you've had for a month walks into the room. A sense of anticipation.

It was the first of March, but unusually warm for spring. Callapher and I shared the bus with half a dozen other passengers. In a silent stupor, they swayed to the rhythm of the Greyhound as its engine roared against the Pennsylvania terrain. Twisting the heavy weight of my hair into a bun, I wiped the sweat from the nape of my neck. Callapher fidgeted in the seat beside me.

"How much longer?" she asked.

"We're almost there." I just wanted her to be quiet. "Sit up. It's too hot to be so close."

Sighing dramatically, she flopped back against the seat. Her legs were too short to reach the floor. She swayed them back and forth,

watching the sunlight glint off the sparkles in her jelly slippers. She winked her eyes at them. First her right, then her left. Right, left, squinting.

"Something in your eye?" I asked.

"Look, when I do this it makes the colors change."

"I am looking."

"No, I mean try it." She covered her left eye with the palm of her hand so that she could only see from the right. She covered the right eye in turn. "See, everything looks different. Like more purple."

I said, "I see," but I was looking down at the book I'd brought. Callapher walked her finger people up and down my arm.

"Stop it," I murmured.

"Olivia?"

"Mmm."

"Olivia," she repeated.

"I said 'what.' "

She squirmed to her knees so that her face was level with mine. "Why do my eyes do that?"

"That's how they work together. One sees one set of colors and the other sees another set and then your brain puts the two together," I lied.

"I heard your eye flips things upside down and then your brain turns them around again." She projected her palm forward, like a policeman halting traffic, then turned her arm so that her fingers pointed down. "Like this." She repeated the gesture several times, rapidly.

"Where did you hear that?" I asked.

"On TV."

"Well, it's true."

She sucked on the zipper of her jacket meditatively. I told her not to be disgusting and to spit it out. She kicked the back of the empty seat in front of her. She slid around and sat backwards. She laid her head in my lap.

She asked, "Are we there yet?"

"Almost," I said. "Probably almost."

The road passed beneath the wheels of the bus, its path never-ending and monotonous as the slats of a treadmill. I stared out the window, excessively disappointed with the view. Nothing more than hills buried in blurred brush, brown and green. Bloated land. I closed my right eye to stare at the landscape with my left. I switched eyes, winking one then the other. The mountain jumped back and forth, shifting like an object in a room lit by strobe light.

I lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from? The psalm occurred to me as clearly as if someone had whispered it in my ear. That's what you get as the daughter of a minister: a mind full of Scripture. My Sunday school teacher used to give us verses printed on thin scraps of paper the shape and size of the slips folded in fortune cookies. These printed papers littered my brain. The inside of my head, a ticker-tape parade.

We passed a bait shop, a gas station, and a spattering of white-washed houses, all sandwiched between city limits posted on leaning green signs. One after the other, these sparse islands of civilization gave way to greater and wider stretches of untamed land. Just seconds after passing the line of a little town named Cedarville, the engine of the bus roared up in protest, sending a shudder down the length of the floor that tingled the soles of my feet. We veered off the road slowly, coming to a complete stop at the curb.

The driver unlatched himself from his chair. It buoyed up in his

absence. Standing at the front of the bus, he adjusted his belt beneath his overhanging belly. "Sorry, folks," he apologized. "Engine's overheated again. Gonna be a few minutes."

He stepped down from the bus, which, I imagined, lifted with a sigh like that of the chair in being released from the particular burden of that one man's excessive weight. In that same moment, a grouping of heavy-bellied clouds covered the sun. The darkness of a premature dusk raced over the land with all the speed of a heavy curtain drawn shut. Of their own accord, reading lights flickered to life along the perimeter of the bus's ceiling, creating green halos upon the heads of the passengers beneath who eyed the changing landscape with suspicion.

Callapher fussed to be free of her buckle. "I have to go to the bathroom," she announced.

I sent her to the toilet in the back. She returned with her face screwed tight in pain.

"I can't go; there's somebody in there." She did an impatient dance in the aisle.

"Hold on," I said, undoing my own seat belt. I remembered passing a gas station just at the city limits. "Get your jacket."

"But it's hot."

"I know—but it might rain while we're out."

At the front of the bus, I told a woman that we were going out for a second and not to let the driver pull away without us.

"Sweetheart, we're not going anywhere," she replied. "But I'll tell him."

The gas station was no longer visible from the road, but above the wall of trees an artificially white light glowed bright. We ran down the street in its direction.

"Slow down," Callapher demanded. She ran with the stilted gait of a one-legged man, her legs locked together at the knees.

"C'mon, it's not that far. You can hold it in; no one's looking."

She pinched her hand between her legs.

When we reached the station, a chime above the door announced our entrance.

"Bathroom?" I asked breathlessly.

Raising his eyebrows, the attendant pointed to the back. I helped Callapher pull her pants down as we ran. With her underwear around her ankles, she half tripped into the stall. I closed the door behind her.

"You make it?" I asked.

"Yeah," she managed.

Leaning against the door, I saw my own reflection looking back from the square mirror opposite. My skin was pale. The single light above the sink cast the bathroom in a yellowish hue, pulling deep shadows from beneath my eyes. I turned away.

The toilet flushed. A pair of twins about Callapher's age emerged from the handicapped stall. They wore matching pink dresses that fanned out, pleated and shaped like lampshades. Red curls kinked tight in the humidity had escaped from the once carefully arranged ballerina buns atop their heads. Together, they stood on tiptoe to lather their hands over the shared sink.

"You look very pretty," I told them.

"Thank you," they replied in unison.

"Were you in a wedding?" I asked, noting the stump of a withering bouquet on the edge of the sink.

"Yes," one of the twins answered with pride. "Our mother's."

They patted their hands with brown paper towels, and one wiped

her palms against her dress for good measure. They skipped from the bathroom.

When Callapher emerged, looking better, I told her to wash her hands. "Use soap," I said. "Don't just rinse them off."

At the counter, I bought her a shrink-wrapped sub sandwich and a large soda. We sat for a moment at the single plastic booth situated between the coffeemaker and the row of candy machines.

Outside the window, parked beside the second gas pump, a blue minivan chugged in place. Pink and yellow streamers trailed the pavement behind it. White balloons hung from the side mirrors and the rear door. A sign had been duct-taped to the back, just covering a hairline crack that cut the length of the glass. In handwritten cursive it read *Just Married*. I couldn't see the bride's face, but a cloud of white fabric and lace was visible just over the rim of the passenger side window. Occasionally, the great bundle moved as the bride readjusted herself; once, it trembled.

It was the groom who drew my attention: a man in a white tuxedo waiting beside the open van door, one hand behind his back, the other straight at his side. The twins ran the length of the parking lot, the second throwing herself into the groom's arms. He lifted her into the air and kissed her affectionately on the cheek before setting her in the van and closing the door behind her. It slid along its rusted hinges with the roll of a gentle thunder.

I was struck with a peculiar desire to study his face, but he got into the front seat without glancing back my way, and his features remain indefinite in my memory. The van drove away, white balloons bouncing with the eagerness of hands waving farewell.

"Come on," I urged Callapher, glancing at my watch. We'd been gone fifteen minutes. "You can eat the rest on the bus."

"I don't want anymore." She offered the remainder of her sandwich to me.

"I'm not hungry."

The rain began as soon as we started back. In seconds it was a torrential downpour. Lightning flashed on the horizon. Callapher screamed. When she was really scared, she grimaced with a deep and rigid downward turn of her bottom lip that made her chin jut forward and left her bottom row of teeth just visible. Her plastic shoes quickly filled with water. She tripped. I offered to give her a piggyback ride. Once on my back, she pitched her coat over her head and mine.

"You're choking me!" I called through the roar of rain on pavement. "Don't hold on so tight—it's only rain. It's nothing to be afraid of."

"I amn't scared," Callapher stated.

"You *aren't* scared," I corrected.

"Nope," she insisted. She grasped her arms tighter around my neck as a second peal of thunder shook the ground.

We arrived at the Greyhound dripping and panting. Through the narrow aisle, we managed our way back to our seats, avoiding the indignant grunts of passengers sprayed with rainwater by our passing. Callapher cradled her jumbo soda pop with both hands while I helped peel away her soggy shoes.

"Let me take off your shirt," I said.

"No. I don't want them to see me naked."

"You're soaked. No one will care."

She whispered, "They'll see my boobies."

I laughed. "You don't have anything to hide. Put your arms up."

Too tired to complain, she obediently raised her arms. The tight T-shirt pulled from her body with a wet slurp. Her skin was clammy and cool in the sallow yellow light. I took my own jacket down from

the storage compartment where I'd left it neatly folded, and wrapped it around my sister's bare shoulders. We sat down. She laid her head on my shoulder and closed her eyes. In minutes, she was sleeping.

Half an hour later, the driver took his seat, and we began again up the road. This marked the second pit stop we'd been forced to make in two hours. It occurred to me too late that we should have called Margaret at the gas station so she wouldn't worry.

I tried to remember my great-aunt. The first years of my parents' marriage, they made an effort to keep in touch with that corner of my mother's childhood, but it had grown increasingly difficult to make time for a lone relative living so far from the rest. Margaret single-handedly maintained the old farmhouse and the great tract of land left to her by her late husband. The marriage was so long in the past that no one remembered it well or spoke of it often. Ten years ago Mom heard that Margaret had taken in a housemate, an unmarried friend by the name of Ruby Alcott. Together, she and Margaret were known in town as the Old Maids.

This permanent addition to Margaret's otherwise solitary life alleviated the burden on my mother's conscience. In the years that followed, each Christmas brought one excuse or another why we couldn't accept Margaret's annual invitation. We had never met Ms. Alcott. We knew her only by pictures and by the new signature adjoining Margaret's on each year's posted holiday greeting card, which we kept in a shoe box with the other rubber-band-bound Hallmark Christ childs that lay in beds of heavenly gold hay.

In anticipation of our arrival, Margaret had mailed us weekly installments of Bethsaida life: postcards, clippings from the local newspaper, church bulletins with all the exciting announcements circled in red. She sent me a help-wanted ad for a housepainter. The envelope

had been addressed to "Miss Monahan," and the enclosed note said, "Possible employment opportunity. Thought you might be interested, since your mother says you are a talented artist." Mom scolded me for laughing at the note. "Humor her, Olivia," she'd said. "She's only trying to help."

I didn't need to be reminded of Margaret's help. You could praise my dad's credentials all you wanted, but I knew that she was the reason Bethsaida Christian Academy agreed to hire him for the coming year. No one would have overlooked the events of the past year without sufficient sway from a sympathetic party. And Margaret's was about the only sympathy we'd found so far; the rent she required for the cottage on her land was nothing less than outright charity.

The vision of the cottage as I had long since imagined it rose up before me. A picket fence lining a carpet of moist, spongy grass. Little shutters and yellow-checkered curtains blowing in the breeze. Tufted pollen of dandelion seeds bursting in a puff to become stars that spattered the air, soaring up in an explosion of gold . . .

My head banged against the window, and I woke up. Through the indistinct reflection of my face on the glass, the pavement wound, wound never ending, roadside weeds ripping through the shadowy half moon of my cheek. The cabin grew warmer as my head grew thicker. I lost concentrated vision to gathering splotches of brown. As if lifted from beneath, my seat tipped forward. I fell out completely, my body light and arms outstretched in abandon. Then I stood at a precipice beneath which churned a great swirling beauty. A red cloud shrank down from a pull at its center, as a stomach flushing, or a galaxy upon its axis spinning. There was a flashing sheet of an unbearable glory. I had to jump to live. Plunge to the bottom and spring up, reborn.

Lightning flashed. I blinked my eyes, grasping at consciousness. I tried to remember the bus and Callapher's heavy head against my arm. The road stretched without end toward the unknown. Another gas station passed, so exactly like the last that I expected to find the same minivan parked beneath its overhang. I wondered about the man and his bride. Now they were speeding in the opposite direction, streamers wavering behind as they rose up from the road to fly into the sky. Instantaneously, I found myself on the road. The bus had disappeared and I was running, desperately, my feet soaked from the puddles that mirrored the darkening sky, my lungs burning, my head on fire. I had to run after him. I had to find him. I had to run before that for which I ran shrank to nothing.

I stopped. Before me stood the man, a liveried servant dressed in a suit of white. He stood before an open door. A door, perhaps, to a carriage. Or a blue van or a chariot. His garments glowed with brilliant heat in the purple fog of rain. He stood at the open door, his open palm extending the invitation.

Would you come with me? I understood him to say. *You have to want something more.* With the eager abandon of a child, I ran to him.

Again, my head struck the windowpane. The rush of joy met its end and receded as a wave breaking. I woke to see the words *W lco e to Bethsaida* printed in fading letters on a fast-approaching sign.

CHAPTER 2

with my suitcase in one hand and Callapher's in the other, I stepped down from the bus. The fresh, cool air hit me like a clap of a hand to the face. I felt it cold at my armpits and my back where I was wet from sweating. Callapher stumbled in her fatigue. I squeezed her hand.

Across the street, two women sat waiting beneath the plastic yellow awning of the bus stop kiosk. Margaret, the taller of the two, stood at the sight of us. The flesh of her underarm jiggled as she waved.

"Oh, girls! I'm so happy to see you!" she declared as she hurried across the street. "How was your trip? Did you make it all right? Where's your bags . . . oh, let me get that, you shouldn't carry it, you look absolutely beat. No, really, it's no bother. Ruby, grab her other bag. There, that's better—hugs all around!"

Her breasts felt like feather pillows. She left my clothes with the aroma of apple blossom. Taking me by the shoulders, she looked my body up and down. "I was expecting children, but you're practically

ladies." She winked at Callapher, who announced that she had just turned six.

"Six going on twenty," Margaret decided. "The last time I saw you, you practically fit in your daddy's palm. Ruby, aren't they grown up? Girls, this is Rosalyn Mae Alcott—just call her Ruby. Everybody does."

Ruby looked at us from a distance as if we were contagious. She wore bright lipstick that made the spittle at the corners of her mouth a milky pink. Her hair floated just above her scalp in a blurry auburn haze. She patted it gently, as if to make sure it hadn't gone anywhere.

"Margaret, we best get going," she said. "This rain is ruining my permanent."

"Right!" Margaret clapped her hands. "Out of the rain! Good idea. This way, girls, the car is this way. Mind you, watch the step. There's a little drop-off you can't see in the dark. Wouldn't do to get you here just to lose you on a step now, would it? I knew a woman once, busted her hip falling down two steps. Two steps! We're just so glad you girls made it all right. We had it in mind to call the police if you didn't get here in the next half hour, didn't we, Ruby?"

"Not likely," Ruby replied. She struggled to pull my suitcase against the sidewalk.

I offered to take it from her, but Margaret said, "Nonsense, she's fine. Callapher, dear, hold my hand. We're crossing the street. Anyway, like I said, we near gave in to calling help. We thought you might be lost up on the road somewhere. You hear terrible stories nowadays, girls getting taken off by complete strangers. Scares the living daylights out of me just to think it. You can't count on these public transportations. The bus schedule said arrival time: seven o'clock. Seven o'clock, my foot!"

I began to explain that the bus broke down twice, but Margaret interrupted me.

"How your mother got it in her head to let you come all this way without supervision, I'll never begin to understand. In my day and age a girl couldn't just get up and go off on her own. But then I suppose it was your father's doing, when it comes down to it. I do hope they can come soon. All that fuss and bother of moving. I've been unbearable homesick for your mother of late. Ever since she said you were coming, I've missed her something terrible. When she was little, your grandma and grandpa used to bring her down every year for a vacation in the summer and a weekend near Christmas. It was always so good to have those family visits. And I love a child in the house. That was when my husband had just died, you know. Now, I don't mean to say I'm lonely, because I'm not. Ruby here's all the company I can handle nowadays. She could talk the leg off a donkey, couldn't you, Ruby dear? Here we are. You can both sit in back. We had Beauregard clean it out last night. Callapher, are you all right? You look a little flushed."

A red splotch colored Callapher's cheek where she'd pressed it against my shoulder.

"She was sleeping when we got here," I explained.

"Sleeping?" Margaret said. "On that awful bus? With her little head banging on the window the whole way, no doubt. Well, we'll get you both back to warm beds. The sheets are all freshly washed and folded down, just waiting for you."

The Old Maids lived beyond the last intersection in town. A Dairy Mart stood to the left, bullied by the show lights of the neighboring used car lot. Triangle-cut circus flags hung between the light posts, swaying in the wind. Beneath them, shining with the gloss of rain and

spotlight beams, the cars glowed in evanescent silhouettes of green, yellow, and red.

A mannequin sat on the hood of a convertible parked at the corner of the lot, her left hand raised with palm turned back in the manner of a waitress holding a serving platter. Her head was turned so that her blue jewel eyes stared vapidly just to the right of my window. She wore a red bikini, the top of which had been forced down to her waist by the onslaught of rain. Her breasts were bare, round and smooth and hard as pool balls. She taunted me with her cold stare and her empty hand. She offered me something. Or maybe she withheld it.

"That's the Bauers' car lot," Aunt Margaret explained. "Cameron Bauer runs it with her daughter, Mollie—she's your age, Olivia, or about. Comes to church every Sunday. Works in the nursery. You really ought to meet her, such a nice Christian girl, I'm sure you'd get along."

The light changed. We turned down the road, past a black wall of trees and into a secluded cove. Atop a small hill sat the Old Maids' farmhouse. Three plastic flamingoes stood guarding the steps to the porch. They had sunk into the earth made soft by rain and leaned into one another as if in private conference. Christmas lights lit the bushes that lined the perimeter of the house.

"Lovely, aren't they?" Margaret said when Callapher exclaimed at the sight. "Beauregard put those up for us this Christmas, and we forgot to take them down. But then we just didn't want to. They're so cheery. You can't see it now, but our land goes all the way back to the trailer park behind the trees. There's trails in the woods and a creek bed. And there's a family of little boys that lives in one of the trailers. The Speldman children. You'll have to invite them to play, Callapher."

The smells of the kitchen seemed vaguely familiar: nutmeg and dust and the moist breathing of plants. A radio above the refrigerator

babbled the evening news. Aunt Margaret said she left it on so that if a burglar got near the house he would think someone was home and leave. You could never be too careful. You had to take precautions in this day and age. She, for one, never went anywhere without her safety money pouch.

"What's a money pouch?" Callapher asked.

Margaret lifted her blouse to reveal a white zipper pouch attached to her bra. It hung the way a pocket hangs from jeans turned inside out. Callapher was duly impressed.

It was so late, Margaret and Ruby didn't think to feed us. I felt a little guilty, knowing that Callapher would go to bed without dinner, but she was too tired to complain. Margaret took her by the hand and led her upstairs.

She pointed me to the bathroom, where a stack of folded towels and washcloths sat waiting on the counter, topped with a fresh bar of Ivory soap. I washed my face, rubbing the washcloth against my cheek in slow concentric circles. Standing sideways, I studied the profile of my figure in the mirror. I'd had oatmeal for breakfast that morning, a ball of cement that had hardened in my stomach during that awful bus ride. Now my stomach fell flat again.

Callapher and I were to sleep in separate bedrooms. My bed had a canopy suspended by wooden pillars as thick as saplings. The room was pink. Even the light switches were covered with rose print wallpaper. The sharp slant of the attic ceiling cut through the left side of the room. I was sleeping in a dollhouse.

Margaret came to say good night. She apologized for Ruby, who couldn't come up on account of the stairs being too hard for her legs. Their bedrooms were downstairs off the living room, should we need anything. I asked after Callapher.

"Sleeping," Margaret replied. Before closing the door she said: "Good night, sleep tight, wake up bright, in the morning light, to do what's right, with all your might."

I waited until she was gone to roll my eyes. Then I turned off the lamp and lay awake, waiting. It wasn't five minutes before the door cracked open and I heard the gentle pad of bare feet against the hardwood floor. I pretended to be asleep.

"Are you awake?" Callapher whispered.

I didn't answer. She lifted my hair and said into my ear: "Are you awake?"

"Stop it!" I turned to face her. I couldn't make out her expression in the dark. "Why don't you sleep in your own bed?"

The scold was only a formality. I always said it; she never listened.

"It's dark in there." She clambered onto the bed.

"It's dark in here," I retorted.

She wriggled under the covers and pressed her body against mine. I moved away, but she scooted closer.

"When's Mom coming?" she asked.

"Soon," I replied. Her hair smelled like sweat and sunshine. I moved over again and told her not to be so clingy.

"I can't sleep," she said.

"You haven't tried."

"I can't try. It makes my eyeballs roll back in my head and it hurts." She pinched at her eyelids. "It feels like somebody's pulling on them."

I said, "Just close your eyes and breathe slow. And think of something pleasant. If you try to sleep you won't. You have to think of something else."

She projected one leg straight up in the air, pitching the bedsheet into a teepee over her foot. "Like what?"

"I don't know. Imagine a story or something."

"I need Daddy to do that," she said, exasperated.

"Put your foot down. You're stealing my covers."

She sighed dramatically and flopped around to lie on her belly. "Will you imagine me something?"

I laughed. "I can't be in your head."

"No, I mean tell it."

"Go . . . to . . . *sleep*."

I curled up against my edge of the bed, but Callapher reached her foot until her big toe just brushed the skin of my leg. She couldn't sleep unless we were touching. Otherwise aliens might take my body away in the night and leave a fake in the bed without her knowing it. They'd leave a shape-shifter, who could take on my form.

I imagined I could change my shape by sheer willpower; if I closed my eyes tight and thought long and hard enough, I would feel the contour of my figure change.

Long after Callapher fell asleep, I lay staring at the curve of the white canopy hanging blue in the moonlight. My belly sank between the twin points of my pelvis the way the canopy sagged gently between the bedposts. I ran my fingers back and forth across my stomach, tracing with satisfaction the shape of the emptiness.

My watch alarm went off at seven. I dressed quickly and dug to the bottom of my suitcase for my tennis shoes. I would go out before anyone woke up so that no one would worry or miss me.

I didn't even make it to the door. At the bottom of the stairs, Margaret accosted me with a plate of bacon in one hand and a glass of orange juice in the other. From the kitchen, I smelled coffee and

scrambled eggs. On the stove, grease popped and spat from the dozen sizzling link sausages frying in the skillet.

"I'm not very hungry this early," I explained.

"No such thing," Margaret said. "Everybody needs a good breakfast, hungry or not. I don't let a soul out of this house without a full belly in the morning—most important meal you eat all day, they say. I used to make a whole big spread of toast and eggs and coffee for my husband every morning before he left for work. He used to tell me, 'Woman, if you feed me any more you're going to have to roll me out the door!' He was only kidding, of course—about the 'woman' bit—always said endearingly. Have some eggs!"

"Sit down," Ruby insisted. "Margaret can make anybody hungry." She looked down at my tennis shoes in surprise. "Were you going somewhere?"

"Just out," I mumbled, blushing.

They got Callapher out of bed. She sat at the table with her eyes still shut and her hair rumpled straight up into a crown of static electricity.

"It's a beautiful day," Margaret said. "The birds have been making the most lovely racket all morning. Really makes it feel like spring."

She stood at the sink, elbow deep in suds. It seemed absurdly early to have pots and pans to clean. I moved the eggs around on my plate.

"I thought maybe later we could all go out for a picnic or something," Margaret continued. "We could show you around town, pick up some things from the farmers market. They've got the most gorgeous potted flowers over at that market, Olivia. You and Callapher can each pick one out, and we'll set them out on the porch of your new house before your parents get here—liven things up a bit. It's not an ugly house, I wouldn't say that, but it's in need of a little color . . .

oh, and Ruby thought you might want to see the school—"

The revving of a nearby car interrupted Margaret's train of thought. She pulled back the lace curtain from the window and leaned forward, squinting in the sunlight.

"Why, I do believe that's George McFanny. What on earth is he doing over here at this time of day—with his boat and all get out!"

There was a gut-wrenching turn of the engine. Margaret gasped, and her hand flew to her chest. "Lord Almighty!" she cried and ran out the door like the house was on fire, the screen door slapping-papping behind her. We followed her to the lawn, Ruby holding her coffee cup up in the air as if to keep it dry from a rising flood.

In the street, obstructing the little gravel road entirely, a black truck was backing a great white sailboat up the incline of the front lawn. The wheels beneath the boat's belly churned the grass into deep rivulets of mud. Margaret ran to the driver's side of the truck, waving her arms wildly and exclaiming: "George McFanny, you get this thing off my lawn this instant! You hear me?"

"Mercy," Ruby breathed softly, shaking her head. "Now he's done it."

I followed her eyes. A man sat in the sailboat, waving enthusiastically in our direction.

"Who's that in the boat?" I asked, but Ruby didn't hear me.

The sailboat stopped a mere foot away from Margaret's azalea patch. When the engine in the truck died, her voice became clear, like someone had turned her volume up.

". . . well, I never—Beauregard Lowett, you have done your fair share of damage in this household, and most graciously have I forgiven it, but this cuts the cake; this is absolutely unacceptable!"

As if he hadn't heard a word of this rebuke, the man in the sailboat stood and said a cheerful howdy do and good morning. He was lean

and tall, with jeans that hugged the exact shape of his long legs. He wore a belt buckled with a golden medallion. Two plastic fishing lures dangled from the bill of his baseball cap.

"How are y'all this morning?" he asked.

Margaret put her hands on her hips. "Mr. Lowett, you have some serious explaining to do."

He threw a duffel bag down to the ground, followed shortly by a fishing rod, two tent poles, and a pillow.

Margaret raised her eyes to heaven and petitioned the Good Lord again.

" 'Morning, Ms. Margaret, ma'am," said the driver as he maneuvered his huge belly out from behind the steering wheel. He pushed his baseball cap back on his head and wiped his brow with a red-checkered handkerchief produced from his back pocket.

"Good morning, my foot," Margaret retorted. "George, I don't know what gives you these ideas. I don't care what Beauregard said to you; I don't ever want to see him pulling such a stunt again . . . riding around town in a boat. You know how these roads are—he might have flown right off! He might've been killed!"

"Don't you worry about it none, ma'am," Beauregard said as he hopped down to the ground. "Them seats have buckles: I locked myself in snug so I wouldn't fall out and bonk my head on the highway."

Margaret gaped at George. "You took him for a ride on the *highway*?"

"I did no such thing," George replied. He had bent over to unlatch the boat from the truck, so that his voice came muffled as if from a great distance. "I wasn't givin' nobody no ride. I's just deliverin' property."

"This is not our boat," Margaret said.

George stood and chuckled until his fat belly jiggled. "Is now."

Margaret followed him to the other side of the boat, talking too fast to catch a breath: "Well, I never . . . what on earth possessed the two of you . . . don't think you can just get away with this . . . poor azalea bushes, nearly wiped right off the face of the earth . . ."

"Where did you get the money?" Ruby asked Beauregard.

"Earned it shoving carts at Wal-Mart."

"Beauregard!" Margaret said. "That money was for your savings. We talked about that—remember? 'A penny saved is a penny earned'?"

"A boat sounded a mite more interesting," he replied.

"I told you not to let him handle his own money," Ruby said. "But look on the bright side: we'll have new lawn decor."

"We'll hose her down and paint her real nice." Beauregard ran his hand along the body of the boat. "Then we'll put her name right here. *The Ruby Mae*. In pretty choreography."

"Calligraphy," Margaret corrected.

Ruby said, "You name anything so ugly after me, I'll not speak to you again."

"She's not ugly," Beauregard said. "She jest needs a little cleaning up, that's all."

"Margaret, this isn't funny," Ruby protested. "Tell him he can't keep it."

"Of course he can't keep it. Beauregard, you have to give the boat back to George. Callapher! Get down from there."

Beauregard looked up to notice Callapher for the first time.

"Is she ours?" he asked.

"Oh, dear, I forgot," Margaret said. "Beauregard, these are my niece's children—Olivia and Callapher. Their family's renting the little white house beyond the bend."

Beauregard appraised us, lifting his cap from his head to hold it against his chest. His hair sprang up in an unleashed bush of tight ringlets. He gave a chivalrous bow. "Well, welcome to you both, I'm much obliged. Don't know what I'll do with four purties in the house."

He put his arm around my shoulder and squeezed. His breath smelled like he hadn't used a toothbrush five mornings running.

"Word of the wise: don't mind those two hens too much. You just tell them to keep their pots and pans to theirselves, and we'll all get along." He released me and winked at Ruby. "Ain't that right?"

"Olivia," she said, "tell that man if he has something in his eye he should go rinse it out in the bathroom."

"That's enough," Margaret said. "George, tell him—George?"

George had returned to the cab of his truck. Margaret realized it too late to stop him. He drove away, leaving us in a circle around the sailboat, splattered with freshly churned mud.

Margaret sat down on the porch steps, cradling her head in her hands.

Callapher leaned against the stairway railing. "Do you got a headache, Aunt Margaret?"

"Yes," Margaret replied. "He lives in my basement."

That afternoon, when the tumult over the boat had been sufficiently fussed over and nearly forgotten and Margaret and Ruby lost to their afternoon naps, Callapher and I followed the gravel path around the bend to see our new house. It was a depressing sight from any angle: a white box with three front windows framed in blunt black shutters. The window screens were stuck through with dust mites

and dead flies. All around the little house, overgrown bushes bullied up against the walls, threatening to overtake the three-foot cement slab that constituted a porch. A single-car garage stood separate from the house, its white paint peeling in strips thin and curled back.

Callapher tiptoed through the bushes to examine the living room from the front window. Without warning, a squirrel leapt from an overhanging tree, snapping the branch from which it sprang. Startled, Callapher darted back, catching her pants on a protruding root and falling backwards into the grass. I laughed as I helped her up.

"I don't like this place," she said decidedly.

"It's just ugly, that's all," I said. "But it won't be bad. It's a shoe-box house."

Callapher picked a stick off the ground and flourished it in the air. "Remember when I was little and I used to play like I was a sword fighter?"

"You're little now."

"Yeah, but remember?" She pounded against the mud with the stick. "There was an old lady who lived in a shoe," she sang to herself. "She had so many children she didn't know what to do . . . and all the king's horses and all the king's men, didn't know what to do with them again."

"You're nuts," I said, taking her hand.

"You're nuts and a half," she retorted. We returned the way we came, Callapher singing happily about the Old Maids who lived in shoe-box houses.

Once my sister's fear of falling off mountains had been assuaged, her primary concern regarding the move had been whether or not we

would be taking the bushes. Mom said no, we'd have new bushes. Would we be taking the cabinets? What about the books?

"Yes, honey," Mom said. "We'll take our books. And your bed and your toys. All the things we can pack up."

The Old Maids had three books: the Bible, a hymnal, and *Betty Crocker Teaches You Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Cooking.*

Margaret didn't wear pants on account of personal conviction, and she looked about as good in a dress as a professional linebacker. She had broad swooping shoulders and the thickness of muscle and fat in her arms you usually see only in men accustomed to daily labor. Her one delicate feature was the wreath of tight gray ringlets that framed her forehead. They reminded me of late Grandmother Monahan's poodle.

Beyond the matter of modesty, Margaret was wholly unconcerned with her appearance. I never once saw her look in a mirror. She dressed and bundled her hair blindly, unaware of her figure but for what she saw when she looked down. Ruby, on the other hand, sought her own reflection everywhere: in the microwave door, in windowpanes, in the bowl of her dinner spoon. She wore heels to compensate for the disappointment of her five-foot-two stature. In the house, she tied a scarf around her head to keep the ceiling fans from messing up her perm. After her nap, she sat at the kitchen table soaking her cuticles in a blue ceramic bowl filled with warm water, swishing her fingers back and forth the way children swing their feet in swimming pools.

She told me about Beauregard. He was thirty-one, an only child. His mother lived in the motel in town. During weekends he worked the Wal-Mart parking lot, shoving carts.

"How long has he lived here?" I asked.

"You ask Margaret," Ruby replied. "This is her business. I'll not say another word or she'll label me a gossip."

Beauregard joined us that evening for dinner. When he noticed Callapher gaping at him, he asked, "Got something in yer mouth?"

"No, sir."

"Then watcha doin' with it hanging open like that?"

Callapher watched him all night, sitting at the bedroom window to look down on the lawn where he worked tirelessly and ineffectively to erect a garage tent around his sailboat. The next day she moved closer to him by degrees, watching him first from the window, later from the porch. By midafternoon he'd recruited her to gather kindling for an evening bonfire. It was the dumbest fire I ever saw, just a tree stump in a nest of brush that smoked so bad I could hardly breathe. Beauregard hit the stump five times with the back of the shovel. It was a Boy Scout trick, he said. To make the flames higher.

I went inside for a glass of water. Watching my sister from the kitchen window, I asked Margaret, "Do you think it's all right to leave her with him?"

"Who? Beauregard?" She waved off the concern. "He's harmless."

"But he's not . . . he's not quite right, is he?" I didn't know how to say it.

"He hasn't the mind of an adult, no, if that's what you mean." She was using a dull butter knife to carve wax from used-up candle jars. "He's been that way for years. Ever since the accident."

"The accident?"

She stabbed at a bit of unrelenting wax. "When he was just a young man—not too many years beyond you, I'd say, well, late twenties, anyway—he was in a real bad car accident. It was just outside of town. Lord knows how treacherous these roads can be when you're

alert. But he fell asleep at the wheel—went right through a red light as an oncoming car rushed through the other way. Beauregard and his mother, who was asleep on the passenger side as I understand it, both lived, but it was only fatalities in the other car: a young woman and her unborn baby were killed.

"Beauregard walked away from the accident. But his mother had a bad time. The impact severed her spine. It was two years of therapy before she could walk again. She lost her job and the house. And Beauregard, he was never the same again. Seeing his mom like that . . ." Aunt Margaret shook her head slowly. "He spent some time in therapy, but his mind was never the same. We can't know for certain. Some things are never explained."

She shook the newly cleaned jar free of dripping water and set it top down on the windowsill.

"How did he end up here?"

Margaret shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "He dropped out of school and left town. His mother—Barbara Lowett's the name—went away to stay with her sister, or at least that's what I heard. The Lowetts don't have much family. Not a soul came to their aid when it happened. But Mrs. Lowett returned, after her therapy. She's still in town—lives on the west end, across from the Dollar Mart. Came to us one night to say she'd found her son living in his van just outside town. She couldn't afford to take care of him, and he wouldn't have it anyway. Doesn't really acknowledge her as his mother.

"Well, there was nothing to do but go get him and bring him back. We thought about putting him up in the house where you'll be living. Thomas built it when we first married. Everyone says we should knock it down, but I know Thomas would want me to use it this way. Anyway, we thought about letting him rent the house, but I

worried about him taking care of himself. So we just set him up downstairs with his own little apartment. He's got his own bathroom. Which you'd know is a good thing if you've ever had to wipe down the toilet of a grown man. It's like they're aiming for the window."

"How long has he been here?"

She raised her eyes to the ceiling and counted on her fingers. "Five . . . seven years? Could it be seven? Lord, time does fly. We never meant for him to stay so long. And did we ever have a time of it convincing our good friends in the Sunday school about keeping him on. They said you can only do so much and then you've got to get the person on his own two legs. Say you can't just spoon-feed them or they'll get dependant. But I don't think so." She swished her hand across the bottom of the sink to direct the soapsuds to the drain, but her eyes gazed out the window. "All I know is, Jesus said, 'Whatever you do unto the least of these, you do unto me.' I like to think of Beauregard as our own little Jesus, living in the basement."