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MYSTERIOUS WAYS: A NOVEL

by

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Abstract

Mysterious Ways is an exploration, in novel form, of the anxiety that hovers over the genre given its dependence on character and point of view: the issue of subjectivity, or how we come to understand ourselves as selves. The novel takes place in a contemporary evangelical community in rural Kentucky, whose particular brand of religious enthusiasm can be traced to the Second Great Awakening. Narrated by a young teenaged girl, the novel points both to the construction of an identity, as a coming-of-age narrative, and the simultaneous deconstruction of an identity, her father’s. Her father is a self-proclaimed prophet, but over the course of the novel his psychological problems and their treatment begin to expose the voice in his head, which he has always understood to be God’s, as an effect of the disease. A critical introduction to Mysterious Ways makes use of theories of the subject found in the work of Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, and others.
Critical Introduction

The creative dissertation option for completion of the Ph.D. at SUNY Albany suggests a different approach to the introduction. I begin here with a précis of the novel in lieu of the chapter outline that would accompany a critical dissertation. From there, I explain how the three approaches to my examinations—the critical, the historical and the genre—arise from and contribute to the same preoccupations that inform the novel.

Novel Précis

This novel takes place in a small, exclusively fundamentalist Christian town in rural Kentucky, home to an evangelical seminary, large religious retirement facility and rigorous overseas missionary organization. The protagonist and narrator is a 13-year-old girl named Charmaine. Other key characters include her mother, her father, a girl from the rural reaches of the county, a physically disabled high school boy, and a missionary boy on furlough from Ghana. At the opening of the novel, Charmaine’s father, who considers himself a prophet, returns from the Holy Land believing that he has been inhabited by the Apostle Paul—a psychological condition known as the Jerusalem Syndrome. His faith-based mania leads to an accident, after which he’s hospitalized then transferred to a mental
rehabilitation facility. As the novel closes, he plans to move into a half-way house instead of returning home to live with Charmaine and her mother. In the meantime, Charmaine and her mother relocate to cramped quarters—an RV-turned-log cabin—on the banks of Kentucky River, so that they can rent their house in town to the missionary boy’s family to cover the mortgage.

The plot runs along several lines. Charmaine must adjust to living in the county, where extreme rural conditions stand in stark contrast to the sheltered—if claustrophobic—evangelical town. She rides the bus and lives among impoverished junior high and high school students, navigating their cultural differences with varying levels of success. In light of Charmaine’s father’s mental breakdown, her mother suffers doubts about her own past decisions, causing Charmaine to fear that her parents will divorce. So Charmaine is faced with the loss of her father, the physical loss of her house, the potential loss of her family unit as she knows it, and the new, unmediated emotional proximity of her mother. She is also faced with a new understanding: much of her father’s religious activity, including prophecy, fasting, and successful prayer without ceasing, has arisen from an advanced bi-polar disorder. She observes his acute identity loss at just the point where she has begun to forge an identity of her own.

As Charmaine struggles to come to grips with how the changes to her circumstances affect her faith, she also struggles with the insistent sexual development of her body. The novel
opens with her first period and closes with her second period, tracing a growing sexual awareness through encounters with her mother, the handicapped boy and the missionary boy. We watch her father and other characters attempt to deny some of the urges of the body (for food, for sex, for connection). The results of these attempts, including her father’s hospitalization and a set of disturbing pictures used in aversion therapy, lead Charmaine into situations where she becomes more and more aware of her body and its resources. As her spirituality is thrown into question, the awareness and influence of her physicality begins, perhaps, to suggest an [humanist] alternative. Her experience of the body, good and bad, is undeniably powerful: she fends off the advances of a mother with negligent physical and emotional boundaries; she connects sexually with the handicapped boy; she becomes “blood sisters” with a new friend. Eventually, the book privileges the body as the necessary site of all connection with others, and suggests that such connections even have the power to offer a momentary physical transcendence that acetic spiritual seeking actually precludes. To echo Charmaine’s teacher, Mrs. Teaderman, the body is both prison and prism, a glimmering site not unlike language in its ability to perform two functions at once. At times in the book such a perspective is reinforced by Charmaine’s—and her father’s—preoccupation with “perfect” words that carry the opposite meaning at the same time: “cleave,” “trim,” “dust,” “against.” Perhaps one of the most profound surprises for me in the writing of the book is the way it
eventually reinforces the myth, if not the practice, of Christianity—a paradoxical tradition in which god is man, “word” is “flesh.”

Introduction

Part of the challenge of the creative thesis involves positioning the work within a literary tradition. My novel deals with the enthusiastic branch of the Methodist Church that first appeared in America during the Second Great Awakening but has never been acknowledged in official denominational doctrine. Because my period readings involve tracing this tradition, or problem, I investigated primary texts from both the First and Second Great Awakenings, as well as their secondary commentary. Mostly, however, I focused on 19th-century American novels. This period was contemporary with the Second Great Awakening and saw the rise of the novel form—important points of intersection with my own work. Not only did I discover direct thematic similarities between the preoccupations of this period and my subject matter, such the concepts of fallen man and the sinfulness of the body, as well as the celebration of eccentric behavior and grandiose personalities, I also discovered an anxiety that hovers over any novel given the form’s dependency on character and point of view: the issue of subjectivity, or how we come to understand ourselves as selves. My reading suggested that theories of the subject might provide the most critical insight. Two of my own novel’s
characters clearly occupy a crisis of identity: the narrator as she comes of age, and her father as he faces the evidence of his mental malfunction. While an investigation of the Great Awakening's interfaces explicitly with the subject matter of my novel, I find the less explicit issue of warring discourses of subjectivity within these religious texts to be inextricable from this coming-of-age novel's focus on identity formation (Charmaine) and deconstruction (her father).

The 1800s in America saw the burgeoning of liberal democratic rhetoric based on the Enlightenment ideals of the previous century. These ideals included a discourse of sovereign subjectivity, under which individuals might understand themselves to have natural/innate rights and originary agency—the assumption, in fact, of most humanist traditions, including liberal democracy. But as Foucault notes in *Discipline and Punish*, “the ‘Enlightenment,’ which discovered the liberties, also invented the disciplines.” (222) In *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault explains that the disciplines—schools, hospitals, prisons, among others—inaugurated a parallel discourse of subjectivity, one that posits subjects not as sovereign with natural rights, but as constructions resulting from historico-political struggles between binaries in opposition. The national American investment in the Enlightenment rhetoric of the sovereign subject, Foucault’s argument suggests, occasions a crisis of subjectivity because such a discourse necessarily
suppresses the realities of a historico-political discourse of a subject understood to be produced from struggle and opposition.

In light of Foucault’s distinctions, we may ask how a nation founded on a discourse of equality among sovereign individuals maintains this cultural identity in the face of realities—slavery and the massacre of Native Americans, for example—that bear witness to the fact that only some individuals are considered sovereign. How does a literature that nearly uniformly invests in the discourse of sovereignty—according to Sacvan Bercovitch—register the underlying anxiety of what cannot be assimilated into such a discourse? In other words, how does a nationally overt investment in the discourse of the sovereign subject suppress a parallel discourse of a subject formed by oppositional/binary forces of race, class, culture, etc., in a state of persistent struggle. Furthermore, where in our literature does this discourse insist on being reckoned with?

I would like to suggest, with Toni Morrison and others, that this anxiety of subjectivity registers itself in the popularity of the novel form since the 19th century, and in the religious enthusiasm that originated with the Great Awakening and persists in the United States today, a movement that has periodically enjoyed dramatic revivals. Both these cultural sites—the novel’s formal and thematic preoccupations of character and point of view (of subjectivity) and religious enthusiasm, with its attempts to transcend the body—are of vital relevance to
my own work. Both consistently reinscribe ontological assumptions of sovereignty even as they call this continuous subject into question. This irresolvable tension, this simultaneous pull in opposite directions, is inherently dramatic, and results in the most exceptional aspects of American literature.

While religious texts from the First and Second Great Awakenings offer rich insight into the American crisis of subjectivity, most of the novels I inspected do not take religious enthusiasm or the Puritan inheritance explicitly as their subject matter. My own work does in fact treat religious enthusiasm explicitly, falling in line with Charles Brockden Brown’s *Wieland* and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, which explore religious enthusiasm and the Puritan inheritance.

We can trace the beginnings of 19th-century religious enthusiasm in America to the First Great Awakening of the 1740s, itself inspired by similar contemporary movements in England. From the start, the movement registered a crisis of subjectivity that would resurface in the 19th century under the inauguration of a national investment in a discourse of the sovereign subject. In *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, Sacvan Bercovitch discusses how the Puritan obsession with self-evacuation, with becoming a vessel for the divine, in fact reinforces the sovereign self, the “I” full of agency, at every point of their texts:
“The vehemence of the metaphors, the obsessiveness of the theme, the staccato syntax, the sense of clauses recoiling rather than progressing (since every gesture against I-ness contains its own counter-gesture), the interminable-because-unresolved incantations of the ‘I’ over itself—every aspect of style betrays a consuming involvement with ‘me’ and ‘mine’ that resists disintegration. We cannot help but feel that the Puritans’ urge for self-denial stems from the very subjectivism of their outlook, that their humility is coextensive with personal assertion. Necessarily, the militancy they hoped would abase the self released all the energies of the self, both constructive and destructive.” (19)

This evacuation of the self, which simultaneously reinscribes the self, comes into play in my novel with the concept of ceaseless prayer. Charmaine’s father’s identity is based on both the emptying of self (in order to receive messages from God), and the reinscription of self (to communicate the messages). He believes that he achieves this self-evacuation through fasting and ceaseless prayer, and exhorts Charmaine to do the same. The prayer she chooses in her attempts at self-evacuation is “Inhabit me, O Lord God.” This direct invitation is to be repeated on each breath in and out until it happens without effort. Charmaine, however, finds this impossible. Throughout the novel she must remind herself to pray, to invite god, as it were,
to inhabit her in place, perhaps, of an experience of her own continuous subjectivity. Each time she fails to pray (almost every time she breathes), each time she has to remind herself to pray, can be read as the reassertion of the powerful idea of a sovereign subject even within the persistent attempts to interrupt it.

This dilemma, essentially of the ontological assumptions about subjectivity as it enters a language that grammatically assumes a speaker (“[you] inhabit me” assumes a subject behind the invitation/command), appears with nearly every theoretical discussion of subject formation, from Althusser’s theory of interpellation—the self is “called” into existence through naming—to theorists from De Man to Judith Butler, who insist that the grammatical necessity of a narrating subject is a rhetorical, and not necessarily an ontological phenomenon. In The Psychic Life of Power: Theories of Subjection, Butler explains:

We cannot presume a subject who performs an internalization if the formation of the subject is in need of explanation. The figure to which we refer has not yet acquired existence and is not part of a verifiable explanation, yet our reference continues to make a certain kind of sense. The paradox of subjection implies a paradox of referentiality: namely, that we must refer to what does not yet exist. (4)
In other words, the Cartesian, sovereign subject who knows that “he is” because “he thinks,” (and “he prays,” “he receives messages from god despite having tried to become a ‘vessel’”) is already assuming the “he” who is able to think. Butler argues that this is a problem produced by the grammatical need for the subject of a sentence, and forms, in fact, an ontological assumption that must be suspended if we are to investigate how subjects are truly formed. (4) I would like to suggest that some of the religious content in my work, which recalls cultural fascination with religious euphoria, traces the attempts—and frustrations—of trying to suspend that ontological/grammatical assumption.

Note that Butler does not insist that the discourse of the sovereign subject must be completely abandoned, only that unexamined adherence to something that seems self-evident—the “obviously” already established “I” behind every subject in a sentence—can mask other possible (social? spiritual?) investigations of subject constitution.

I am not invested in privileging one discourse of the subject over another, ontologically. I suspect that the discourses reproduce each other, much as they seem to operate in language. What does interest me are the strategies that emerge in American novels as the buried discourse, that of the constructed, non-continuous subject, pushes against the assumption reiterated through language of the continuous, narrating, sovereign subject.
In my own work, the attempts of various characters to deny the body, the flesh, can be read to represent the battle between these opposing ways of understanding the subject. Every attempt to evacuate the self through transcending the body (which I read as an attempt to elide the encompassing discourse of the sovereign subject) results in the reinscription of this very self: David attempts to fast, and his body rebels with the cloudy thinking that leads to his accident. Seth attempts to transcend his bodily (sexual) urges by gazing at mutilated images of the body, images that serve to center Charmaine more deeply within her body. Charmaine’s attempts to evacuate her soul through prayerful request to be “inhabited” result in her keeping an ink tally on the skin of her arm.

The work of Nancy Ruttenburg also helps trace the relationship of religious enthusiasm to strategies of point of view in the novel, an intersection that stages the discussion of subjectivity. In *Democratic Personality*, she suggests that the public insistence of the ability to evacuate the self reveals the site of a strange, appealing power. She connects the methods of the itinerant revivalist George Whitefield, who convincingly presented himself as emptied of self—an unmediated vessel for God’s message (like Charmaine’s father)—with novelistic attempts in America to establish an “innocent author” (269). Such a narrative voice necessarily speaks from a grammatically continuous subjectivity while attempting to elide this
subjectivity—and responsibility for any “self” or self-interest—from within such narration.

While Charmaine’s father is not the narrator of my novel, he is a writer, and one who has claimed to be inhabited by god—speaking not as himself, but as god through him. After his breakdown, he ceases to hear god’s voice much as he ceases to write coherently. Paradoxically, it seems that David, who spoke as a continuous subject while believing himself to be only a vessel for the voice of god, has become a subject deconstructed, without even his own voice (or much of one) once the illusion of self-evacuation has been destroyed with the explanation of mental illness. He is full of self (operates as a continuous subject) when he thinks he is not; on the other hand, when he is grounded in himself, imprisoned in his body with a new understanding of its mental limitations, he finally approaches a more likely experience of the discontinuous subjectivity he has previously claimed.

I began the Ph.D. examination process five years ago, before I had completed even a first draft of my novel. I approached my exams much like I approach the creative work, by casting about for arresting details from my academic experience and trusting that the areas of study I chose drew my attention because of the way they interacted with methods and subject matter that were already important to me in ways I had yet to discover. The choice of the 19th Century Second Great Awakening
was perhaps most obvious as a relevant historical period, since
my own fiction continues to explore, indirectly, a family history
of radical evangelical participation. The selection of genre
seemed natural, too: I write fiction, and the novel’s rise as a
form is contemporary with 19th century evangelical expression.
Perhaps the most surprising part of the process involved becoming
acquainted with theories of the subject as my critical lens. In
my fiction, I have long been preoccupied with coming-of-age
narratives as the sites of identity construction, and furthermore
with how the rigors of fundamentalist religious culture intersect
with the process of coming of age. In this novel, I was
interested to pair a coming-of-age narrative with a narrative of
mental disintegration. Both Charmaine and her father primarily
understand themselves to be religious subjects with the goal of
interrupting their own continuous subjectivity through occupation
by God. In Butler, Foucault, Ruttenburg and Bercovitch I find an
understanding of why any discourse of the self must necessarily
be an uneasy one. Language itself insists upon the assumption of
a continuous subject, and as several of these writers point out,
sites that pull this discourse into a glimmering tension with an
alternative discourse of the self, that of the constructed
subject, lend themselves to illuminating interpretation. To the
extent that my novel not only presents such sites, as all
narratives do, but actually points to them through my selection
of subject matter, contributes an anxiety—both of text and of
character—that I hope supports and informs even the most seemingly traditional, “representative” ways of reading the work.


Chapter 1

From The Holy Land, my father sends me a postcard of the Dead Sea. Rippled, turquoise water rimmed by faded brown hills under a flat, lonely sky. On the back he explains that the sea is really a lake, and that very possibly, underneath the lake bed, lie the ruined, sinful cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The postcard came folded into a one-page letter for my mother, dated three weeks ago but arriving today, the exact day we’re picking him up from the Bluegrass Airport. My mother scanned the letter, nodded to herself, then, with satisfaction, tucked it into the pages of her Bible. Now she calls me into their bedroom, where I find her pulling her half-slip over her head, shrugging it down over her upper body.

“I have something to share with you,” she says, flapping her hand at the bed. My mother has become the kind of person who uses “share” to mean she would like me in the room while she worries aloud. “Your father says that the Lord has begun another great work in him.”

I perch on the edge of their bed and steel myself for an announcement. My father is a modern-day prophet, and it’s anybody’s guess what the Lord is going to send his way. A year ago he took a hiatus from his job because the Lord told him we should be living on faith alone. “What kind of great work?” I say.

My mother frowns into the grainy mirror over the dresser.
She is easily distracted. "I’ve had this little roll at my belly ever since giving birth," she murmurs to her reflection.

"Phoebe," I say. It is her name, and I have begun to use it when I have to. "A great work like living on faith?"

"Living on faith alone," she says. "We always live on faith. Charmaine. Anyway, no. We’re done with living on faith alone. It’s exhausting. Never forget to pull in your stomach. See?" She sucks in her stomach. Involuntarily, so do I. "Then you’ll never need a girdle. And sit up straight. If I had to guess, I’d say your father is about to embark upon a series of articles about our year, or maybe his trip. The Lord seems, finally, to be leading him in a more practical direction." She turns sideways to the mirror for a new view of her belly. It does bulge, just barely, over the waistband of her slip. She strokes the soft white skin of her stomach like it might be sore to the touch, then sighs and gives it a firm slap. "The Good Word will be glad to have him back. Your grandmother will see to it."

The Good Word is a small Christian press, one of a couple things in town founded by my grandfather, the late, great evangelist Custer Peake. My grandmother, whose name is Daze, still sits on the board. She doesn’t mind reminding people that The Good Word was established with personal money, Peake family money. The rest of which my grandfather ran clean through before he died, but Daze leaves that part out.

Phoebe is backing towards me on the bed, waving behind her for help with the zipper. Today she’s wearing the bottom half of
a cornflower blue suit she sewed herself. Bespoke, she likes to say, if anyone asks. I used to be the kind of girl who enjoyed helping my mother get ready, but since we’ve been the only two people in the house, something’s flipped over inside me. Now I pinch the zipper of her skirt between my thumb and forefinger like it’s the tail of a dead animal, hoping this conveys a distaste that is both obvious and, at the same time, easy to deny. The position is a bad one for zipping, and the zipper snags.

“Oh, for Pete’s sake,” Phoebe says. She swats my hand away and manages the zipper herself. “What’s gotten into you lately?”

Around my mother, I have become a frequent yawner, a roller of eyes, an exaggerator of tolerance. And even though I pray forgiveness each night before sleep, I find myself at it again the next day. It’s just that after Phoebe shares, I have to feel guilty about the things I know. Like about her nest egg from tailoring jobs, kept secret from my father for the past year because earning money wouldn’t be living on faith alone. Or how she thinks my grandmother has always thought my father married down. Used to be, I loved hearing her talk. She would tell me about the marshes of North Carolina, where she grew up, and about the lighthouses and the tall grass that grew right up out of the sand. Stuff like that. But the memory of this is a tiny, hollow pocket lodged somewhere in my heart, which I can feel but have no idea how to reach.

Now Phoebe sits carefully beside me and cocks her head like
she’s winding up to start in. Something about my father coming home, probably. “Listen,” she begins, but our cat, Titus, has wandered in and is rubbing sympathetically against our ankles. I reach down, scoop him up with both hands, and jiggle him up and down in Phoebe’s direction.

“I’m a fat black kitty,” I say from behind his soft head, like he’s the one doing the talking.

Phoebe reaches out and pinches him on the pads of one of his hind feet. She loves Titus almost as much as I do. “You like that, don’t you Titus,” she says, switching to her half-scornful half-babyish cat-talking voice.

“That’s what you’re wearing?” Phoebe says, as I let Titus down to the floor and stand up. I pull at my dress, which is brown with peach ribbon trim. It hurts Phoebe’s feelings whenever I wear something she hasn’t made, and Daze bought this dress at the mall in Lexington two years ago. Now it’s getting to be too small, but it is still bigger than the white sundress Phoebe made me at the beginning of the summer, before my breasts started to come in, and it is still big enough to hide the bulky paraphernalia of my first period, the awful belt and safety pins, the cotton pad big as my forearm, that Phoebe showed me how to rig up the day before yesterday. I would remind her of this now, but I don’t want to have to hear the words “your flow” again, which she insists on whispering in her best private voice.

It's August in Kentucky, and outside the sky is a low,
humid ceiling. Everything under it is muddled with heat. We live next to the mayor, Mayor James, who we see as we’re getting into the car. He’s out trying to finish mowing his lawn before the storm breaks, struggling with the push mower, whose sound reaches our driveway in a slow, heavy rhythm. That's how hot it is.

On the way out of town we pass the seminary, the Custer Peake Memorial Retirement Home, where my grandmother lives, and the huge water tower that stands on a hill in a field where the three tree streets, Elm, Maple and Walnut, dead-end. Under that water tower, in 1973, Custer Peake led more than 400 people to the Lord during the largest spontaneous revival ever recorded in Kentucky. For two weeks people stood or sat or camped, even, in that field, listening to my grandfather over the PA system someone rigged up on day three. They came from as far west as Paducah, and even from other states like Ohio and Tennessee once the word got out. It made the papers. It made the television news in Lexington and Louisville, both. On day six, my father even came back to town from Bloomington, Indiana, where he was studying XXXXXXX, and on day 10, as the sun set, my grandfather sent my father to meet the delivery truck from Clay’s Corner carrying 200 loaves of Wonderbread for communion. When he reached the edge of the crowd, my father laid eyes on a petite girl he’d never seen before, wearing a sun hat and cut-off jean shorts, which were frowned upon in East Winder. She turned around and looked at him like she was waiting for something, like he’d already spoken to her and she hadn’t quite caught it all. Right
then and there, before he even knew her name, the Lord laid Phoebe on my father’s heart as the one he was supposed to marry.

There’s a back way from East Winder to the Bluegrass Airport, a two-lane road that twists and turns its way out of Rowland County. Phoebe is a nervous driver. She rides the brake and only takes a hand off the wheel when she absolutely has to shift. In the airport parking garage, disheveled with relief, she takes a moment to close her eyes, collect herself, and thank the Lord that we’ve arrived, which she makes me close my eyes and do with her. This is another thing that feels too close, this shared prayer, but disliking prayer in any fashion makes me feel sinful, so that after she says, “Amen,” I pray a short prayer of apology for resisting the first prayer. Unfortunately, where prayer is concerned, I do not have either my father’s gift of hearing the voice of God, or my grandfather’s gift of sensing God’s presence. So I have to work extra hard to imagine that God is lending me a listening ear, because what it seems like to me is that my words disappear into a dark, empty silence, a space with its own gravity that threatens to pull me in after my words. My father says, though, that there is no real silence. We are never forsaken. When we worry that we are, we should search our thoughts and behavior for anything that might be preventing us from feeling the presence of the Lord. There’s almost always something to find. But my father also says that the sense of God is not equally strong in everyone all of the time, and that we
have been given the marvelous gift of faith that allows us to maintain righteousness and to take comfort in what we know to be true. That God is with us whether we feel him or not.

At the airport gate, I take a seat in a row of plastic chairs beside Phoebe. People like to say my mother and I are the spitting image of each other. We are both five feet tall, though Phoebe has stopped growing, of course, and I am on my way up. And we are both brunettes. A month ago we both had Dorothy Hamil bowl cuts, which Phoebe did herself on Saturday nights in the kitchen after trimming my father’s hair. But that’s where the similarities end. And now I’m even trying to grow my hair out long enough for a ponytail, though Phoebe warns that this will do nothing for my face, which is on the large side and as squared off as a box. I have the Peake family face, Daze says, while Phoebe's face is round and sweet looking. Phoebe has her own mother's chin--the Savage family chin--which comes to a pretty, dimpled point and makes her look worried even when she's not.

Now she stands up and nudges my calf with the toe of her blue dyed satin pump.

"Stand up with me, Charmaine. Look alive." Then she remembers about my period all of a sudden. "How’re you feeling?"

"Fine."

"No cramps?"

I look around to make sure no one is listening. "I don't think so."

"Nothing bothering you in your middle? In your womanhood?"
She whispers the world “womanhood” and waggles her eyebrows.

I concentrate on my middle for a second. I can feel it, just that it's there, that I have one, which I usually can't, I guess, but nothing really hurts. I have not thought to call it my womanhood before now. "No."

"Good," she says. Then she forgets she told me to stand up and sits down again herself. Then she thinks better of it and stands up again. "Are you nervous?"

"No."

"Good," she says. "Me neither. Excited?"

"Yes."

"Me, too."

The flight's in already, from Chicago and on its way to Atlanta. The huge parked plane stretches across all the windows. When the people start trickling through the gate they're blinking like they've been underground instead of in the air. One tanned, older couple comes out whispering and glancing behind them at a skinny man with long hair and a wild beard. He's dressed like an illustration from the Bible in a brown toga and rope sandals and for just a moment I think that's why he looks familiar. Then Phoebe's hand on my shoulder starts to hurt.

"Oh," she says, and suddenly, beneath the beard, I recognize my father. His lips are moving like he’s talking quietly to himself, which means he’s probably receiving a prophecy. They can come upon him any time, like a spell.

“David,” Phoebe says. She waves her arms until he sees and
heads in our direction. His legs work slowly against the heavy brown robe like he’s wading through water. I’m used to thinking of him as a prophet, which is considered unusual even in a town like East Winder. But until now he's always had his military haircut and worn the regular clothes Phoebe picks out or sews for him. Still, you never know what you're getting with my father on any given day. The prophet is different from the man, he has said in the past, sadly.

Now he stands in front of Phoebe with his hands on her upper arms, and his lips stop moving and he smiles his warm, sad prophet smile and says her name. Then he turns to me and palms the top of my head the way he did when I was little, and that’s when I smell him. Like some kind of fruit that's gone by. The people coming off the plane stare or look away, but they all give us a wide berth.

"Dad," I say, and he gives me the same smile he gave Phoebe, his I-love-the-world-and-you're-part-of-the-world smile, which means that right now he is more prophet than regular person. Whenever this happens it always makes my stomach drop the way it does in an elevator. All of a sudden I do feel a pain in my middle, a slow squeezing.

We turn and traipse back through the airport, me trailing them by two steps. In the gift shop hang some T-shirts that I saw coming in, the kind with Kentucky printed on them that kids at school wear when UK plays basketball. I have always wanted one, even though we do not have television to watch the games and the
shirts cost fifteen dollars. Now I feel like I want one a little bit less. The same way I still, but not quite as much, want one of the little shot glasses stacked in the window, the ones with the tiny horse heads painted on. Daze has one that she keeps full of toothpicks. She always explains, apologetically, that someone gave it to her as a gift, so that no one thinks it’s actually for a shot of something, like bourbon.

On the escalator down to baggage claim, my father ducks his bearded head towards Phoebe and says, “I have to let you know up front that I am full of the spirit of the Apostle Paul.”

“I see,” says Phoebe.

“I have been given a vision much like his.”

Phoebe waits, a rare blankness on her face.

“You may find that the Lord calls upon you to adjust your expectations.”

“My expectations,” Phoebe says, enunciating each syllable.

“Isn't it interesting,” my father says, “that the Biblical Phoebe was a special helper to the Apostle Paul?”

“My expectations,” Phoebe says, sounding thoughtful, then, “my expectations.” It's like she's doing what I used to do when I was little, emphasizing a different syllable each time to see what it sounds like.

“If you had been there,” my father says. “I walked where they all walked. I let the living history work on my spirit until I was open in a new way, and you can’t believe, you can’t believe what’s possible when we let go of the limits we place on God.” He
speaks in a hoarse voice that is also loud, and getting faster, and people gliding past us on the up escalator stare openly.

Phoebe only nods once and bites her lips. She shoots me a worried glance, and part of me feels sorry for her. But a bigger part of me feels impatient, because she’s the one always telling me that mere humans can’t imagine in advance what the Lord has in store and she has gone ahead and tried to imagine it anyway, and now she is disappointed.

At baggage claim my father’s lips start working again, silently, poking the stiff hairs of his mustache out. I don’t want to stare at him, and I don’t want to see other people staring at him, either, if they are, so I train my eyes on the suitcases snaking by on the rubber mat. They are the same, but different, as Mr. Cole, my fifth grade social studies teacher used to observe. About lots of things.

“Here it is,” says my father, and reaches down for his deflated canvas duffle.

“What about the rest?” says Phoebe.

My father hoists the bag over one shoulder, a motion that lifts the robe and exposes an ankle covered in small scabs. “I divested myself of anything that wouldn't fit into a single bag,” he says. "And anyway, I've been wearing this for two weeks, now."

"I see," says Phoebe again, and I know she’s thinking of the trip’s list of suggestions they had followed to the letter. The linen clothes that were supposed to withstand the heat of the Holy Land. The search in Lexington for the appropriate walking
shoes, for the hat that would protect his face and neck from the Middle Eastern sun. The list had been very specific. And expensive. And Phoebe has shared with me that it was humiliating for her to visit country churches, asking people to help fund the trip, as part of my father’s calling, while we ourselves were foregoing work in order to live on faith alone.

“I shed many things,” my father says, as if he's thinking of the list, too. “But I didn't come home empty-handed.” He winks at me and pats part of the duffle that looks flat, like maybe it contains a shoebox.

Outside it has begun to rain. Phoebe and I trot across the road to the parking garage then turn and wait for my father, who has lifted his face and palms and is walking slowly, getting wet. The rain steams up from the road with the grassy, metallic smell I usually love. Now, when I breathe deeply, it turns into a kind of heavy wet dread in my lungs.

“I haven't seen rain in a month,” my father says when he reaches us. “You forget how nice it can be.”

Phoebe slides a foot out of her satin pump and looks down at her toe, which has turned blue from the wet dye. She slides her foot back in without comment. She points her chin. She offers my father the keys to the Pinto but he shakes his head and opens the passenger door, flipping up the seat for me to climb in back, which I do, holding my dress against the back of my legs. Out of the parking garage the rain comes down steadily, and against the silence in the car the windshield wipers seem like more than a
sound. They seem like a feeling, a scraping, an aching that, when
I close my eyes, gives rhythm to the new dull pain in what I
can’t help thinking of, now, as my womanhood.

Daze is chatting with Mayor James on the front porch when
we pull up. She stands tall, five-nine, and straight as a pole
until her shoulders narrow and curve in on themselves like the
tip of a canoe. She squints in the direction of the passenger
window, but with Mayor James right there she says nothing. When
we get out she just claps at my father's outfit like it's clever
and smooths two manicured hands over her silver hair, which is
pulled straight back from her forehead with a clip. Since she
turned sixty-five a few years back, and splurged on permanent lip
liner and eyeliner, she has been pulling all of her hair back
from her face to tighten everything up.

When my father cuts across the wet grass in his rope
sandals, Phoebe says sidewalk under her breath like she always
does.

"Well," Daze says with apparent delight to Mayor James. "I
guess you can tell where he's been for the last month."

"Surely," says Mayor James. He smiles and shakes my
father's hand, looking him up and down in the friendly way that
makes him a good mayor. "Can't wait to hear all about it, David."

"Can't wait to tell it, James," says my father, "and some
other things too."

"Well alright," says Mayor James. "Sounds good. And now I'm
going to jump into the weeding while the ground’s still wet.” And the man hightails it back to his own yard leaving family to deal with their own.

I’m thinking about the Apostle Paul, how I’m pretty sure he never married. This is probably what my father means when he says that Phoebe is going to have to adjust her expectations. Though the Apostle Paul did say it is better to wed than to burn. He didn’t have children, either, that I know of, so I may have to adjust my expectations, too. I don't know what happens to Daze. The Apostle Paul had to have had a mother. But my father just does the same thing to Daze that he did with us. He doesn't call her "mother" or "DeeDee," his pet name for her. He just grasps her upper arms in the distant hug and delivers the smile.

Over his shoulder, Daze opens her eyes wide at me but I just shrug and follow Phoebe inside.

In the kitchen Phoebe takes two casserole pans from the freezer and peels back their tin foil. I'm thinking she'll start with her encouraging speech, the one she makes whenever our lives change direction according to the Lord’s will, but she just hands me the bowl of sour dough and says, "Biscuits, please." Then she switches on the oven and adds, "Feed the dough after."

"I know," I say.

"Flour and a little sugar water."

"I know."

I spoon out eight biscuits onto a cookie sheet. The cramps in my womanhood come regularly, now, like slow breathing, and as
each one subsides I find myself waiting for the next, and when it comes I feel an almost comforting recognition. There you are.

Daze comes in and lowers herself into a chair. She makes a teepee of her long forearms and props her chin on the top. "Can I help?"

"No, thank you," says Phoebe.

"Got those biscuits okay, sugar?" Daze says to me, and I tell her yes. "I always say your sour dough's on the strong side, Phoebe, but then the biscuits turn out fine. I wonder what Mary James did that was different."

It's a sore spot that Phoebe didn't take her sour dough starter from Daze when she got married. Instead she took it from Mayor James' wife Mary, who got her own starter twenty years back when she cleaned out a dead woman's refrigerator. There's no telling where the dead woman got hers, because sour dough can last for generations if you keep feeding it.

Phoebe takes the cookie sheet from me and sets it on top of the oven. When the casseroles are in their last ten minutes we'll slide the biscuits in on the rack just over them for perfect timing.

"You never can tell, can you," Daze says.

When Phoebe doesn't answer her, Daze turns to me.

"No," I say.

"I guess this means he won't be going back to work right away," Daze says carefully. She got the The Good Word to help out with the trip to The Holy Land with the promise of a few special
features.

"We haven't discussed it," Phoebe says.

"I think," Daze begins.

"We haven't discussed anything," Phoebe says, her head bent over the two sheets of tinfoil she's removed from the top of the Pyrex. I sit down and pull my knees up under my chin to see if it makes a difference in the way I feel. It does, then it doesn't.

"David is a man after God's own heart," Daze says after a time.

Phoebe spreads the tinfoil on the kitchen table and smoothes it carefully, like it takes all her concentration.

"It would be wonderful, maybe, if he finished with this latest"--Daze waves her hand respectfully in front of her, looking for the word--"it would be wonderful, maybe, if he didn't go back to work until he was sure he could fully focus on it."

"We haven't had a chance to sit down," Phoebe says through her teeth.

Daze's manicured hands drop from her chin and hit the table in fists. "I can get his job back, but I don't know if I can get it back over and over."

"I don't need for anyone to get my job back," says my father from the doorway. He raises his arms to the side and the sleeves spread out like wings. "The Lord has given me new direction, and everything will be taken care of. Hasn't he taken care of us so far?"

Phoebe stands over the stove with her back to him.
"Hasn't he?"

"I guess he gave me the means to cover your mortgage, praise Him," Daze says.

"And someday we will pay you back," says Phoebe, speaking towards the window behind the stove, as if to someone standing in our back yard. "And it won't be soon enough."

"We had plenty to eat, too," says my father. "And when it looked like we weren't going to, the Lord provided."

I think about Phoebe's tailoring money. But you can look at that as coming from the Lord, too. He gave Phoebe the ability to sew, after all. I gear up to say this, to show how everyone can be right, if I need to, because Phoebe is mad, and may reveal it all. She whips her head around so fast that her Dorothy Hamil hair whirls into a circle at the top of her head, the swingy ends crashing into her cheeks.

"You know what?" she says. "I accepted living on faith alone because it's what the Lord told you to do. And I prayed, and I took charity from people who probably felt sorry for Charmaine, people with their own jobs."

"I don't know about charity," Daze says. "Charity is for the poor."

"We would all be so much happier if we came to him like children," my father says, laying a hand on my shoulder.

"And I did it," Phoebe says, "I took charity, because the Bible makes it clear that you are the head of this house." Phoebe is pointing at him, jabbing the air with her finger. "But I have
to say, I have to say right now, that I have been a nervous wreck every single day."

My father nods as though he is considering her words. He looks at Phoebe’s finger, then at my grandmother, then at me. “I walked the streets of Jerusalem,” he says. “I offered prayers at the Temple Mount. The Lord’s plan is vast and spans the ages, and as I understood that I was filled with the spirit of Paul’s special mission to the Gentiles.” After he stops talking his eyes keep moving over the three of us like he’s tracing a shape with them in the air. “Even my body has been changed.”

“Son,” Daze says. “Do you need to sit down?” But he doesn’t seem to hear her.

"You're smiling," Phoebe says. Her pointing finger sinks to her waist like it feels defeated.

"If you could see how worry is just unnecessary," my father says.

I have been a nervous wreck, too, sometimes, about living on faith alone, but I don't say this out loud. I want to show my father that unlike Phoebe, whose flesh sometimes gets the better of her, I have enough faith not to worry.

"Am I hearing that you do not plan to go back to work?" Phoebe says. "Is that what I'm hearing?"

“It’s interesting the way everyone uses the word ‘work’ to indicate what one does for money,” my father says. “I have never stopped my true work. Not once. I am imperfect, and I have not always worked in accordance with the spirit, but I have never
stopped trying."

"David is a hand-picked servant of the Lord," Daze pipes up. "But son, remember that you can do the Lord's work anywhere. Even at a job with a paycheck."

I have started staring at the floor so as not to have to look at anyone while this conversation is happening. I feel full-on sick to my stomach, now. Beside the doorway where my father stands is a heating vent, and it looks like the hem of his robe is dancing with forced heat. But then I remember that it's summer and of course there isn't any forced heat, and as I lift my head to where his fingers peek out of the sleeves of his robe, I see that they are spreading out then coming back together, very quickly, a motion kind of like scissors that travels up his arms and causes his robe to sway.

I say, "Dad," and when he looks at me he’s blinking way too fast, like the fingers and eyes are all being run by the same engine that’s overheating inside him. "Dad," I say, "are you okay?" And I don't know where this comes from since it's something I’ve never asked him or any other adult. And he keeps blinking and looks at me like he knows me but can’t remember my name.

"Charmaine, go upstairs," Phoebe says.

"I have a burden," my father says, talking right to me, as if I’m the only one who can understand. Sometimes I think maybe I am. "It has to do with the people of Rowland County. Not this town, with all its churches, its Pharisees, but the dark, lost
outskirts. I pray that I am up to the task," he says, "but I worry that I am not."

"But you're willing, right?" I say.

"Daze," says Phoebe, "Charmaine has some exciting news she might like to tell you upstairs."

"I am willing," my father says. "Yes. Charmaine, thank you for that." He closes his eyes briefly, seems to steady himself, then opens them. "What exciting news?"

"Nothing," I say, mortified at the thought of my period.

"It’s not that I’m not concerned for the people of Rowland County," says Phoebe, now bracing herself with her hands behind her, grabbing either side of the stove. "I’m just growing more concerned for the people of this family."

Daze stands up too fast and lurches to the right, which is the side that lags, still, from a stroke she had last year. "I'm fine, I'm fine," she says, though neither Phoebe nor my father has noticed. "I'm so excited to hear your news," she says to me. "And I want to see the clever new school clothes your mother’s made."

"I'm a Christian too," Phoebe is saying. "I'm willing, too. I lived on faith alone for the whole year, too."

"We were taken care of," my father says.

"And you said that the Lord said a year. One year. Which is over."

"I’ve had some further revelation," my father says.

"We're just heading upstairs now," says Daze. As she moves
carefully around my father in the doorway she squeezes his shoulder.

"The Lord was preparing us, Phoebe," says my father.

I’m standing up, now, but I can’t take my eyes off the edges of my father’s sleeves where his fingers are still opening and closing. “I saw lepers, Phoebe. Covered in sores. Couldn’t feel their own skin burning if they were on fire. And do you know there are children in this very county born with tails?”

“Charmaine,” Phoebe says, pointing to the door.

Daze beckons from the dining room and I follow her over the carpet and through the foyer. The kitchen door shuts behind me. Daze limps a little, then warms up after a few steps, then makes better progress up the stairs. I’m careful to go more slowly than she does so she doesn’t feel rushed.

In my room she pulls me into a close hug.

“I don’t feel good,” I say into her chest, which is bony over her low, flattened bosom.

“It’s an unusual thing, the way God has chosen your father,” Daze says. “But there’s nothing for you to worry about.”

“Phoebe should have more faith.”

“Your mother’s feeling a little frustrated,” says Daze. “The Lord is a demanding task master. Where’s that in the Bible?”

“You mean ‘our god is a jealous god?’”

“Maybe that’s it. A jealous God.”

“Jealous of Phoebe?”

“Maybe,” Daze says. Then, “That doesn’t seem quite right.”
“Have you seen any of those children with tails?”

“Not tails,” says Daze. “Not really. Well, tails, but not like you’re thinking. More like little growths along the spine. The county health system leaves something to be desired.”

I reach around behind my back and finger the ridges of my backbone. I think about the grim sentence of my period. There seems no end to the treachery of the body. But when I share the news with Daze, who as a rule dislikes discussion of bodily matters, she congratulates me and gives me Tylenol from a bottle in her handbag. She also fishes out a plastic egg of new sun-tan colored pantyhose, which until now I have not been allowed to wear. Then I lie down on the bed and she sits beside me.

It’s getting dark outside, the slow way it does on summer nights. The crickets sound like they’re saying, “OKAY, okay, OKAY okay,” in a kind of resignation loud enough to drown out the voices of my parents downstairs. Out my window, in the distance, the white electric cross on top of the water tower flickers on as it does every evening at dusk. Some nights it’s bright enough to wake me up, the light playing off town rooftops and, in the distance, spilling over the rolling county fields.

When my grandfather, the late, great Custer Peake died, Daze came to live with us for awhile. She used to tell me stories before I went to sleep, the same stories over and over, and even though I am thirteen, and less of a child than I have ever been, I ask her for one, now. She tells me about the day I was born, at St. Joseph’s Hospital in Lexington. I know it by heart. The road
from East Winder had nearly invisible patches of black ice that she prayed over as my grandfather maneuvered their Ford Comet around the most dangerous spots. She made him stop at Rich’s Department Store, despite the road conditions, to buy me a yellow baby dress. At the hospital my grandfather took me out of Phoebe’s arms and dedicated me then and there, with his booming evangelist’s voice, to the service of the Lord. Two nurses stuck their heads in to see what the fuss was about and ended up laying hands on me with the rest of the family during the prayer.

Daze tells me how sick Phoebe was and how much help she needed, and that she was sorry Phoebe didn’t have her own mother at a time like this but glad she had a chance to step in. Taking care of me as a baby was the great blessing of her middle age, she says, not that her middle age is over yet. Her middle age is really just getting started, come to think of it. When she stops, things downstairs are quiet. “You hungry?” she asks. I shake my head. “You feeling any better?” she asks, and I say, “A little,” and I am, but I make a face like I’m not because I know she’ll sit there until I feel better or fall asleep, whichever comes first.
Chapter 2

In the morning, there’s a small, flat box at the end of my bed near where Titus is curled up, sleeping. It’s made of a hard clear plastic that’s gone milky with scratches. Inside, it’s divided into four tiny compartments with baggies inside that hold dirt and rocks and what looks like a large splinter, all fastened at the top with rubber bands. An index card taped to the lid tells me what they are in uneven typewriter type: Holy Soil from Bethlehem Hill; Stone from the top of the Mount of Olive; Sliver from the Cross of Jesus; Water from the River Jordan.

I lift up the last of the baggies, the water baggie, and hold it to the window but it’s empty. Not even a drop. I unwind the rubber band from the one with the sliver of wood inside and empty it into my palm. I know that Jesus’ cross was so heavy that he could hardly carry it up the hill on his back to Golgotha—even if they hadn’t been beating him the whole time. Still, it’s hard to believe that in two thousand years of people collecting souvenirs they wouldn’t have used up all that wood by now, slicing it into splinters. The rest, I don’t know. I’m guessing it would depend on how big the Hill of Bethlehem is, or the Mount of Olive, and I picture long lines of non-stop pilgrims for more than two thousand years carrying away stones from a mountain until the mountain rounds out, and then flattens out, and then to get any stones at all they have to start digging.
My father knocks and sticks his head in, first, then swings open the door and enters the room. He’s still wearing the brown toga, and he still smells like he hasn’t bathed, and I’m wondering if Phoebe let him sleep in the bed with her. Or if, inhabited by the spirit of the Apostle Paul, he even wanted to.

“Are these real?” I ask him about the relics.

“Everything’s real.”

“I mean, are they what it says they are.”

“The River Jordan is a possibility,” he says. “Also the Mount of Olives. Their value may be more symbolic, however.”

I hold up the empty bag where the water should be.

“Dry conditions,” he says.

I pick up the Mount of Olives bag and pretend to study the three pieces of rough gray and black gravel. My father seems calmer, this morning, but he’s still blinking a lot.

“I bought these from a beggar,” he says. “He was crouched against the city wall with a stack of boxes like these and a sign around his neck that said, ‘Holy Relics.’ I gave him my shoes, too.” While he’s talking, my father’s gaze shifts from the white sheer curtain at my window, which is open, to my bookcase, with its three rows of books and top row of tiny animal figurines that my great aunt Martha, Daze’s sister who moved to New England, sent me, one animal for every box of Red Rose tea she polished off. My room is painted pale yellow, with white woodwork. All the furniture, which was Phoebe’s furniture when she was little, is also white. My father’s eyes are glassy, and between blinks all
the bright things in the room show up across the wet surface of his dark brown irises. He looks back at my face, briefly, and seems to study something there. I can’t see the mirror that hangs on the back of my door, from this angle, and I have no idea what I look like at the moment— if my hair is sticking up, or if I have pimples, though these are not things that tend to phase my father. I’m scrutinizing his face, too. He looks different with his beard, and his cheekbones are so sharp it looks like you could fit an egg in the hollow underneath each of them.

I keep my children’s Bible on the nightstand by my bed, and now my father picks it up and flips the pages, careful not to let any of my bookmarks fall out. It’s the full New International Version text, just like in adult Bibles, only it’s accompanied by pictures. If I were to be joining the church this fall, as Phoebe wants, I would be receiving a new Bible in my choice of pink or brown leatherette cover. I’ve started a joining-the-church Sunday school class since my father’s been gone, and if you pass the class, you join the church as a kind of graduation. But my father doesn’t want me to join the church.

“I’m taking the Christian Education class,” I say carefully.

He is turning the thin pages of the New Testament, looking something up. “It’s not a bad class to take,” he says.

“At the end everyone joins the church. And gets a Bible. And if you haven’t been baptized, then you get baptized, too.”
“It is unnecessary to pledge allegiance to a church,” my father says, “and you will be ready for baptism when you feel the Holy Spirit come upon you. Only you will know when the time is right.” He finds what he’s looking for and then closes the Bible on one finger to keep his place. “Do you know what’s so special about the word ‘apart?’”

“Apart?”

“Think about it.”

Apart. I think about it. I want badly to be clever enough to know already whatever it is he’d like me to know about the word, but I want this too much, and it’s like a dust storm rises in my brain and clouds all my thinking. I shift my feet under the sheet and disturb Titus, who stretches and resettles himself with his head on the box of relics.

“Think, Charmaine. Break it up. A. Part.”

“It’s a compound word,” I say.

He looks patient but a little disappointed. “What does it mean?”

“To be separate from something.”

“Now break it up and tell me what it means. What it means to be a part of something verses apart from something.”

“To not be separate,” I say.

“Ah,” says my father. He flips open the Bible again and runs his finger down the page, and suddenly I’m staring at his fingernails, which I’ve only ever seen clean and clipped short. Now they are ragged and broken, with a thin line of grime showing
through each nail, right where it meets the skin underneath. “You
could say that ‘apart’ is a perfect word, one that suggests
opposite things at the same time. Apart,” he says again, leaving
the Bible open on his lap and raising his hands to either side of
his head. “Now, a part,” he says, clasping his hands together. “A
part of something larger. That is how we are to be with the
church. With other believers. We are a part of them because we
share faith. For where two or three come together in my name,
there am I with them, Matthew 18:20. But we must also hold
ourselves apart from other believers at the same time because any
human organization is fallible.”

He is running a finger down the page of my Bible again, in
the book of First Thessalonians, which is Paul’s first letter to
the church at Thessalonica, a place I’m wondering if he visited.
At the foot of the bed Titus pushes himself to his feet and does
his black cat pose, with the arched back. My father has liked
this in the past, and I wait for him to notice, but he doesn’t.

“Here’s what I was looking for,” my father says. “Read
this.” He taps his dirty fingernail on verse 5:17. It’s a short
one, almost as short as “Jesus wept,” the shortest verse in the
Bible.

“Pray without ceasing,” I say.

“Are you familiar with the 19th Century sermons of C.H.
Spurgeon?”
“No,” I say, and I feel the flattered way I feel when he gets wrapped up in a prophecy and speaks to me about things I’ve never heard of as though I might have.

“He makes some practical points about what is unnecessary to prayer. Still, Spurgeon may not allow the words their literal meaning. But this is what I have come to believe is possible, Charmaine. I am lining up with the old Russian monk, after all, and his Jesus Prayer.”

Again, I have no idea what he’s talking about, but I squint at him like I’m trying to remember.

“Not that I use the same words,” my father says, still tapping the page of my Bible. “The words aren’t important. The monk used ‘Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me,’ but it’s more about the breathing. The trick is to have a 2-part prayer so you can think the first part as you breathe in and the second part as you breathe out.” He closes his eyes and takes a natural breath in then lets it out. “See?”

“What did you pray?”

“That’s between me and the Lord,” my father says, opening his eyes. “And whatever you pick will be between you and the Lord. You don’t have to keep it secret, but I think you’ll find that exposing certain things to the air can be counterproductive. That’s a good example of holding yourself ‘apart.’”

I nod, but I wish he would just tell me so that we could be doing the same thing. Sometimes I think that I would rather share a secret with my father than with the Lord, but that’s a
backwards way of thinking about things. A prophet helps people get closer to the Lord and the Lord’s will, through revelation and interpretation, pure and simple. You’re not supposed to try to get closer to the Lord in order to be closer to a mere human, even if that human happens to be your father.

“Breathe in and out,” my father says, “and consider the rhythm.” I do this, and it’s as if I’m making the breathing happen, even though from school I know breathing, like your heart beating, to be an involuntary function.

“You do this all the time?” I say.

“Without ceasing.”

“At the same time as you talk?”

“We are capable of much more than we ask of ourselves,” my father says. “Once you get into the habit of praying as you breathe, you can talk and think about other things while continuing to pray. It’s important, Charmaine. In fact, it has been revealed to me that prayer without ceasing is the undergirding of the full armor of the Lord.”

“I missed you,” I say, before I can stop myself.

My father gives me a stern look. “Reject all falsity. Ephesians 4:25.”

Then I have to think about what I really meant, because he’s right. He hears something in my voice that I can’t control, something that indicates that what I said doesn’t exactly match what I feel. That’s the prophet in him. What I really feel is that I miss him right now, more than I did when he was gone, even
though he’s right here in front of me and we’re joined together in the work of the Lord, which is the most important way to be joined. More important than being family, even, because Jesus says in the book of Matthew, ‘Who is my mother, and who is my sister?’

“I think I have it,” I say. “My prayer.” I know he won’t ask what the words are, but I’m disappointed when he doesn’t respond at all. His eyes are closed, and he seems to be listening to the summer sounds outside. The morning insects, the buzzing kind, instead of the chirping evening kind. And the slow, wave-like approach and retreat of cars, soon drowned out by the train rumbling across Main Street not a quarter mile away. I watch him listening, and I breathe in and think the words I’ve come up with, words that seem grave and important enough to do the job: “Inhabit me,” on the breath in, then out: “O, Lord God.”

My father’s eyes, open now, track the motion at my window. The white sheers have picked up in the breeze of another storm coming, fluttering out towards my bed before being sucked back against the screen, a kind of breathing of their own.

At lunch my father drinks tomato juice but slides his grilled cheese and boiled spinach sandwich over to me, which means he’s fasting. His hair is so greasy it looks wet, and a piece of what might be straw drops from somewhere inside the hair to the placemat. Between his beard and mustache, his lips are
moving again. Possibly a prophecy, possibly just his ceaseless prayer, which makes me remember my own: Inhabit me, O, Lord God.

Phoebe tries to catch my eye, but I look down at my food. “How long is this going to last,” she asks my father.

His mouth moves a moment more before the sound comes out. “I don’t know,” he says, finally. “As long as it takes. I’ll be spending some time at the river.”

“You just got back,” she says tightly.

“Is the tomato juice still there?”

Phoebe closes her teeth and blows air through them. It sounds like she’s deflating. Her face is white except for two high spots of color. “At the river? Yes. The cupboard is full of tomato juice. You can bet Charmaine and I didn’t head down there to deplete your supply.”

“Phoebe,” I say, because she sounds so mean.

“She calls me ’Phoebe,’ now,” she says to my father, blaming him. My father nods distantly, like he’s hearing about the weather in another state. “I guess that’s okay with you,” Phoebe says. “Honor your father and mother?”

“Your mother is angry,” my father says to me.

“When was the last time you ate?” says Phoebe.

“I’ve been fasting for two weeks.”

Phoebe presses her lips together. Today she has not bothered with lipstick. “I guess that explains a lot,” she says.

“Jesus fasted,” I say.

“I realize that,” says Phoebe.
“I’m fasting.” I push away my grilled cheese. My cramps are gone, and I missed supper last night, and I’m hungry, but my father needs support.

“No, you are not. The Lord does not ask growing children to fast. David?”

“That’s true,” my father says.

“I’m a woman,” I remind her.

“Oh, that’s right,” Phoebe says. “I’d forgotten.” She snatches my plate, then my father’s plate, and crosses the kitchen to dump the sandwiches in the trash can. It is not like Phoebe to waste food, ever, and I am aware that my mouth is hanging open. “Here’s what we’ll do. We’ll take your father down to the cabin and then we’ll come back here by ourselves, as if he hadn’t even come back from The Holy Land at all. And I, for one, am going to spend some time on my own knees in prayer, because I am not feeling very Godly.”

“We will all be in prayer, then,” my father says. “Which is as it should be.”

I move my lips, praying as I breathe, in case he happens to notice.

It takes about ten minutes to get from our house in town to the tiny piece of county land down on the river that has been in the Peake family for six generations. The air is heavy again, so I don’t mind that the open windows turn the Pinto’s back seat into a wind tunnel. I can’t hear anything that Phoebe and my
father are saying, but they’re not saying much. I’m figuring it will take a day or so for her to recover and get on board with the plan, and then we’ll all settle in to figuring out how the latest mission translates to daily life.

During the day, the cross on top of the water tower is unlit, just a sharper white against the muggy, overcast sky. In East Winder you don’t just pass churches on every corner, though that is the phrase people use. There are churches in the middle of each block, churches in the tiny strip mall with the Dollar Store on one end and the Dime Store on the other. There’s a church that meets in a corrugated building someone erected in the parking lot of the IGA. To count is to lose track, but I try to tick them off as we go through town. There’s the United Methodist, Free Methodist, and Chinese Methodist, set up by a couple missionaries. There’s Church of God, Church of Christ, Church of Jesus Christ, Church of the Savior, Church of Jesus Christ the Savior, Church of the Holy Savior, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Nazarene, Assembly of God, Christian Church, First Christian Church, Christ Evangelical and Evangelical Free. There’s the Salvation Army. There’s a small Baptist church, even, on Elm, though mostly county people go there, since you don’t have to go to seminary to become a Baptist preacher and most people in town are tied up with the seminary. In fact, two out of three East Winder men are preachers, or they’re at the seminary studying to be preachers, or they’re retired preaches living in the Custer Peake Memorial Retirement Center. The tiny black
community on the other side of the railroad tracks is divided between the African Methodist Episcopal and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion. The nearest Catholic church is over in Clay’s Corner, and the only Jewish people I’ve seen in person are the Jews for Jesus who come through town once and put on their show in the seminary auditorium, a show that did not have any of the traditional kind of squat dancing from *Fiddler on the Roof* that I’d been hoping for. There are missionaries in town, too, at all the churches, and though my father says they’re a refreshing bunch, closer to the practical application of the Lord’s will than seminarians battling endlessly over hermeneutics, their kids can be hard to take. They’ve been all over the world already, and they like to rub it in. Like Seth Catterson, who went to school with me up to third grade, when his family left for Ghana. When I saw him in church last week, he said, *kawula*, then pretended to look confused, hitting his head with the palm of his hand like he couldn’t believe he was so African, now, that he’d forgotten how to say hello in English.

On the Lexington side of East Winder, which people call the city side and which is where Daze family comes from, the county is all tobacco fields and thoroughbred horse farms, two wealthy industries of sin. But on the river side, where we’re headed, it’s scrubby pasture as far as you can see, dotted with cows and hogs and a few foundering horses. The old black barns that used to hold tobacco are turning gray as their creosote wears off, and listing to one side like sinking ships. At this point in the
summer, everyone’s rolled their hay once, and the strong hay smell sweeps through the car, sweeter after the rain. Round bales sit in the pastures like big waiting cats, like Titus with his paws tucked under, as if they’re riding out the swell and dip of the earth beneath them. This is the part of the county where the late, great Custer Peake’s people all lived before the turn of the century. That’s when the Holiness movement swept through and the first Peake, some great-great-great-uncle Peake, was called to preach and ventured into town.

On the town outskirts, the old farms are set well back, but down towards the river, the houses get more ramshackle and closer to the road, like they’re creeping up on you. Some have no yard to speak of, just a thin ribbon of gravel between the asphalt and the front stoop. We pass an unpainted porch sagging under two old dishwashers, and in front of those, in a strip of dirt, sits an electric stove without its door, and three refrigerators, the old style with rounded-off corners, duct-taped shut. Another porch is covered with old bricks and clapboards pulled off from somewhere, nails still poking out like a warning. The pile’s been there so long a sapling’s growing out of the top of it. Almost every driveway has the shell of at least one truck up on cement blocks, for parts.

My father has always talked about our town as the bosom of Christ and the county as a dark, lost place where a lot of good people suffer. Instead of the Lord, he says, they more often turn to the worldly occupations of drinking or fornicating or gambling.
over cockfights or listening country and rock 'n roll music that makes the blood boil for more of the same. We pass another porch where two red-haired girls about my age share a cigarette and glare at us. One of them raises her middle finger. “See?” my father says, gesturing to Phoebe as if they’ve been having a conversation. As if any of this is new, or unexpected. As if Daze, when she ventures down to the river, doesn’t always comment on the particular type of red hair folks have in these parts. Country red, she calls it, and she claims it comes with its own brand of hostility.

“We’re going to get a flat tire,” Phoebe says as we drive over a sprinkling of broken brown glass in the road.

The turn that leads to our place comes just past the top of Tate’s Bridge, which spans the gorge high above the river. And even though I know it’s high, and I know exactly how high—300 feet—from the historic sign the state put up, every time I see it, it looks even higher than I remember. And just because it’s rusted red, and old, doesn’t mean it can’t still hold up the Norfolk Southern trains that rumble across it several times a day. The sign also tells about how the bridge was built in 1876, for Civil War transport, and how it was planned as a suspension bridge, but they ended up never stringing the cables, and eventually taking down the towers, and today it’s just a long network of criss-crossing metal that makes you dizzy when you stand at the top end of it and look lengthwise down the supports, like peering through some kind of geometric cocoon. The whole
thing is held up by two long piers made of metal bars arranged in hexagons. And the piers end in huge stone feet a couple stories high, planted into either edge of the river bank so far below that if you look you start to get the falling feeling, and the pull that tells you that falling, jumping, even, is what you really want to do. It’s an awful fall. It happens every so often that someone foolish enough to climb onto the bridge slips, or jumps, and when they fish out the body every single bone is broken.

Our place lies deep down in the gorge on the valley floor, where the road runs parallel to the river. Folks live on both sides of the road, but everyone on our side, which is basically the river bank, built their houses on stilts for when the river floods, which it does every couple of years. Everyone except us, since our place is really just an old RV that my father couldn’t figure out how to elevate on stilts. It’s the same RV that the late, great Custer Peake used to travel around the country in, evangelizing. After he died, and Daze said she didn’t care if she ever saw the inside of it again, my father parked it on the river lot and laid a cement block foundation underneath it. Then he extracted the engine and built up log walls, leaving spaces for the doors, windows and all the sewer and electrical hook-ups. He did most of this while fasting, and some of it during a dark night of the soul that lasted pretty much one whole summer. Now it looks like a real cabin, sort of, with a tin roof over the regular RV roof. The roof has just a little pitch in it, like the
roof of a lean-to, so the water runs off when it rains and collects in our cistern.

We pull into the short gravel driveway and Phoebe cuts the engine. She’s out of the car first, standing and looking helplessly out to the river, which today is brown and swift from the rains, then up to the bridge, which hovers high above like an ancient, complicated skeleton, and finally to our cabin. My father’s robe catches on the car door, and I wait while he struggles with it, then I push myself up and out of the back seat.

“Here we are,” my father says, spreading his arms to take in the air, the green vegetation. The river is high enough from the rain that the trees down close to the bank dip their lowest branches into the water. Our tiny dock is just out of sight, across our overgrown lawn and down the bank. But it’s on buoys, so it floats, and I can hear it knocking against one of the trees. That’s how strong the current is. Our closest neighbors have a place almost directly under the bridge, a small, tidy clapboard house on stilts, with a truck parked underneath. I don’t know them, but on the rare nights we stay down here as a family I sometimes see a light at the window and the blue flicker of a television screen.

“This grass needs cutting,” says Phoebe. “And the garden’s a mess. I’ve come down for vegetables but I haven’t done much weeding.”
“Those are prayerful tasks that will serve me well during this time,” says my father.

Phoebe heads off through the tall, wet grass down towards the small garden closer to the river. I follow my father to the lean-to and stand there, helpfully, because I have a feeling he might have forgotten the combination, which is 3-06-74, my birthday. But he hasn’t forgotten it, and the lock springs open against his hand.

“It’s quiet down here,” I say, as he opens the door of the shed and begins wrestling with the mower. “Easier to hear the voice of God.”

“Interior barriers to God’s voice can be much more of a problem than exterior,” says my father.

“I bet you could get a lot of writing done down here,” I say. I can hear the way I sound, nervous and too cheerful, like I’m trying to accomplish something, but I can’t seem to stop myself.

My father rolls the push mower to the side of the cabin and props it there, then crouches down over the reel and runs his finger over one of the blades, testing for sharpness.

“I bet you could write some interesting stories about your trip. Or you could write about how to pray without ceasing, or about the ministry of the Apostle Paul.” These all seem like good ideas to me, ideas that incorporate both his vision and the looming practical concerns without my ever having to mention them.
My father, still crouching, rolls the mower back and forth, making it squeak. He rises and returns to the shed without looking at me. When he withdraws a small bottle of oil and returns to the mower, his lips are moving.

“Dad,” I say. “Did you hear me?”

He squirts oil onto the axle of the reel and rolls the wheel back and forth a few inches to work it in. Even though I know I have spoken out loud, my father not answering me makes me uncertain, like I might have becoming invisible without knowing it.

“Dad?”

“Internal barriers to God’s voice include worry,” my father says, finally, speaking down into the blades.

“I’m not worried, though,” I say, my voice forced, chirping, as if it hasn’t even entered my mind how we’re going to keep on without any money coming in. “I just think you have a lot of interesting things to write about.”

My father frowns at me over his shoulder. “If you don’t even know what you yourself think, then it follows that you are also hiding your thoughts from the Lord. You disappoint me, Charmaine. At least your mother acknowledges what she feels even as she allows it to come in between her and the Lord’s work. At least she is not walking in total darkness.” He shakes his head like I, myself, am a bad thought he’s trying to clear himself of, and turns back to the mower.
“I’m not,” I say, swallowing hard. “I’m not walking in darkness.”

“It is very hard to retain a childlike faith as one grows older,” says my father. He sounds more neutral, now, less disgusted. He sounds, almost, like he’s speaking to the mower because he’s given up on me.

“I do have a childlike faith,” I say, and the words come out high and squeezed because I want him to believe them so badly. I try not to think of the thick cotton evidence, between my legs, that I am officially not a child anymore. I hope Phoebe hasn’t told him.

My father rises with his back to me. The hem of his brown robe looks damp. He pushes the mower several feet, right up to the edge of the cabin and back, and the blades quickly become clotted with wet grass.

“My faith is childlike,” I say again, moving up behind him. “It is. Dad. Dad.” All I want is for him to turn around and see me. Even if he’s mad.

The prayer has come to his lips again as he works the mower over the same patch of grass, forcing it as it gets harder and harder to push. Before I know what I’m doing I have reached out and grabbed a handful of his robe, and as I do this, the mower reel locks up and skids forward on the grass with all my father’s weight behind it, so that my yank is harder than I mean it to be. We rebound into each other, his back hard into my front, where my chest is already sore all the time from my growing breasts.
My father has never hit me before. When he whirls around, and the back of his hand catches my chin, it takes me a second to understand that this is not an accident. I let go of his robe and my hand goes to my face, as if my fingers have their own curiosity about what happened there.

Now he’s looking right at me, with a face more impersonal than angry. It’s as if he sees right through me, through my pretend innocent suggestions, and it forces me to see right through myself. I don’t have enough faith. I am afraid. I have been hiding my thoughts from myself. I wish I could disappear, from shame. Like Cain, who runs away after trying to kill his brother, or Noah, who cowers in his tent to hide his naked, drunken state.

I turn and pick my way back through the grass to the Pinto, holding my throbbing jawbone. My eyes feel hot, but I feel worse than crying. I fear that in losing the special quality of childlike faith I have ruined something, let my father down, changed forever how he thinks of me. And while part of him may have felt badly about hitting me, I understand that he cannot let himself be bound by mere human attachment. “Who is my mother,” and “Who is my sister,” also means “Who is my daughter?” If you love anyone in your family more than you love Christ then you are unworthy of Him.

I sit in the passenger seat of the Pinto to wait for Phoebe. Tiny green bugs have congregated around my ankles and when I try to brush them away with my fingertips, several of them
smear across my skin. “I’m sorry,” I whisper, and try to shake
off the rest. It occurs to me that there is another way to think
about what just happened— that my father would not be
disappointed enough to slap me if he did not still consider me
capable of faith. If he did not think me capable he would treat
me more like he treats Phoebe, like some things are simply too
much to expect from her.

He has told me about the prayer without ceasing, after all,
though of course I have already ceased. Inhabit me, O Lord God, I
whisper now, breathing in and out, keeping my eyes on the
palisades that rise steeply across the river in front of me and
behind me, too, in view from the side mirror. Soon my eyes are
burning a little less. The limestone walls, crowned by a
ridgeline of deep green trees, seem like they’re growing towards
the sky with every exhale, lifting the bridge above me even
higher.

Phoebe climbs up the river bank carrying tomatoes and
summer squash in her untucked shirt. She pauses behind the cabin,
where I assume she says something to my father, then approaches
the Pinto and lays the vegetables carefully on the back seat. She
missed the whole thing, and I don’t tell her about it because
she’s unhappy enough with the latest turn of events as it is.
She’s so unhappy that as we drive up out of the gorge and back
towards town she makes me scour her pocketbook, then the seats
and floor of the car, for change. I come up with eighty-three
cents, and she drives straight through town and out the other side, the city side, then turns east on the county road that leads to Clay’s Corner, where I’ll be starting to junior high in a week. Clay’s Corner put in a McDonalds last year. When Phoebe is feeling really terrible, only a McDonalds hamburger can make it better. We pull into the parking lot and she turns off the engine so fast that the tail pipe coughs out a small cloud of blue smoke.

“One hamburger each,” she says to me under her breath. “No French fries. Water to drink. Unless tax has gone up we’ll be fine.”

I have been to McDonalds only a handful of times, in these emergency situations, but it is always just as cool, from air-conditioning, and wonderful-smelling as I remember. Phoebe waits in line and I head down the short hall to the ladies’ restroom. In the stall I am shocked to see that even though I feel nothing of the pain I felt yesterday, I have continued to bleed since I changed my supplies this morning. Blood has stained my underpants and the crotch of my shorts, though it has not yet leaked through to the outside. When I join Phoebe in line, I whisper that I need a dime.

“What for?” she says. Two men are getting ready to order at the register, and I don’t want to tell her in front of them.

“I need it,” I say.

“We don’t have it.”

“Please,” I say.
She points to the marquee sign above the counter, where all the prices are. “How much are hamburgers?”

“Thirty-eight cents.”

“How much is thirty-eight times two?”

“Seventy-six.”

“Plus a few cents tax,” Phoebe says. “How much money do we have?”

“Eighty-three.”

The men grab their trays of food and Phoebe, satisfied that she has explained herself to me, smiles at the high school girl behind the register and begins to order.

I creep back to the bathroom and sponge up as much blood from the pad as I can, with toilet paper. I roll more toilet paper around my hand, and when it feels as thick as a pad I add it to the top of the other one, then I picture the toilet paper wad falling out the leg of my shorts in McDonalds and I unroll more toilet paper and wind it around the whole thing, including the crotch of my panties. I try to pull it all as tightly against myself as I can, and I manage to button my shorts and waddle out of the restroom and down the hall to the dining room, where Phoebe has taken a table for two by the plate glass window and already unwrapped her burger.

“Let’s pray,” she says, and bows her head. “Oh, Lord, for what we are about to eat make us truly grateful. Amen.” The she pops open her eyes. “What did you need the dime for?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”
Phoebe bites into her hamburger and chews it reverently. Her pointy chin moves up and down. “There’s nothing in the world that tastes like this,” she says, placing her fingers over her lips since she is talking with her mouth full.

I unwrap my hamburger, too.

“Tell me what you needed the dime for,” she says.

“My period,” I say, as quietly as I can.

Phoebe swallows and frowns at me. “Part of being a woman, Charmaine, is thinking about that kind of thing before you leave the house.”

“I know.”

“With a new body comes new responsibilities. You can’t be caught out just anywhere without supplies. Where’s your purse?”

I shrug. Phoebe sewed me a purse from a pair of brown corduroys that I outgrew. The rear pockets of the pants decorate the front of the purse, which in a parallel universe might be cute, but in this universe the material still bags out in the shape of my bottom.

“You’re talking about the machines in the bathroom?” Phoebe says. “That’s what you needed the dime for?”

I nod while widening my eyes at her, willing her to lower her voice.

“Those are tampon dispensers, Charmaine.”

“Can we talk about this in the car?”

“Do you know what tampons are?”

“It’s not just tampons in there,” I hiss.
“You’re too young for tampons,” Phoebe says. We both take bites of our burgers and chew. They are going fast. Phoebe nods towards the remaining half burger on my wrapper. “Does yours taste funny?”

“No.”

“Okay. Just making sure.”

“Does yours?”

“No. But if yours did, and you took the rest of it up to the counter, they’d probably give you another one.”

“Why don’t you do it?”

“Because mine tastes fine, too,” she says in a small voice. “Listen, Charmaine, I’m not like some folks in East Winder who think tampons compromise your virginity.”

The women at the next table stop talking to each other and turn towards us.

“Phoebe,” I say. “Please.”

“Oh relax,” she says. “As if this particular matter is the biggest thing we have to worry about in the grand scheme of things. However, it should be said that someday you will want to get married to a good, Christian man, and you will want to give him the precious gift of your virginity, and the issue is not do we believe tampons compromise that, but whether or not the man you marry will have been raised to believe that. It’s a good idea to honor that possibility.”
Now the women at the next table are staring deep into each other’s eyes, holding their breath, daring themselves not to laugh. I keep chewing, miserably.

“What happened to your face,” Phoebe says.

I move my jaw from side to side.

“Turn that way,” she says, indicating the window, and I do. She squints at me. “You’re a little flushed, there. Does something hurt?”

“No.”

“Listen. You need to consider what I said about tampons.”

“I hate my period,” I say under my breath.

“One day you’ll have the joy of your own children,” Phoebe says. “So in the meantime, don’t be melodramatic.”

I stuff the rest of my burger into my mouth and consider the thought of my own children, which seems like a lousy, abstract consolation for an irreversible, monthly doom.

“We simply don’t have dimes to go squandering on tampons, anyway. Not when we have perfectly good supplies at home. Especially now that your father has thrown us a curveball.” Phoebe crumples the wrapper of her hamburger. “We don’t have money for this, either,” she says. “That was our last hamburger for a long, long time. Eighty-three cents is eighty-three cents, not to mention what it took in gas.”

“God’s will isn’t a curveball,” I say.

Phoebe sighs and turns to the plate glass window. Outside, McDonalds has put in a plastic playground, with a high fence so
kids can’t run out into the street. One mother sits on a bench, sipping her drink through a straw, while four blond children tumble around on the slide. You can hear their muffled shrieks through the glass. Phoebe’s chin has begun to quiver. I worry that she is about to cry, right here in McDonalds, and I say a quick prayer for her not to and then I realize that I’ve left off the praying without ceasing again, and I start in.

“Did you say something?” Phoebe says, turning to me.

“No.”

“Under your breath?”

I don’t know why I don’t want to tell her about the prayer, but I don’t. “No.”

She shakes her head slowly. “I hope the teenage years aren’t going to be full of resentment and attitude,” she says. “It’s not looking good.”

“I’m not resentful,” I say, though I speak through my teeth and resentful isn’t a bad word for how I feel.

“It’s not every woman who could be a partner to your father. Hear me? It’s no walk in the park. But the Lord brought us together. Do you have anything to say about that?”

I don’t understand what she thinks I would have to say about it, so I shake my head.

“So I don’t need a teenaged girl telling me about God’s will. I have my own front-row seat and I’m barely hanging on.”

I drop my head and keep it low, but I can feel the women behind Phoebe, listening.
“When someone speaks to you,” Phoebe says, “please respond.”

“Okay,” I say.

“I feel like I’m at the end of my rope. You get that, right?”

“Right,” I say.

“This is hard,” she says.

“I know.”

“What do you know?”

“That this is hard.”

Phoebe sighs again. “Your tone is unkind.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say,” I say.

“I don’t want a puppet,” Phoebe says, “but I don’t think a little compassion is too much to ask for.”

I am practicing continuing to think the prayer while I talk, but it’s hard. It stops and starts around the words I say. Still, it feels good to have something private in my head, especially when Phoebe starts in on compassion. I heard her telling Daze, while my father was away, that she worries about my diminishing capacity for it. This includes my capacity to understand that the world does not revolve around me, as well as my capacity to imagine what it might feel like to be another person, and what that other person might like to hear in order to feel better. But Phoebe has it wrong, because even though I say I don’t know what she wants to hear, it’s not true. I do know. She wants me to tell her how sorry I am that this latest thing with
my father is hard on her. She wants me to say that I will start helping her out in little ways around the house. Doing my chores without being asked and taking over some of her chores, too. I know she’d like to hear this because this is the kind of thing I used to be able to say to her, and when I said these things she would hug me and cry and tell me I was sweet. I remember what it felt like to want to say these things because it’s still in me, only it’s stuck in that unreachable hollow pocket near my heart.

The women who have been listening to us gather their trays and move to the trashcan. One of them sneaks a look back and shakes her head, just barely, in disapproval or disbelief or disgust. First this embarrasses me, but then it makes me mad, more mad than I am at Phoebe, even, and I stare right back at the woman, keeping myself from blinking until she stops shaking her stupid head. By the time Phoebe turns around to see what I’m looking at, the women are gone, the glass door of MacDonalds already closing behind them with its delayed swing.
Every Sunday, my joining-the-church class sits in a circle of folding chairs in a cinderblock room of the church basement. Besides me, the teacher, and two adult women, there are Mary-Kate and Karen, girls I have known for as long as I can remember, and now Seth Catterson, the missionary boy back from Ghana. This morning the talk has turned to speaking in tongues, which one of the adult women, a thin, blonde seminary wife, says happened in her old church whenever anyone was baptized. The teacher, a woman named Connie Bowls who has soft, powdery skin, explains that speaking in tongues is generally discouraged at First Community Church. The blonde woman, who always takes careful notes, writes this down.

“But if there’s a translator, then it’s not a sin,” says the other adult women, a heavyset brunette.

“In Ghana people speak in tongues all the time,” Seth adds.

“I’m sure that’s true,” says Connie Bowls. “Thank you, Seth. And, Sherry, it’s not a matter of sinfulness. It’s more a matter of church unity. Of time and place.”

“Some people have the gift of translation,” Sherry goes on. Her voice doesn’t sound unhappy, but she has an unhappy expression, with a mouth that turns down at the corners and drags the rest of her face with it.

Across the circle, I see that Mary-Kate and Karen have done each other’s hair in identical French braids, even though Mary-
Kate’s hair is so thin and fine and slippery that the braid is already escaping from its weave. I have managed only to pull my bangs back into a barrette. Again. Last week they saved me a seat, but today they sit in the only two chairs between the woman Sherry and Connie Bowls, and they didn’t switch their seats to the two empty ones beside me, like they could have. Now they’re whispering and leaning into each other and writing tiny notes in the margins of their Bibles.

I’ve spoken in tongues many times,” says Sherry. The words erupt from her mouth like a hiccup, like she didn’t know they were about to come out. She pauses again and her face settles back into itself. Connie Bowls waits to make sure she’s finished, then opens her mouth to answer, but Sherry has more: “Once I even translated myself. Translation is one of the gifts of the spirit,” says Sherry, after another pause. Then she looks pointedly at me. “Like prophecy.”

“Prophecy is an Old-Testament gift,” Seth says, beating his pencil against the rubber sole of his brown Sunday shoes as he talks. He has light brown eyes, the color of iced tea, and he is clearly one of those boys who can’t sit still. “Speaking in tongues is a gift of Pentecost. New Testament.”

“I thought speaking in tongues was from the Tower of Babel,” says Mary-Kate.

“The Tower of Babel is where different languages come from,” says the thin blonde seminary wife. “Like French and Spanish.”
“Something like that,” says Connie Bowls.

“My father says the Lord has always spoken to him in plain English,” I say to the woman, Sherry, who has brought it up. And to Seth, “There are plenty of prophets in the New Testament.”

“Not really,” Seth says. “What do the prophets have to foretell in the New Testament after Christ already came?”


“Debatable,” says Seth, though I doubt he even knows about Agabus and Philip’s daughters, given their brief mention.

“I’m delighted with this lofty discussion of the spiritual gifts,” says Connie Bowls, smiling hard and clapping her hands to indicate the end of any debate. “It falls right in with our scripture for next week. First Corinthians 12, where Paul talks about the church as having one body but many parts, and I’d like for us to use the next five minutes or so to think of the parts the disciples played in support of the early church, and then how this might translate to church members’ responsibilities today.”

I don’t even have to crack open my Bible to write “prayer” and “outreach,” and to come up with examples, the most obvious being prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane and the writing and preaching of the apostles throughout the New Testament. Today, I write, 
this translates to supporting the church in prayer and to being a living witness to others. And, I add for Seth’s benefit, to being open to new revelation from the Lord. When I look up,
everyone else is scowling down at their Bibles, turning pages, except Seth, who has also finished.

“Charmaine,” says Connie Bowls. “You can help out Karen and Mary-Kate, if you want. It can be a collaborative process.”

“We’re already collaborating, though,” Mary-Kate says without looking up from her Bible.

Connie Bowls twists her lips in a way that tells me she feels bad that Mary-Kate said that to me and wishes she hadn’t given her the opportunity.

“It’s okay,” I tell her. I try not to take Mary-Kate and Karen personally. They are kind of my friends and kind of not.

Seth is mouthing something to me from across the circle. I shake my head, and when he tries again I make out the word “prophecy.”

“Prophecy?” I whisper back, and he nods his head and crosses his forefingers in front of his mouth in an X, as if to say, “No prophecy.” When he sees that I understand, he smiles in a sly way, like he’s gotten me to admit to something. I roll my eyes.

“Everything okay?” Connie Bowls asks me.

I say yes, because it is better to ignore than engage someone as obnoxious as Seth. Then I open my Bible and flip through the pages, each one as soft as a pillowcase. Out of the corner of my eye, I watch Seth pull a square of thickly-folded paper out of the back pocket of his brown church slacks. He
unfolds what looks like the script of a play, with a thick white margin on the left stamped with names and colons.

I love plays. Seth and I were even in one, together, a church play, back in the third grade. We played husband and wife, and in one scene Seth had to kiss me on the cheek. Because it was awkward, Mrs. Reynolds, the director, didn’t make us practice, and the night of the performance Seth came towards me hard and swift, like an attack, and bruised my cheek with his teeth.

“Is there a new church play?” I ask him after class, and he shrugs.

“By ‘church,’ do you mean a play about church or a play for church.”

“Either one.”

“In that case, the answer is yes.” He folds the paper back into a square and pushes it into his pocket.

“Which one?”

“None of your beeswax.”

Mary-Kate and Karen pass by us on their way out the door. Sometimes our parents let us sit with each other during the Sunday morning service, but before I can follow them, Connie Bowls has put one hand on my shoulder and the other on Seth’s.

“It’s nice to have you and your family back from the mission field, Seth,” Connie Bowls says. “And Charmaine, I know you’re glad to have your father home again.”

“Yes,” I say, even though he’s been home all of a day and a half, and he spent last night down at the river, not at home.
“I’ve always wanted to see The Holy Land for myself,” she says.

“Africa’s farther away than The Holy Land,” Seth says.

“Depending on where you are,” I say, engaging in spite of myself. “Distance is relative.”

“I wouldn’t mind seeing Africa for myself, too,” says Connie Bowls, politely. “Ghana, especially.”

“My dad says The Holy Land has become commercialized,” Seth says. “They sell souvenirs and everything, just like Disneyland.”

“Beggars sell those souvenirs in order to feed their families,” I inform him.

“Well, maybe one day I’ll be lucky enough to see both places,” Connie Bowls says as she steers Seth and me towards the door. She is so nice to everyone that I don’t know how I’m going to explain that even though I’m taking the class I won’t be joining the church once it’s over.

When my father doesn’t appear for the service, I realize that I have been expecting him to. I have assumed that whatever heated inspiration he’s brought back from The Holy Land will be cooling into a new workable vision, and that he will ease back in to being not just apart but also a part of the community. In the past, when he is fasting down at the river but needs to get home for any reason, he walks to the tiny gas station in Tate’s Bend and calls Phoebe from the pay phone. Today, though, Daze, Phoebe and I sit by ourselves in a pew to the right of the wide center aisle, as we’ve been doing the whole time he’s been gone. The two
of them take turns telling people that yes, David’s home from The Holy Land, but he’s still exhausted from traveling.

The sanctuary of First Community has a big, barn-shaped interior, with a red-carpeted floor that slopes down to a stage in front and two small choir alcoves in either corner. On the right side, which I know to call “stage-left,” sits the choir, and on the left side sits the worship band, a group of six seminarians who are right now taking their places with the instruments waiting on stage-right. Two electric guitars, two acoustic guitars, a drum set, and a keyboard. Their warm-up sounds like a bag of cats and the noise ricochets off the sanctuary’s cement block walls. The windows onto the bank parking lot next door are open, but the ceiling fans right over our heads just churn up more stale, hot air. A cross draft is impossible, because the only other windows up near the ceiling on the opposite wall, open not to the outdoors but onto the room where the Youth Group meets, the Upper Room, which I have only set foot in once, but where I will soon find myself every Sunday night, for youth group.

High above the pulpit, over where the band is warming up, is the new dove-cross window embedded deeply into a vertical swath of paneling. It was specially commissioned to indicate “community,” with four birds meeting in the center, beaks locked together, forming a cross. We took special offerings for it for two years, with such a fuss that when it was unveiled I was surprised at how small it was—about the size of a dinner plate.
Each dove is not even as big as a real live dove. The whole thing looks like someone punched it there in the wall with an air gun, or a big needle, like the small pox vaccination in the middle of Phoebe’s shoulder. What I do like about the window is that it’s always casting a fuzzy replica of itself, a little colored secret of a spot, somewhere in the church. Once you find it, you can track it as the sun moves. Today I spy it behind me, hovering on the front of the balcony, a blurry disk of faded blue and gold.

As the band starts into the first song, Daze pulls two cardboard fans from the hymnal rack and hands one to me with a raised eyebrow. The song is called “Spirit of the Living God, Fall Afresh on Me.” My grandmother does not go in for contemporary music, praise choruses included. Melt me. Mold me. Fill me. Use me. She stands there with the side of her lip up like the words taste bad. Sometimes I try to stand, unsinging, with her until we get to a respectable old-time hymn that she likes. “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” for example. Or a praise song that I enjoy, like “I’ll Fly Away,” or even “These Are the Days of Elijah.” But if Phoebe catches me not singing she switches places with Daze and pokes me until I open my mouth.

Soon a woman to my left slips out from the pew and heads down the aisle, then another woman, this one on the right a few pews up, then two more, then three, all while the expression on Daze’s face becomes more and more grim. The women are headed to the spirit-flag receptacle mounted on the wall of the left-side choir loft. The wooden box holds ten flags made of gold, silver
and red cloth and decorated with felt crosses and doves. One red flag has a pair of hands that are supposed to look uplifted in prayer. But in a design mistake they’re both left hands, and the cutting job on the felt makes them look kind of creepy, with craggy, too-long fingers reaching right up out of the flag and wrists that just end as if they’ve been hacked off from felt arms. They must look creepy to the women, too, because the hand-flag is almost always the last to be chosen.

Today I watch as the thin blonde woman from the joining-the-church class timidly lifts the hand flag from the receptacle. Probably she’s too new to know which one she’s choosing. A couple other women, including Mary-Kate’s gray-haired mother and a tall fair woman I believe to be Seth’s mother, Mrs. Catterson, spread out in front of the stage and wave their flags in time to the music, dipping their knees on every other beat. The idea is that motion of the flags set to the music helps lift people’s hearts in prayer. The other idea is to get as many people involved in worship as possible, which is one reason my father originally left the United Methodist Church and its one-way delivery of the gospel. That’s not to say, however, that First Community supports dancing any more than it supports speaking in tongues. And even though most Sundays it would be hard to call what’s happening up front dancing, today the thin blonde woman is wiggling her hips, just a little, as she jerks the hand flag back and forth. Every few seconds she changes it up, swaying the flag to one side and kicking her foot to the other, then reversing the motion, like
the chorus girls I’ve seen from watching Daze’s old movies. Several women in the next pew bring their hands to their mouths, and Daze and Phoebe steal a quick look at each other. The question to ask yourself, if you feel moved to keep time with music in church, is whether you intend to call attention to the Holy Spirit in an attitude of worship or whether you intend to call attention to your own body. Watching the open-mouthed smile on the thin blonde woman’s face, it’s hard for me to believe that she intends to be calling so much attention to her own body. I am imagining the church she comes from, where people freely speak in tongues when they are baptized. Maybe they dance in the aisles, too, and think nothing of it. Even though I have only sat in two classes with this woman, I want to run down front and warn her to be more careful. All I can do, however, is stand there with the rest of the congregation, who gasp as she raises the flag over her head with both hands and begins twirling in joyous, oblivious circles. She is so caught up that she doesn’t even notice the other flag wavers, who one by one lower their arms to watch her. In a unanimous, unspoken decision, they file past her in a slow line, and by the time the thin blonde seminary wife opens her eyes and stops twirling the rest of the women have gathered by the receptacle and are already replacing their flags, dropping the posts into the wooden box with a hollow thock that registers just below the music, turning away from her as she stops twirling and scurries to catch up.
Later I will find out that during this church service my father, down at the river, is tramping around in the scrubby woods on the other side of the road from our cabin, close to the base of the limestone palisades. I have seen the way he does this when he thinks no one is watching. Tears on his face, eyes lifted towards heaven, allowing the Lord’s presence to descend upon him. Maybe this time he has his eyes closed, feeling Paul’s blindness at the sudden appearance of Christ on the road to Damascus. Maybe he’s just wrapped up in his prayer without ceasing. What he is not doing is watching where he is going, and by the time he realizes he has stumbled into poison ivy, his robe is tangled in the underbrush. It’s possible he returns to the cabin right away, but in my mind, he keeps on through the scrub, not wanting to interrupt the voice of the Lord. The itching won’t come until later on. When it does, it will seem like nothing more than a nuisance, an impediment to the voice of the Lord, something to be ignored, like hunger or worry. He will ignore it all day Sunday, first while Phoebe and I are having dinner with Daze in the cafeteria of the Custer Peake Memorial Retirement Center, then while Phoebe sits at our kitchen table scouring the Lexington Herald-Leader for employment ads, telling me that even though doing this counts as working on the Sabbath it’s okay because our ox is in the ditch, if it ever was. He will ignore it while Phoebe and I head back to church for the evening service to listen to Seth’s father give his presentation about their school in Ghana.
Sunday night dinner for us is always a can of tuna mixed in with a can of cream of mushroom soup and spooned over saltine crackers, a meal Phoebe calls “tuna wiggle” because of how it all turns gelatinous as it begins to cool on your plate. The trick is to eat it fast. And as we are sitting across from each other at the kitchen table, in the half-dark because the electric lights just seem too hot when it’s this muggy, the itching begins to get the better of my father. Under a bright moon he drags Daze’s old tin washtub from the shed, the big one that I used to splash around in when I was a child. There’s a gallon of bleach in the shed, too, and he empties that into the washtub and adds water from the hose until it’s half-full. And then, because it doesn’t look like the neighbors are home, he drops his filthy, spore-ridden brown robe in the grass and steps into the tub of bleach water. He squats, wedging himself in until the water rises to his waist, and he sits there a good long time, praying without ceasing, telling himself that he’s killing the poison ivy, the itch that Satan has brought upon him to test his devotion to the Lord’s vision.

I’m sitting on the floor of my room, with the contents of the box I keep under my bed spread out beside me on the brown braided rug. It’s an old wooden Swineborne’s Gelatin box Daze picked up somewhere, with a flip up top and mitered corners, which means that it was built to last. Every time I empty it out to go through my things, Titus jumps into the box like I got it out just for him. He fills it with his whole body, corner to
corner, squeezed in tight as my father in the washtub, and you can tell by the way Titus purrs that he thinks it’s a good, solid feeling. I can’t explain most of what I keep in the box. Some of it’s special, like Daze’s bone pen from Niagra Falls, which she bought on her honeymoon. If you look through a tiny lens at the top of the pen it’s a viewfinder that shows you a black and white cartoon illustration of the different parts of Niagra Falls, like Goat Island, Horseshoe Fall, and Whirlpool Rapids—all places I would like to see someday. But most of what’s in the box is junk I just can’t throw away, for one reason or another. There’s a book of matches where the part that holds the matches slides out of the cover, which I saved because it reminds me of a tiny drawer. An empty tin of Band-Aids that I keep because I like the way it smells on the inside. There’s a Queen of Clubs playing card I found on the street in Lexington and pocketed, since I’m not allowed to have a deck of playing cards because they are used in gambling. The only cards we have, the only cards I have ever seen in all of East Winder, are for the game Rook. And the corn and wheat cards you trade in Pit, which is a game I cannot abide, with its irritating bell. I also keep a small notebook in the box, with a list of things I might like to become, including actress, veterinarian and prophet. Even though I am not in danger of forgetting the words to my prayer, I jot it down on the back page of the notebook. I know that every time I come across the words I will remember to start praying again, if I have stopped. I whisper the words, now, and I bend down close to Titus’ head
and whisper them again into one of his velvety black ears, which flattens in annoyance. I tip up the Swineborne’s box and he spills out onto the rug. Then I reload the box with all my things, arranging them carefully so there’s space for The Holy Land relics and the postcard of the Dead Sea.

I don’t know at what point the bleach starts to burn my father worse than the itching. And the washtub itself becomes uncomfortable, as all tight fits eventually do, and when he manages to throw the tub on its side and crawl out on all fours, he has red rings from the pressure of the tub halfway up his back. He must know that his robe has poison ivy oil all over it, but it’s the only thing he has to cover his nakedness with, to warm his sudden chill, to soak up the oozing that has begun to happen from his waist down. An oozing that doesn’t seem to stop. He clutches the robe to his private parts, then wraps himself in it, as he limps a whole mile and a half towards the gas station. But the pain, the pain forces him to stop at a trailer lit from within like a tin lantern on the side of the road.

Ruthie Pope, mother of seven, is cleaning up from a spaghetti supper that feeds all her kids for two dollars. When my burned, blistered and half-naked father knocks, she’s already jumpy, and drops the pot she’s drying back into the sink of soapy water, splashing the front of her shirt. She’s dabbing at herself, cussing softly already when she opens the door.

My father can hardly speak. The brown robe has stuck to parts of his legs, the weeping parts, and to his privates, which
are unspeakably raw. When Ruthie Pope peels it away, the lower parts of his back and stomach look like someone has skinned them with a knife. She’s a practical woman, and the first thing she does is cover a patch of her wall-to-wall carpet with a sheet so he doesn’t bleed on it, or ooze on it. And the second thing she does is to grab her cylinder of Crisco and oil my father’s naked body from the waist down. My father, she will say later, breathes through his lips with pain. He seems to be talking to himself, and Ruthie reckons he’s delirious. There’s something familiar about him, but she can’t put a name to the gaunt, glassy-eyed, bearded face. And he doesn’t give her his name, or she would find the number for Daze, or Phoebe. The Peakes and the Popes, old Rowland County families both, know of each other, though it is possible they haven’t crossed paths in forty years. She keeps asking, though. “What’s your name, child, what’s your name,” and when he finally manages a name she believes she hears him say he is the Apostle Paul. Then he says it again, and she figures the best thing she can do for this man, and for any and all others who may be concerned, is call the police.

I am closing the lid on the Swineborne’s Gelatin box, sliding it back under my bed, when the phone rings downstairs. Phoebe has been sitting at the kitchen table, listening to the Sunday night Christian soap opera broadcast by the Salvation Army, the stories about streetwalkers and drug users who hit rock bottom in Chicago or Pittsburg and stumble into churches on their
last legs, where they meet kind people ladling out hot soup right alongside the Good News.

The radio goes off and I hear her answer, hear the way her friendly, public voice levels off into calm, dead reckoning. She’s still on the phone with Police Chief Burton, Ezra Burton, when the doorbell rings and there’s Mayor James, having got the first call from the chief who thought Phoebe Peake should have someone with her, should have someone drive her, even, down to the river, and then to the hospital. Phoebe either thinks I’m already asleep or is too shocked to think of me at all. She leaves the house for the first time ever without telling me where she’s going and when she’ll be back.

At my window I follow the mayor’s taillights until his car disappears down Main Street, headed south to the River Road. Then I stay at the window awhile longer watching the moon rise until it sits opposite the cross on the water tower, the two lights more or less matched in brightness, suspended on either side of East Winder like the very eyes of God.
They keep my father in the first hospital for three days. His legs are covered in gauze, but the doctors have decided to leave the more serious burns, in the more serious places, exposed, so that when Daze and I enter his room everything but his head and shoulders has to be shielded by a curtain, for modesty, while he sleeps. An IV is sedating him and regulating his fluids. Someone has shaved his beard and clipped his hair close to his head, which makes him look younger. And smaller. But what gets to me is the way his mouth is open. Not gently, like for regular breathing, but with a helpless gaping that makes me want to pull the curtain all the way closed so no one, not even Daze and I, can see him sleep this way without him knowing it.

“He’s going to be okay,” Phoebe says when she finds us in the hallway. “The bleach did a number on him, though. And the fasting. They want to run a few tests.”

“Tests?” says Daze.

“He said some things. They want to rule out a head injury.”

“He’s exhausted,” says Daze. “My poor boy.”

I don’t even know that I am crying until the tears are running down my cheeks. I can’t stop seeing my father sleeping with his mouth open like that, not even knowing who could be watching him, not even having any say over it. Daze and Phoebe each hug me, and Daze gives me a hankie, but the crying doesn’t stop, and it doesn’t stop on the way home, either. There’s a
reason people talk about crying themselves to sleep, which is exactly what I end up doing.

For the next two days, while Phoebe and Daze are mostly at the hospital, I stay with Mrs. James, who is on a week’s vacation from the county court. We sit on the couch in their air conditioning and watch back-to-back episodes of I Love Lucy, Get Smart, and Batman—the old Batman with the real actors. As long as the television’s on, the crying doesn’t come back except once when Lucy does the dance with Desi and all the eggs break in her shirt, and I start laughing so hard I can’t stop, and then the laughing turns to crying, and I am off and running again. Mrs. James sits with me and pats my back. She tells me everything will be okay, and calls me sweet patootie, and then she gets out her Notary Public stamp and lets me practice notarizing on a bunch of junk mail envelopes, which is more satisfying than I would have thought.

Tuesday night Phoebe says my father’s alert but still needs his rest. They’re making sure nothing gets infected before his skin scabs over. By Wednesday he is out of the woods enough, infection-wise, to tolerate a brain scan and to meet with a different kind of doctor, a psychiatrist, and by Thursday, before I even get a chance to see him again, he is moved to a small, private facility near Frankfort, where Daze’s first-cousin is an administrator and where, Phoebe tells me, he can recover and fully recuperate. She tells me this after she gets home from the day-long admission process.
“Why can’t he recuperate here?” I say.

“Because he can’t.” Phoebe steps out of her shoes, the same dyed blue satin ones she wore to the airport, and raises herself up and down on her toes.

I am home alone because this afternoon Mrs. James felt a migraine coming on, and needed absolute quiet. I have been sitting at the kitchen table for the last two hours, numbly trying to read a book the bookmobile lady set aside for me, which is good, but not quite as distracting as the past couple days of loud television. In fact, the book isn’t distracting from my situation at all. It’s about a girl whose father is mysteriously away from home. Townspeople are talking, speculating that he ran off with another woman, but her mother thinks not and, though worried, is trying to keep a stiff upper lip. The bookmobile lady is from Lexington. Her name is Armenta, and she is black, and she probably doesn’t know anything about my family, so she probably didn’t pick out this book for me on purpose.

“Have you done your Bible reading?” Phoebe says, and I tell her I have. I’m supposed to read the Bible every day before I fill my mind with anything else. She pulls out a chair opposite me and sits. To go to the hospital she has worn a good skirt and blouse, and she still wears the ghost of her public face, which is not as easy to read as the private face she wears at home.

“Well?” She raises her eyebrows as if I have should news for her instead of her having news for me. Then, “Aren’t you going to ask about your father?”
“How,” I start, but I find I can’t get the question going. I close my mouth and start over. “How.” I am afraid, suddenly, of sounding afraid out loud. I am afraid I will start crying again. Underneath the table I run my bare feet over the floor until I feel something familiar, a comforting bubble of linoleum I often press during dinner.

“He won’t be home for awhile,” Phoebe says. Then she raises her eyebrows at me again. Phoebe is the kind of person who, when she becomes very upset, takes a cryptic approach. It’s the opposite of sharing. While the sharing forces me to listen, the cryptic approach forces me to ask questions, only when I ask questions her responses are limited to the questions I ask and I learn only as much as all of the questions I can think of to ask. But you can see how it makes her feel better, the relieved look that comes over her face just after she is asked something and before she answers, even if the answer she’s about to give is incomplete, or upsetting.

After how is he, I should be asking why he won’t be coming home, which is the new information and which is what I desperately want to know. But something about the way Phoebe is watching me from across the table, wanting me to ask the question so badly, keeps me from being able to.

[Finally, Phoebe ____________. gesture for time and to show she’s given up on getting the question] “Things are going to be a little different,” she says.
“How?” I sound like an Indian chief, but it seems to be the only word I can get out.

“For starters, we’re out of money. Let me rephrase that. We were out of money and now we are not only out of money, we owe money. Or we will. We will owe lots of money to the hospital. Not the one he’s in now, praise the Lord, which is more of a recovery facility, but the one he’s been in. I have put in my name as a substitute teacher, but that will be a drop in the bucket.”

I nod again, though I have not realized there was anything more dire than being out of money.

“For starters,” Phoebe says again, “you and I will be staying down at the river. I’ve secured a renter for this house for the next few months.”

I hear the words, but it takes a second for them to make sense. “Live down there?”

“It’s rent this house or lose it.”

“He’ll be gone that long?”

“I don’t know,” Phoebe says. “Nobody knows right now. But three months is the length of the Catterson’s furlough. They can’t rent from us if they’ll have to shift around according to your father’s condition. They need a commitment.”

Under my right foot, the linoleum bubble dents in then pops up again. Now I really do feel the tears coming back, but I bite down until my jaw bulges, and I stare at the cover of my book. It’s blue, with three tiny white silhouettes of the main characters, each in their own series of circles, like you’re
peering at them through a vortex, or a slinky. I imagine peering through a tube like that with my father on the other end, and then I remember that I have forgotten to pray without ceasing since the night he was taken to the emergency room. “What’s wrong with him?” I say, finally, keeping my eyes on the book.

Phoebe sighs. “They’re talking about a chemical imbalance in his brain.”

I have always thought of chemicals as household products like bug spray, or ammonia, or bleach, or windshield wiper fluid, or paint. Substances with odors and warnings and childproof caps. It has never occurred to me that the brain might have its own chemicals with a whole accompanying set of hazards.

“In the meantime,” Phoebe says, “I told the Cattersons they can stay here right away. No reason to draw out this whole ordeal.” She stands, moves to the sink, takes out two brown grocery bags from underneath and hands them to me. “There’s no time to get upset,” she says, pointing at me with her chin. “Hear? We’re going to be just fine.”

Upstairs I sit in the middle of my brown braided rug and try not to think about the fact that, as if things were already not bad enough, Seth Catterson will be taking over my room. Sleeping in my bed. Looking out my window. Hearing the trains come through just the way I hear them. Touching my books, my ceramic animals, anything and everything that will not fit into the two grocery bags in front of me. Which have to be filled with
school clothes, which is another thing, besides the prayer without ceasing, that I’ve forgotten about over the past few days. Junior high starts on Monday.

I unfold the two bags. I don’t know where to start. For one odd moment I don’t remember where any of my clothes are, even though I’m staring right at my dresser. Then I am on my feet and packing in a frenzy, stuffing my two pairs of jeans, a hand-me-down Jordache pair from one of my cousins in Georgia and the pair of fake Levis Phoebe made, into the bottom of one bag, then piling in the T-shirts and the two button-up shirts I own, then folding the brown church dress into the top of the bag so it won’t get wrinkled. Into the other bag go my tennis shoes and church shoes, my socks and underwear and a nightie. I find the belt and safety pins for the sanitary pads and put those in, too. There’s no chance of my leaving behind a bra, because I’m wearing the only one I own. I am praying “Inhabit me, Oh Lord God,” over and over under my breath, and each time I run through it, it gets faster, like it’s trying to keep up with my heart, which is racing. Saying the prayer like this turns my mind into an empty field where nothing has the chance to grow. It keeps out the image of my burned, sleeping father. It keeps out the worry over what will happen if when he’s ready to come back the Cattersons are still living here. It keeps out the claustrophobic anticipation of living on top of Phoebe down at the river while Seth occupys my bedroom. But it’s as if all these things are just
waiting at the corner of my mind for me to forget the prayer again so that when I do, they can come rushing back in.

Titus slinks into the room and pads his way over to me. We will be taking him with us because Seth is allergic to cats. And dust. And carpet. The Cattersons, Phoebe says, will be rolling up my rug and storing it in the basement. At the river, Titus will get to try being an outdoor cat, which Phoebe says will be a treat for him, but this is another worry for me, and I accelerate the prayer to the point where I am spitting, a little bit, as my lips form the words. Inhabitmeolordgod, inhabitmeolordgod, inhabitmeolordgod. I sink to the rug again and pull Titus onto my lap. I bury my head in the back of his neck, which he lets me do for a long time, and as the prayer slows down to a normal speed he starts purring, nosing his face into the crook of my elbow, and we stay that way until Phoebe calls from downstairs that it’s time to go.

Halfway to the river, I remember the box I keep under the bed. “I need to go back,” I say, caught between wanting it and not wanting to see the Cattersons as they arrive.

If Phoebe hears me, she is concentrating too hard on driving, squinting into the setting sun, to answer.

That it is not the best idea for me to see my father for a week or so is something Phoebe and Daze agree on. Phoebe says that the medicine he’s taking makes him very subdued. Not great for visitors. But the next day, our first full day of living down
at the cabin, she returns from the hospital with a short letter from him.

“I didn’t read it,” she says, holding it out to me.

I take the folded sheet of paper. It has a sticker to hold it together, one of those scratch and sniff bananas, which I don’t know why they would have at a hospital. I have been tracking Titus around the lot surrounding the cabin, warning him when he seems about to explore further. Cats roam, my father has told me. Before he began to hear the voice of the Lord, my father had been studying to be a park ranger. Cats establish a territory and know, always, where they are in it and how to get back home. Groups of lions are called prides, and I don’t know if it’s the same for domestic cats, but if it is, I hope Titus thinks of us as his pride. Now I find him crouched in the deep grass, tracking a bug, and return him to the cabin.

“He’ll just want out again,” Phoebe says, but I have already let the flimsy screen door, original to the RV, slap shut behind me. I head across the overgrown, weedy lawn down the riverbank to our dock to read my letter.

Dear Charmaine,

The doctors here are men of science, not believers. A few things I did not expect. I thought another CAT scan. They ask if I’ve had a fall. They laid me on my back and said don’t move. The first time in the tube the screen was off. This time, the green digital words started showing up. Then I remembered they told me
about this. I forgot. That’s happening because of the medicine. The words on the screen made me feel. They touched my knee with a rubber hand. A rubber hand will touch you in five seconds. Even though it was only a rubber hand. Then the noise. From the camera. Mapping the ocean floor. But it was the work of the Lord. Inside me, meeting outside me. It’s hard to pray with the noise. But the noise is the prayer.

A letter of groggy half thoughts to decipher, in handwriting that looks funny. My father has always been a printer—with sharp marks that slant forward and dent the paper with their force. His handwriting here is looser, large and nearly cursive but not quite. I lie on my back, on our dock, and use the letter to block the sun, which is about to dip behind the western palisades.

Everything inside me is outside. Outside the machine. I was in the tube. The tube I was in was in me. At the same time. I had swallowed a capsule with me in it.

I close my eyes and try to imagine my own full self, shrunken and submerged in a capsule deep within my own body, the breathing and heartbeat and all the stomach sounds like weather. Me inside myself, perhaps going on into infinity, like your reflection can do when you stand in between two mirrors.

When I open my eyes there are only the tops of the trees that grow along the river bank, the sycamores and sugar maples, looking limp and tired, gray and green, the way they do before the first cold snap. It’s a warm day early in September. The air
has a rare dryness to it, even right over the water. Overhead a red-tailed hawk cuts across the hazy sky, shuttling between the limestone palisades. The river lifts and settles beneath me, pressing the warped planks of the dock against my shoulder blades. Today, the water smells oily, and this sticks in my throat. My father has often told me that at one time Kentucky was under a large inland sea. That’s why it’s full of limestone, which is made up of millions of tiny skeletons of tiny fish. Now all that’s left of the sea is the river, part of a branch of rivers that all flow, eventually, into the Mississippi. For centuries the river has been pushing its way over and through and along the rock, carving the gorge. I used to think that you could count the horizontal seams in the palisades the way you could the rings on a tree stump, and that way you’d know exactly how old the river was, but you can’t. The river is older than anyone knows.

I hear Phoebe before I see her, grunting softly as she stagger-steps down the damp grass bank, a dirty potato in each hand. “I forgot all about these,” she says, brandishing the potatoes. “We can eat off the land for a while yet. The fruits of our labor. How does that sound?”

“Technically, it’s not our labor,” I say, since my father is the one who kept up with the summer garden before leaving for the Holy Land. Now it’s so overgrown now that it looks like a patch of weeds.
“Technically, I found them and dug them up,” Phoebe says, “and that was pretty laborious.”

She steps out onto the dock gingerly, holding the potatoes out to her side to keep her balance.

“You’re wearing my jeans,” I say.

“Not your new pair,” she says. “Not the ones I made you.” She is wearing the hand-me-down pair of Jordache jeans, the ones I’m planning to wear to school every day I possibly can. The ones I’m planning to change into once I get there even when Phoebe insists I wear the jeans she made.

“My jeans are dirty,” Phoebe is saying, “and you have an extra pair and look--they fit me pretty well. We’ll be sharing clothes like sisters, soon, which will save us money. Fun, too, huh?”

“Fun,” I say.

The jeans fit Phoebe the way they’re supposed to fit, snug but not as tight as they are on me. These days it seems like I am getting bigger in direct proportion to Phoebe getting smaller. She has new finger-sized shadows between her ribs, when her ribs never even showed before. Whereas my breasts get bigger every day, it seems. I have begun to wonder if my own body is going to keep swelling indefinitely, the way my father’s garden tomatoes do on the vine, splitting wide open, some of them, if you don’t pick them in time.

“What does your father have to say?” Phoebe asks.

I sit up on the dock and hold out the letter.
“You tell me,” Phoebe says, shooing away the letter with a potato. “He wrote to you.”

“Some kind of brain test, or something. Pictures.”

Phoebe lowers herself to a squat. Then she loses her balance and sits down hard on her bottom. A corner of the dock dips into the river, picking up a film of water that creeps towards us.

“Did he say anything about me?”

“If you want to know what’s in the letter you might as well read it yourself.”

Phoebe’s mouth turns down and her eyebrows go up. Her chin points. She’s either going to hold the face until she gets an apology, or she’s about to say that I am developing a smart mouth.

“He says he misses being home,” I say quickly.

“Really?”

“He says he loves you.”

“Maybe I should take a look at that after all,” Phoebe says, setting down one potato and holds out her small hand for the letter that says neither of those things.

As she reads, I watch the surface of the water. Sometimes it’s a black-green sheet of glass, but today you can see the current, flexing and unflexing like a long muscle. Phoebe’s mouth is doing the pre-crying thing, like she’s sucking on a piece of hard candy. I have been feeling remorseful about the lie, but now, for no good reason, I fill up with pure hate.
“I want you to close your eyes with me, Charmaine,” Phoebe says. She tucks in her chin and I crimp my eyes closed. “Lord, first of all we thank you for teaching us not to take our mental health for granted.”

I try to pray what she prays, but I can’t. Then I try to start up my own prayer, but I am fully in the grip of my sinful nature, and the words that come into my head, behind my eyes, are Lord, make my mother shut up.

“We also give you the glory for this fine day,” she goes on.

Shut up, shut up, shut up, I pray. I can’t help it. The words flash into my mind like a blinking light.

“Please help Charmaine and I to support each other with honesty and respect. Amen.” Phoebe raises her head, opens her eyes. “You don’t have to make things up,” she says. “He’s a grown man.”

A breeze picks up, and the leaves above me flip over, changing entire trees to a paler, grayer shade of green, then back to normal. “What did they do with the rubber hand,” I finally ask her, cross because she’s the only person I have to ask. I would ask anyone else if I could.

“I have no idea,” says Phoebe. “He’s a little confused. And they’ve given him something to calm him down. He’s had a couple MRIs, though, I know.” As she speaks, Phoebe contemplates the potatoes. Her face looks, suddenly, too soft. When she frowns, tiny puddles of loose skin form at either side of her mouth. It
makes her look young and old at the same time, and all of a sudden the hate is gone and I feel sorry for her. I wish those words had been in my father’s letter. This is what happens when you’re born again. First you have your own reactions and feelings from your original, sinful nature. Then the Holy Spirit kicks in and shows you what to feel bad about. Your conscience is a sign that God is there, something you can experience even if you don’t always feel his presence more directly.

Now I pray, in my head, forgive me. I pray, help my father and help my mother. Inhabit me, O Lord God. Out loud I say, “I’m sorry.”

“I forgive you,” Phoebe says. “It’s a tough time.” She leans over the side of the dock and wiggles both potatoes around just under the surface of the water. She brings them out and wipes them on my jeans, transferring long streaks of dirt down the thighs so that they will have to be washed again before I can wear them to school.

Phoebe says to think of living down on the river as another adventure. Like our year of living on faith alone, but with a different setting. She says to think of the two of us as partners for the time being, more than mother and daughter. It can be fun to make do, she says, kind of like in The Boxcar Children, only with running water and a small septic tank, praise God.

On our first Sunday, the first Sunday we have missed church in years, she stands at the miniature kitchen counter while I try
to read, sprawled off the edge of the narrow, built-in, tweed-covered sofa bench that’s original to the RV and that is now, also, my bed. Today it’s drizzling outside, which makes the sofa smell like an old wet coat.

“You hated the year of living on faith,” I remind her.

“Faith alone,” Phoebe says. “The point is, we lived to tell.” She is scrubbing more potatoes over the small, stainless steel sink, turning on the water to rinse, then off to scrub, because if we don’t conserve the water in our cistern for showers, we’ll run out. If I reached out my arm I could touch the back of Phoebe’s leg, that’s how cramped we are, here. Even with the windows open to catch the slightest breeze, it feels suffocating. Titus, who hates rain, watches us from the passenger seat up front.

“You’ll have all the time in the world to read,” Phoebe says. “So put that book down and listen to me. I was thinking you could start fishing off the dock for dinner. Trout. You can figure out how to clean the fish and everything. You’d never do something like that in town. I have the feeling you’re going to excel in your science classes, living down here full-time, right in the middle of nature.”

“It’s hot,” I say, then wish I hadn’t. Saying so only makes it hotter.

“It’s a private sauna,” says Phoebe. “People pay money for this kind of thing. “I’m telling you, Charmaine, plenty of people would love a front-row seat to the changing of the seasons like
we’ll have down here. Just wait until the leaves start turning. Someday after I’m gone, you’ll look back on all this and say, ‘One time my mother and I lived all by ourselves in a real log cabin down on the Kentucky River.’ Then you’ll show them the spot, then you’ll get all choked up.”

I send my skepticism, telepathically, towards Titus. I can’t imagine a time after Phoebe’s gone. Then, all at once, I can. And a bolt of grief runs clean through me, leaving me stunned.

“You won’t have to give them all the details,” Phoebe says, misinterpreting my look. She wipes the sweat off her forehead with the back of her arm, then stabs each potato once with the paring knife, to keep them from exploding on the grill. “We can look at this situation in terms of the challenges, or we can look at this situation in terms of the opportunities. If you never have to persevere, Charmaine, you’ll never know you can. And I, for one, am feeling positively buoyant after winnowing down my earthly store.”


“This is different. Less prophet, more...pioneer.”

The two paper bags that hold my clothes are wedged between the RV’s passenger seat and driver seat. “Our house is still our house, though,” I say. “With our stuff. And Daddy’s stuff.”

“I can tell you that your father’s stuff is probably pretty far from his mind at this point.” Phoebe hands me the potatoes,
then tosses a box of tinfoil onto the sofa beside me. She swipes a dish towel from the hook in front of the sink and wipes her hands. “The whole idea, all I’m talking about, here, is to get a little less attached to the things we have, to lighten our burden during a difficult time. Not to see if we can do without things we actually need.”

“Okay, so we’ll try to be less attached.” I spread two sheets of tin foil and carefully wrap the potatoes, then palm each of them to carry outside. “But we’ll move back home anyway, eventually, all three of us.”

Phoebe perches next to me. She starts to grab my hands, but I’m holding potatoes in both my palms, so she ends up laying her hands on top of the potatoes instead. “I want to you know something,” she says, studying our hands as if she could bake the potatoes through concentration alone. “You’re more important to me than anything else in the world.”

“Okay.” I try giving the potatoes a little lift. The cabin feels too stuffy, too damp for a conversation like this, and there is no place for me to go. Phoebe presses the potatoes back down, pushing the backs of my hands into my lap.

“Thank you,” I try again, willing the conversation to be over.

“Shh,” says Phoebe. “Don’t say anything. I want you to think about that for a minute. How important you are to me.”

I frown in a way I hope makes me look like I’m thinking about it, but as soon as anyone tells me to think about something
my mind begins skipping around like a Mexican jumping bean, and
details zoom into focus one at a time. Like Phoebe’s smell, right
now, which isn’t the vinegar strength of my father’s scent when
he hasn’t bathed, but more of a clingy feeling in my nose that
reminds me of dark, growing things, underground vegetables that
send out tentacles to stay alive. Then I’m thinking about the
Cattersons living in my house at this very moment, Seth probably
sitting at my desk, opening drawers. I’m wondering if he’s looked
inside my box under the bed, discovered the secret glimpse of
Niagra Falls, shaken the Holy Land relics from their baggies. I
think of my father and the rubber hand, and of my prayer and how
I’ve forgotten, again since yesterday, to keep it going. I am as
bad as the vestal virgins in the book of XXXXX, who failed at the
one simple job they had, to stay awake for the bridegroom.

“Did you get that?” Phoebe is saying. “Did you really
listen? I said you’re more important to me than anything else in
the world. That should mean something to you.”

“What about Daddy, though?” I say. It doesn’t seem right to
be more important to her than he is. Or for any of us to be
ranked at all. Or for her to say it.

“That’s different.”

“What about Jesus?”

“That’s different too,” Phoebe says. “You’ll understand
when you have a child of your own. There’s no bond like it.” She
moves a hand to my forehead, pushing back my bangs, which hang
into my eyes because I have forgotten my barrette. It’s something
that makes me feel five years old again, and even more hot, and I
lean away. On the stove, the pot of water begins to boil. “So?”
Phoebe says, standing up.

“What?”

“Am I important to you? Because it’s getting harder and
harder to tell, these days.”

“You’re important,” I say, and even though I mean for the
words to come out in a careless way that would let her know this
corversation couldn’t be less important, they come out thin and
strained. “Please,” I tack on, but even that word, sarcastic as
it feels in my mouth, sounds like a kind of pleading by the time
it hits the air. Like it could mean, “Please believe me,” not
“We don’t make me say these things.”

Phoebe is momentarily satisfied. She drops handfuls of
spinach from the garden into the pot, and smiles to herself
through the steam, the first time I have seen her smile since my
father came back from the Holy Land. Phoebe enjoys boiling
vegetables, and eating boiled vegetables. She even enjoys the
worst part, which is afterwards when we have to split the
leftover water they were boiled in, a kind of vegetable tea, to
make sure none of the nutrients go down the drain.

Outside, the rain picks up, pattering against the cabin’s
tin roof, which peaks emptily above the RV’s original flat top. I
think about what Phoebe’s said, that there is no bond like the
bond between her and me. And whether or not I believe it, or want
it, I feel it, as real and deep inside me as if we shared a
single vital organ. Only it’s as if this organ we both need can help just one of us at a time, and it has, somehow, been transferred to me, and her need of it pulls me to her even as it forces me to resist.

The air coming in through the small windows smells of green, growing things. It’s not hard to imagine a tangle of grass and weeds creeping up to, and then over, the thick logs of our cabin. Month after month a slow progress, so slow we don’t notice, until one day the only thing to be seen from the outside is a gentle hill, like an Indian burial mound, with Phoebe and me trapped inside.
Chapter 5

Before the school bus comes into sight, I hear it, gears grinding as it lurches down into the turns on the River Road. Soon it’s rounding the base of Tate’s Bridge to where the bottom of the gorge flattens out. Then it’s getting closer to me, then it looks like it’s going to run right into me before it stops, and I step back into the wet grass. The doors fold open, and a long-boned black woman in the driver’s seat says, “Hey there, baby, hop on.”

“Ravenna,” someone yells from the back of the bus.

“I’m talking right now,” says Ravenna. She gives me the once-over, then bends her head to a clipboard. All the woman’s hair has been wound into a tight round knob on the top of her head, like the handle on a pot lid, and what looks like a tiny piece of straw has been stuck through a hole in her earlobe, where an earring should be. Like she’s trying to keep the hole from growing back together. “You Charmaine Peake?”

I nod.

She half stands, twisting up out of her seat.

“Ravenna.” The voice comes from a pudgy redheaded girl near the back. “You deaf?”

“Tracy Poague, sit down,” says Ravenna.

“Just so you know, I’m saving this seat,” says the girl.
“I know you are. You saving it for Charmaine.” Ravenna sweeps her arm in front of me, indicating for me to move down the aisle. “Go on, sit with her. That’ll be your assigned seat.”

There are only four other kids on the bus and plenty of empty seats, but I follow the rubber mat towards the red-haired girl, who has scooted to the outside edge of the seat bench, arms crossed tightly in front of her. “Saved.”

“You, Tracy,” yells Ravenna. “Move over.”

But Tracy won’t move over and she won’t get up. She stares, faded blue eyes unblinking, at the back of Ravenna’s head. I nudge her leg with my knee, but the girl makes her body so stiff that I have to high step over her, nearly sitting on her lap. Tracy’s legs are stuffed so tightly into worn blue jeans that the side seams have split a little, showing thin, straining wedges of a deeper blue. Exactly what my hand-me-down Jordache jeans are starting to do on me, near the thighs. I arrange myself by the window and hold my breath until I can’t anymore. The whoosh of my breath out reminds me to pray. O Lord God, I whisper, and Tracy, still shooting hate towards Ravenna, narrows her eyes.

School’s just starting and already grime coats the window beside my face in tiny layered ridges, like fish scales. Out of the corner of my eye, I watch Tracy stretch a leg into the aisle and work her hand into the pocket of her tight jeans. She withdraws a 2-inch-long rusty screw and elbows me hard in the shoulder, then holds the screw up to my face. “Give me lip?” she says, “and I’ll give you something you won’t forget.”
Except for the shadows underneath her eyes, and the large tan patches where freckles seem to have merged together, Tracy’s face is very pale. She talks like they do down at the river. Lip is lee-yup.

“This is rust,” the girl says. “You want to get lockjaw?”

“No.” Then I remember. “I have lockjaw already.” I wiggle my jaw to see if it pops today, and it does. “TMJ.”

“TMJ?” the girl looks insulted. “Well, I have ESP. Do you know what ESP stands for?”

“Yes.”

“What, then?” Wuht they-un.

I know I know what it stands for, but can’t think of it. Tracy’s words are like little darts, or insects hitting a windshield. They don’t hurt, but it’s hard to have your own thoughts when they’re coming at you.

“You don’t know.”


“If you don’t know,” she says, “I’m not going to tell you.” Then it comes to me. “Extra sensory perception.”

“Whatever,” says Tracy. “I can predict the future. I predict you’ll be sorry if you give me lip.”

I have no idea what to say to this red-headed girl. A kind answer is supposed to turn away wrath, but there’s no question on the table, and really, she’s not exactly wrathful. Ornery, is the word that comes to me. One of Daze’s words. The special kind of red hair.
“Close your mouth,” Tracy says. “You wanna catch flies?”

I close my mouth and try to remember what I know about ESP. It has something to do with a cult, or the occult—I can never keep them straight, but they’re both bad, even though ESP is kind of like being a prophet in the way you know things other people don’t. Only unlike the insight of a prophet, ESP doesn’t come from God, and whatever doesn’t come from God is of the world, which is Satan’s domain. I am considering saying some of this to Tracy, but she has propped her foot onto the opposite knee and is digging into the rubber sole of her tennis shoe with the screw like she’s forgotten I’m there.

I’ve never ridden a bus up from the river before. The road is narrow as a wire. So narrow that to look out the window this high up is to feel like we’re about to tip over and crash down the scrubby hill. I breathe in and out, praying.

We stop often, right in the middle of the road since there’s no shoulder. Some of the siblings we collect look like they slept in a pile of dirt; others are so red-cheeked they must have been scrubbed within an inch of their lives, if not boiled in a pot. At each stop, Ravenna makes seat assignments right and left, but still the bus stays pretty quiet. Just the hiss of the brakes and the whining of the engine as it works harder. Tracy’s eyes have closed, and she sways, trancelike, every time we round a bend. She smells like cigarettes. I feel the sway of the bus, too, but I sit carefully, not wanting to touch the girl’s arm or leg in case it wakes her up.
Then her eyes pop open so fast it’s hard for me to believe she’s been asleep at all. “You know who’s kin to me?”

“Who’s kin to you?” I repeat, stupidly.

“That’s what I’m asking.”

“How would I know, though? I don’t even know you.”

“If you knew, you’d know it,” Tracy says, and closes her eyes again. Her thin lips twitch into a smirk.

When the bus stops next, Ravenna gets up and pulls a sheet of plywood from behind the driver’s seat. She bangs it down on the steps and latches a latch. Outside the door of the bus there’s a heavy first step, then it’s step and shuffle, step and shuffle.

“Here he comes,” Tracy says. “You better not stare at him like you’re staring at me.”

“Hey there Cecil,” says Ravenna, peering down the ramp. “You got it, baby?”

If there’s an answer, I don’t hear it. There’s a couple thumps and some more shuffling and then the boy’s standing at the head of the aisle. *Child of God*, is what I heard them call him at church, once. His head and abdomen are normal sized, but his legs seem to have been cut off below the knees, and instead of a right hand, a metal claw pokes out of the cuff of his plaid shirt. The other sleeve, the empty one, is tied into a knot right above where the elbow should be. He ignores the handicapped bench behind Ravenna and moves down the aisle towards the back of the bus, yanking his powerful shoulders with an effort that swings
the claw, which slaps against each the back of each seat as he passes.

Is it worse to look or to look like you’re trying not to look? The boy has an adult face, with a heavy ledge of a brow and a mustache that someone--his mother, maybe--keeps trimmed close to his lip. That person must have to shave his chin and jaw, too. He breathes through his nose.

“Cecil,” Tracy says hopefully beside me. “Hey there, Cecil.”

He nods at her. Then he lifts his chin and looks down his nose at me, and I can feel my mouth stretching into a wild, encouraging smile, as if a smile can convey that I don’t really notice anything different about him, or that, like Jesus, I see only what’s inside.

That’s when he stops himself by our seat. As he leans over Tracy a brown curl falls into his eyes. Then his face is in mine, and he smells of pine needles and sweat, and his gray eyes are hard. This is as close as I’ve ever been to any boy or man, other than my father. What he says is, “I can smell your pussy,” but I don’t hear right.

I swallow, my face stuck in the smile. “What?”

He says it again, separating the words with his smooth voice, a higher voice than I would have expected from his serious, handsome face. “I. Can. Smell. Your. Pussy.” Then he rears back and makes his way on past. Tracy shrinks down in her seat with a proud little yelp, and I turn my burning face to the
window and tightly cross my legs, in case what he said could possibly be true.

I have worn the homemade Levis to school, to please Phoebe. Once the bus lets out, though, I head inside with the crowd and duck into the first bathroom I find. I dig the dirt-streaked, hand-me-down Jordache pair from the bottom of the butt purse, though now I give them a thorough smell in the crotch, just in case some whiff of Phoebe’s pussy remains. Nothing, or not much of anything, anyway. I feel a little overwhelmed by this entirely new concern, that the existence of those parts of your body is well-known to everyone else and subject to commentary.

The only person from East Winder in any of my classes the first half of the day is Mary-Kate, in second period, and her assigned seat is across the room from me. The rest of the kids, from the county or from Clay’s Corner, seem to have gone to school with each other for years. Fortunately, I’ve brought a book with me, only it isn’t the one I’ve been reading. I accidentally picked up the second of the three latest from the bookmobile lady. This one’s an old-timey book about a teenaged girl named Diane, and during each class, after we have learned about the type of paper and pencils we need, and after we have been assigned our textbooks, I pull it out and read about Diane’s fall formal dilemma, whether she will recycle her old blue wool dress, with different accessories, or wear her new red one, which she has been saving for Christmas. I like thinking about this
girl standing in front of her closet in her own room, making a choice between two acceptable options.

In fourth-period, though, English, we have an assignment that absorbs any extra time. Free-writing. The topic on the board is “summer pastimes,” but we may also choose our own topics. Free-writing can be anything, says the teacher, a woman in bright red slacks so tight in the bottom that they show the outline of her bikini panties. As she walks up and down the rows, a couple boys snicker. Even a letter, the teacher says. Which we can even mail after she checks it for completion. I have my father’s letter with me in my purse, and I begin a letter back to him. I’m in English class, I write. This fall, our first assignment will be preparing and giving a how-to speech. When I realize that I have recorded something the teacher has just said word for word, I erase it. Praying without ceasing is hard, I write instead. But then I wonder if that sounds like I’m complaining about a direct instruction from the Lord, so I erase that, too.

“No erasing,” says the teacher from over my shoulder. “The only criteria for free-writing are that we do not erase and that we keep moving forward.”

I got your letter, I begin again. I’ve read it a few times. Right now we’re doing free-writing, which this page is part of. After I turn it in for a grade, I will be able to send it to you. For this class I have to come up with something to demonstrate. It has to be something I already know how to do, and the title of it has to be called “How to ‘something.’” I stop writing. Asinine
was the word of the day this morning in homeroom, and that’s exactly what my letter is.

The room, like every room in the building, has a low ceiling, six walls, and green fluorescent lights that make us all look like we’re coming down with something. The only windows are floor-to-ceiling slivers the width of my hand, set so deeply into the wall that the outdoors seems like a distant, separate world. On the other side of the building, the high school is identical. Two sets of flat hexagons, with a shared lunchroom in between. We are bees in a honeycomb. Drones. Already, I feel the day dragging.

Mary-Kate sits two rows over, writing carefully, already halfway down the page. She keeps her free hand on the clarinet case in her lap. Beside me, a girl with a long brown ponytail also writes. I keep the point of my pencil on the paper, trying to think of more to say.

“No stopping,” says the teacher. “Even if you have to write, ‘I don’t know what to write,’ over and over, I want you to keep your pencil to the paper. Get used to it, men and women, because this is how we’ll start every class period.” On the chalkboard, she has written “Miss Shipps,” then crossed through it triumphantly to write “Mrs. Teaderman” underneath, because one of her summer pastimes, this year, was getting married.

I don’t know what to write, I write. Everyone around me is writing, except for one boy over near the window who might be mainstreamed. Did you get to see the pictures they took of your
brain? Do you still feel the spirit of the Apostle Paul? I’m reading Romans, right now, the part about circumcision. Then I’m embarrassed to have written circumcision, and I try to cross out the last part and make it look like I’m still writing at the same time, in case Mrs. Teaderman sees. The boy they call the Child of God rides my bus, I write, the page now hopelessly smudged. Then I am wondering about Cecil and how he holds a pencil, how he eats his food at lunch. I wonder how he goes to the bathroom, too, which makes me think of the time I walked in on my father in the bathroom and saw. I had already seen a diagram in The Godly Body Book, but I had not expected any of the parts to look like they did in real life. Pinker than skin and with the soft, sad pouch underneath. It looked like something that really belonged inside the human body and had escaped only accidentally. Like part of an intestine that couldn’t be contained. I felt sorry for my father, and for all men.

After fourth period comes activity, where the whole seventh grade heads to the gym. Fourth-period classes have to stay together, so ours follows Mrs. Teaderman up the bleachers to our allotted section near the top. All except Mary-Kate, who has apparently received permission to go practice her clarinet somewhere else. Mrs. Teaderman perches in the aisle with Mr. Rodriguez, who I have for science, and another teacher I don’t know. I find a space against the wall and watch the rest of the classes file in, a sea of people, with teachers waving their arms and trying to make themselves heard over the din. If you plug
your ears and don’t think of them as teachers, and just watch their faces, you get a good idea of what they might look like when they are in pain, or about to cry. When the bell rings right over my head, the sound ricochets around in my skull like it’s jangling my brain loose. The brown-haired girl with the ponytail is beside me, and she jumps and claps her hands over her ears, too. Down below the doors on either side of the gym clang shut, and teachers clap their hands to speed up the stragglers. Mr. Doran, the assistant principal, steps to the podium on the opposite stage.

“Quiet,” he says into a microphone, which buzzes then squeals while he makes an adjustment. Mr. Doran raises his hands. He waits. The sound in the gymnasium dies down gradually, like someone’s lowering a blanket on us. The boy behind me keeps talking until Mrs. Teaderman descends three steps and taps him on the back.

Up front, Mr. Doran explains that some days activity will be organized, like a dance contest or volunteer spelling bee. For the spelling bee we have to be quiet, and for the dance contest there’s music, of course. Other days activity will be just the music playing, and we can talk or balance our homework on our knees. Which is not really that active. But when one of the sports teams has a game, then activity will become a pep rally, and today the cheerleaders will be on hand to show us the meaning of good school spirit.
By now, most of the boys sitting around me have parked thick slugs of chewing tobacco under their bottom lips. If you turn in their direction too quickly, you’ll catch them spitting, furtively, into empty pop cans.

“Disgusting,” says the girl with the ponytail, as a boy wipes a strand of spit from his lips with the back of his hand.

I pull out the letter from my father and smooth it against the cover of my social studies book, over the picture of the Declaration of Independence. Someone turns on the music, and it blares from the speaker over my head.

The girl with the ponytail says something.

“What?” I say, over the music.

“Who’d you get the letter from.”

“My dad.”

After the part about rubber hand, my father describes the pair of moccasins he is stitching for me out of suede and sheepskin. “I never understood how hard sewing is,” he writes. “My thumb is sore from pushing the end of the needle in and out.” I like thinking of my dad sewing, like Phoebe sews. When the moccasins come I will be able to write and tell him what a great job he did. Or maybe when he will give them to me in person when he is ready to entertain visitors, which Phoebe says should be sometime next week.

The song ends and they start it over again, the same song. I don’t mind. It’s from the movie Rocky, which I have never seen, and it has a driving beat that pulls me in each time, making me
forget that I just heard it. “Eye of the Tiger.” Beside me the girl with the ponytail dances with the upper half of her body.

“I’m going out for cheerleading,” says the girl loudly. She stops dancing and starts making the rigid motions of a cheer with her arms. “My sister used to cheer at my old school, before she graduated.”

“Oh,” I say. “Good luck.”

“My parents are divorced too,” yells the girl over the music. Eye of the tiger, thrill of the fight. “My dad lives in Omaha.”

“My parents aren’t divorced.”

“Then how come your dad’s writing you letters?”

I look down at the letter in my lap, which is starting to fold itself back into thirds. “He’s just away for awhile.”

“In prison?”

I blink at her, wondering if she’s serious. But the girl’s face remains still, as if prison is something that wouldn’t faze her. She has straight dark eyebrows and when she speaks her lips move carefully over a delicate set of braces. After she stops speaking, it is hard to believe her face ever moved, much less that she was talking about prison.

“What’s your name,” I ask her.

“Kelly-Lynn. Theresa’s dad is in prison. It sucks that there’s no one popular in English. No offense.”

“Oh,” I say, dimly perceiving the insult. “Who’s Theresa?”
Kelly-Lynn lifts a thin, graceful arm and points to where the cheerleaders have sprung out onto the floor in their blue and white uniforms, doing a cheer routine to "The Eye of the Tiger," which is another first for me. I didn’t know cheerleaders cheered to music. At the song’s chorus, a blonde girl in ribboned pigtails, legs tight with muscle under a short cheerleading skirt, takes a running start and turns herself into a series of handsprings that take her across the entire gym floor in a long diagonal. The rest of the squad waits their turn under the basketball hoop. "Theresa," says Kelly-Lynn wistfully. "I can only do a roundoff backhandspring. I can’t do a standing back tuck, and that’s what you have to do to make the team. I have a week, though." On the gym floor Theresa, having landed and thrust her arms ceiling-ward in jubilant V, snaps them back in, crouches, then lofts herself in a back flip and lands on her feet again, rising into another V. "Standing back tuck," says Kelly-Lynn. "Her dad wrote bad checks. He wrote a check to cheerleading camp that bounced, but they let her stay because she has such good spirit. She’s why we always win the spirit stick. Are you from East Winder?"

I nod carefully. Everyone I see from East Winder looks out of place, here. There’s something off about our clothes that I never noticed before. Jeans don’t fit right, or are too thickly cuffed, like the inherited Jordache pair I’m wearing. Shoes are mostly tennis shoes from Kmart, also like mine, which Phoebe and I have coated with white shoe polish to make them seem new.
Everyone else seems to be wearing brown topsiders, a kind of shoe I’ve never even seen at the store. “There’s a lot of churches there,” says Kelly-Lynn.

“True.”

“Have you ever thought about growing out your hair?”

I touch my hair. Today I have pulled my bangs straight back into a barrette again, but some have escaped and curl like parentheses on either side of my forehead. Phoebe says it’s natural wave, and that I should be grateful for it.

“The thing to do is wear it in a ponytail every day.” Kelly-Lynn moves her face from side to side to make her ponytail swing. It’s as straight and smooth as water begin poured out of a pitcher. “Then one day you just wake up and your hair is long, which makes you prettier. Unless you’re like them.” She points again, this time to five rows below us to twins from East Winder whose parents are missionaries, Ida and Martha Hughes. They have flat, dishwater blonde hair that dangles below the waistband of their gauchos in a line of brittle points. “They look like they haven’t cut their hair since they were born,” says Kelly-Lynn.

“They haven’t,” I say. “There’s a verse in the Bible that says ‘A woman’s hair is her crown in glory,’ and some people think that if you cut your hair in this life you won’t have a crown in glory. Glory means heaven.”

“Not even a trim?” says Kelly-Lynn. “You get a trim and when you get to heaven you’re bald?”
“That’s just how their family takes it,” I say. “It doesn’t really say not to cut your hair, except for Samson in the Old Testament, and there it was just that if he cut his hair then he would lose his strength. But when he let it grow out again he got his strength back and brought the temple down.”

“Well it’s gross,” says Kelly-Lynn.

“It’s not gross,” I say, because it is the right thing to say. I would be ashamed before God not to stand up for the twins, even though they’re not really friends of mine. But I am also ashamed, a little, that I have to say I know the twins to this girl with the ponytail. Then I am ashamed of that shame, and I feel compelled to stand up for the twins some more. “They’re nice,” I say. “They go to my church sometimes, when they’re not in Guatemala.”

Kelly-Lynn blinks at me a few slow times, looking confused at the mention of Guatemala, then entirely bored. “Do you have a boyfriend?” she asks.

I don’t know why I want to tell this girl yes, why I want her to think I have a boyfriend, but I do. In my head I break down the word into “boy” and “friend,” and say, “I guess so.”

“Who?”

“He doesn’t go to this school.”

“What’s his name?”

“Seth,” I say, swallowing hard.

“Have you kissed him?”
“One time.” I am relieved at the way that this, at least, approaches the truth.

“Better than having a boyfriend is when someone else’s boyfriend likes you,” says Kelly-Lynn. “Even if the boy is a little bit scummy, like from down by the river?”

“Scummy,” I repeat, taking it in. I am grateful I said I was from East Winder, not the river, but now I feel like a liar, like I’m hiding something from this girl because of what she might say. My stomach feels like something heavy and dead.

“Because when you have your own boyfriend, they could always be about to like someone else. You have a lot to lose. Another thing: it’s good to have a brother or sister who’s popular.”

“Good for what?”


“I don’t have any brothers or sisters.”

“Wait until your parents get divorced. When one of them marries someone else, maybe it’ll be someone who’s also divorced and has kids, and maybe they’ll be popular at the school where you end up. That’s what happened with my older sister. She was really my step-sister. Then my mom divorced her dad, though, and now we’re not related anymore.”

“My parents aren’t getting divorced, though. I already said. My dad’s just away for a while.”

“That’s code for getting a divorce. My mother’s been divorced twice.”
Every time Kelly-Lynn says the word divorce, the possibility of it condenses in my head. *I love you more than anything in the world,* Phoebe said to me. “They’re not getting divorced,” I say again. The words sound squeezed. “God told my father to marry my mother.”

Kelly-Lynn just blinks at me in the same way as before, first confused, then bored. Then she keeps talking like I haven’t said anything, like I don’t sound upset at all. “Sometimes the only way you can be different, like become popular if you aren’t already, is to change schools. This is my fourth school, though I was at Clay’s Corner Elementary for third and fourth grade. But my old junior high started in sixth grade, so this isn’t exactly my first rodeo. Some people are never going to be different, though.” Kelly-Lynn nods toward Ida and Martha Hughes who are sharing a book that looks from here suspiciously like part of the *Little House on the Prairie* set. “They’d be like that no matter what school they went to.”

“Maybe they don’t want to change,” I say hotly. I am determined, now, to prove her wrong about everything. But Kelly-Lynn, with her blank expression, either hears what I say or doesn’t. She opens her small leather purse, uncaps a lip brush and begins to paint her mouth from a round pot of clear gloss. From the way she keeps control of her face, it seems possible that this girl has already thought of every single thing anyone could say, ever, and maybe even every single thing that could
possibly happen anywhere, anywhere in the world, and all of it has already bored her.

I know my own face to be the opposite of this. I am Phoebe’s daughter, and Phoebe’s face is in constant motion, as though she has to convince everyone of her feelings instead of just having them. Your mother lets it all hang out, is what Daze says. I know that right now I look as stricken as I feel. I think about the planet in my book with the missing father, how seen from a distance it looks like it’s covered with a dark film, a spectre, and how the girl in the book is fighting against that darkness. I imagine the spectre of divorce creeping over my heart and making it hard to breathe. I see it casting a shadow onto my face. I focus on pushing back the idea of this shadow, feeling it evaporate off my face until all that shows is boredom underneath, like Kelly-Lynn’s. I even adjust my posture to mimic hers, which is straight, and I imagine that instead of my haphazard hair, I have a ponytail that hangs down between my shoulder blades and switches gracefully, calmly, against my back. Instead of my fleshy, unpierced earlobes, I have attached lobes like Kelly-Lynn’s, with a tiny pearl nesting in each one, a little moon, still and serene unto itself.

In the ten-minute break before final period, Mary-Kate finds me in the hall. She pulls me into a group of about forty East Winder kids assembled outside the lunchroom for a prayer meeting. She and I stand at the outer edge of the group, next to
one of the building’s long, skinny windows, and when I peer through it, there he is. Right outside, with his back to the glass, the Child of God, Cecil, grinds a cigarette into the dirt with his awkward, booted foot. Three boys tower over him, dressed in jeans and concert T-shirts that you can tell used to be black. Quiet Riot and Iron Maiden. One of the boys flicks a lighter and holds the flame to the edge of what might be a textbook. He looks towards the window, and I turn my head away as fast as I can.

Mary-Kate has disappeared. In front of the group, now, one of the long-haired missionary twins maligned by Kelly-Lynn, Ida or Martha Hughes, stands on an upturned milk carton. “Separation of church and state does not mean we don’t have the right to free-assemble,” she pronounces.

“Yeah,” holler some of the kids from East Winder. They raise their fists like they’re protesting something, but it’s not as if anyone’s trying to stop us from assembling. In fact, none of the kids trickling in and out of the lunchroom for study hall seems to be paying that much attention.

“Charmaine, hey,” someone whispers behind me. It’s Mary-Kate again, clutching Karen. They both carry their clarinets.

“Hey.”

“They can take the ten commandments off the wall of the classroom,” the missionary twin says up front, “but they can’t take them out of our hearts.”

“I didn’t know we needed locks until today,” I tell her. Up front, the twin is detailing how the prayer requests will work. You submit your request on a folded up piece of paper, and each day the person leading prayer will unfold a few and pray for as many as there’s time for. Since you might not get prayed for on the day you turn in your request, general requests like “please let me do well in math” might be better than “please let me pass my math text next period.” She invites prayer requests and soon everyone has a piece of paper out, scribbling.

“We were going to see if we could put our clarinets in your locker,” whispers Karen, “but now I’m going to write a prayer request that they don’t get stolen. I hold both clarinets while Mary-Kate and Karen write their requests on paper and fold them carefully. Then everyone passes their requests to the front, and the other twin, the one not standing on the milk carton, collects them in her bag. Then she reaches in, selects several, and hands them to her sister.

Behind me, the outside doors open with a heavy clank. The high school boy who tried to burn the textbook props open the door with his arm as Cecil struggles through. The boy holding the door sneers at our group, lips pulling back from sharp yellow teeth that look too small for his mouth, stuck every which way into his prominent gums. When Cecil’s made it through, he and the other boys line up at the back of our group, all of them but Cecil crossing their arms over their chests.
"This is a good one," says the twin up front. "It says, ‘remember to pray for David Peake, who’s still in the hospital.’"

All the East Winder kids turn this way and that, until they spot me at the back still holding the short stack of clarinets. Heat creeps up my neck and into the roots of my hair. I don’t know how many people knew about my father before the request, and I don’t know who wrote it, but I can’t even hear the next two requests because of the blood pounding in my ears. I should be thankful. It can’t be bad to have more people praying for my father. But mostly I just feel exposed, like I’m standing there naked. When everyone lowers their heads in prayer, I set the clarinets quietly on the floor in preparation to slip away. The first and last school prayer assembly I will ever be a part of. That’s when one of the high school boys lined up behind us yells, “Jesus fucking FREAKS!”

Not a single East Winder kids moves. Each of us has been trained for just this kind of persecution, and we know how to keep our bowed heads uniformly still in an attitude of prayer.

"Those boys?" whispers Mary-Kate beside me, head still bowed. "They don’t even steal stuff out of lockers. They wait until no one’s around and then they pee through the slots in the locker doors."

It has the horrible ring of truth, and I turn around and look. I can’t help it."

“What’s your problem?” says the boy who burned the textbook. The word rings out in my direction.
Cecil is also looking at me hard, and I clench myself for whatever comes next. “Girl from the bus,” he says, placing me. He lifts his nose in the air like he’s trying to smell me again. “Girl from the bus on the God squad.” Then one of his friends shoves him on the shoulder, but not hard enough to knock him off balance. He does a little hop with his foot, turns awkwardly, and shuffles away down the hall with his friends.
Chapter 6

Every morning Phoebe drives to the payphone at the convenience store in Tate’s Corner to see where in the tri-county area she’s substitute teaching. If it’s far out, and she will be late, and I have already left for school, then she will call the Rowland County Junior High office and leave a message for me to take the afternoon bus into East Winder until she can pick me up. On these days I am to stay either with Daze, if she’s available, or at my old house, where Mrs. Catterson has handpicked me for the unlucky task of helping to socialize Seth, who is homeschooled. If Phoebe won’t be late, then I’ll ride the river bus back to the cabin. I’ll sit in the RV’s passenger seat and do my homework on the dash. Daze says this makes me a latchkey kid, like they talked about on 60 Minutes, but Phoebe says it most certainly does not.

On the first Tuesday of school I get the instruction to go stay with the Cattersons, [bus feelings] and Mrs. Catterson meets me at the door and lets me in to my own house. She is tall and blonde, with a strong looking nose and a wide smile, and inside the front door she stoops to give me a little hug as I stand there looking around for our shoe tray and feeling awkward. Even though the cabin is a very cramped space, the inside of my house seems smaller than how I’ve begun to think of it in my head. The blue flower upholstery on our couch looks worn and sad. Titus has shredded both back corners.
For the first time ever, I keep my shoes on while I cross the pale gray living room carpet. It’s six years old but is the only part of the living room that still looks new. Phoebe insists that everyone walk over it in sock feet. Not even bare feet, which collect and distribute dirt. Already, though the Cattersons have not been there even a week, a faint track of depressed carpet runs between the door from the hall and the door to the kitchen.

“You can set up your books right there on the kitchen table,” says Mrs. Catterson as she pours two glasses of milk. “You and Seth can do homework and then we could see about the rest of the afternoon, if there’s time left over before your mother comes. Maybe even watch television.”

“Okay,” I say, wondering where they got a television set. Under the round oak table, where I’ve been sitting all my life, my foot finds the bubble of linoleum, which feels like an old friend. Our mustard yellow refrigerator has been cleared of Phoebe’s notes to herself, and of all the snapshots except the missionary photo of the Cattersons themselves, with Project Ghana scripted mechanically across the bottom.

“Make yourself at home,” Mrs. Catterson says. “I mean, I know this is your home already, but you know what I mean.” Then the woman pulls on yellow rubber gloves and heads off to clean the bathroom. I’ve just opened my history book, which is the only real homework I have so far, when Seth thumps a red cloth-bound Bible down on the table across from me. He doesn’t say hello and
he doesn’t drink his milk. He just flips to a page in the middle of the Bible and begins reading, so I begin reading, too. I am already on the chapter about Puritans. It’s about how they believed in the Elect, and how some women would throw their babies into wells so that they knew they would go to hell and wouldn’t have to guess about it anymore. Knowing was better than not knowing, and I understand why someone would do this, even though it’s murder, and wrong.

The table begins to shake, because Seth can’t sit still. He’s jiggling his knee like there’s no tomorrow, and when I look up he’s staring right at me. “Guess how many times I’ve read the Bible.”

I shrug. I’ve read the Bible plenty, but never start to finish, because every time I start from the beginning I get stuck at Numbers and skip ahead to Esther and Daniel, which are stories.

“Guess.”

“Three?”

“Four. Now I’m reading different versions. The King James is lyrical but the New American Standard is the easiest to understand. What version do you have?”

I shrug again. I am not going to give him the satisfaction of knowing that I read the New International Version and telling me, in my own house, why another one is better. And I know the King James is lyrical. Everyone does.
He pushes the red book towards me. “This Bible has four versions all on one page, see? Tell me a verse you know, and I can probably figure out which translation you have. Then we can look it up and see what the differences are. Some are pretty similar, though.”

“Jesus wept.”

“Come on. You know what I mean.”

Psalm 23 is no good, everyone knows it. The same with John 3:16, and most of Philippians, First and Second Corinthians, and the gospel of Mark. I could give him “Pray without ceasing,” but I don’t want to, because then I’ll probably have to hear, in my own house, all about how Seth spent a whole year mastering ceaseless prayer in Africa, or something.

Seth pushes up his wire-rimmed glasses, waiting. He seems taller every time I see him. His eyes are clear light brown, like iced tea. Under the table his knee continues to jiggle, and the surface of my milk rocks up against the inside of my glass.

“Um. The one that goes, ‘Trust in the Lord and he will do this. He will make the righteousness of your cause shine like the noonday sun.’” It’s part of a Psalm, but right now I can’t remember which one.

“Your righteousness shine like the dawn,” Seth corrects me. “The justice of your cause like the noonday sun.”

“I have school. I can’t just sit around memorizing the Bible all day.”

“I have school, too.”
“I have real school. I have an hour-long bus ride each way, and I have lunch period and gym and I have to change classes.”

“You could read the Bible on the bus, if it was important to you.” Seth’s mouth, as wide and wet as his mother’s, twitches with the challenge. It’s like he’s trying not to smile, only teasing, maybe, but when I start to smile back, he presses his lips together, suddenly serious. “You think reading the Bible is a laughing matter?”

“No.”

“In some parts of Africa, people can’t even read the Bible because it hasn’t been translated into their own language, yet. It’s something Americans take for granted. Like having enough to eat.”

I make a show of flipping a page in my history book and concentrating on an etched picture of an usher in a Puritan chapel. The usher carries a stick with an iron ball on one end and a feather on the other. What I would like to do is to go up to my room, maybe get my box. But if I say so, then Seth will know the box is important to me. And I’m not sure what it will feel like to be in my room and have it not be fully mine.

Seth stands up, walks around behind me and reads over my shoulder, just like a teacher. I ignore him, but I have to reread the caption three times. It says that when children misbehaved in church they got knocked on the head with the ball, and that when adults fell asleep, they got tickled under the chin with the feather.
“Puritans,” he says, straightening. “I did that last year. When you’re homeschooled you can move at your own pace. What are you, in seventh grade? I’m already in ninth and I’m only thirteen. See? At least a year ahead. I can probably help you out.”

“Did you have this book?” I close the cover so he can see it, then open it again.

“Negative.”

“Then how could you help me?”

Seth shrugs. He returns to his seat and bends his head over the large red Bible. He holds his hair off his forehead with one hand and thumps a pencil on the table with another.

“Seth is exceptionally bright,” says Mrs. Catterson from the doorway. She peels off the rubber gloves and her smile breaks open over the whole lower half of her face. “He was reading at a very early age, but he was memorizing even earlier. He could recite whole books before he turned four.”

“Mom.”

Mrs. Catterson crosses the kitchen with our blue bucket of cleaning supplies, pausing at the table to squeeze Seth’s shoulder.

“I really can memorize anything,” Seth says when she disappears into the pantry. “I have a photographic memory.”

“Good for you.”

“I’m just saying. It comes in handy for the play.”
I had forgotten about the play, and I flip another page in my book, like I couldn’t care less.

“It’s Dr. Osborne’s new project,” Seth says.

Everyone in town knows Dr. Osborne. Not only does he teach oratory at the seminary and help churches put on plays, he has also been arrested twice for protesting at the abortion clinic in Lexington. He’s an expert on making his body as heavy as possible. “What’s it about,” I ask, in spite of myself.

“I’m not at liberty to say. You could be in it, maybe, except it’s kind of a limited cast. Of two, Dr. Osborne and me. So, anyway, I had a lot to memorize but I got it all in one read.”

“Is it a missionary story?”

“Nope.”

“A Biblical story?”

“I’m not at liberty to say,” Seth says again.

“So you can brag about being in it but you can’t say what you’re in?” I try to sound like I might not believe him, even though, regretfully, I do.

“Saying facts is not bragging,” Seth says, his voice rising on the last word.

“Think about it,” I say, reasonably. “Bragging is saying facts, because if it wasn’t, it would lying, not bragging.”

“Hey.” Seth smiles crookedly. “I may be able to memorize, and I may be in a play, and I may have a higher IQ, but I’m not
saying I think I’m better than you because of it. That would be bragging.”

“How do you know you have a higher IQ than me?”

Seth shrugs. “I just do.”

“I don’t even have an IQ,” I say.

“Everyone has an IQ.”

“Not if you have ESP.”

“ESP is of Satan,” Seth says.

I grit my teeth and force myself not to say anything more.

In my history book, I’m getting to the part about the first Thanksgiving, where they offer up thanks, which makes me remember my prayer. I try to practice reading and thinking my prayer at the same time, so that I will be doing something spiritual in a private way that Seth will not even know about to one-up. But it doesn’t work very well. When I think the prayer words, then the words on the page become shapes, and when I read the words on the page, the words of the prayer just stop.

“Do you know what lust is?” Seth says after a time. His voice is low, and when I look up, he appears to be staring at my chest.

I look down at myself, alarmed at the possibility that my breasts might be sticking out more than the last time I checked, but they aren’t. They make the same low mounds underneath my t-shirt as usual. Still, I bend over my book so that the whole front of me is hidden behind the table top.
“It’s when a man looks upon a woman and thinks about having sexual relations. ‘And God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another,’” Seth reads from the big red Bible.

“Lust.”

“I know that.”

“If a man lusts, then women are responsible,” Seth says.

“It doesn’t say that,” I say.

“Men are weak when it comes to lust,” Seth says. “Sisters in Christ should help by not wearing suggestive clothing. Sisters in Christ should help men practice looking without lusting. Like right now. I’m looking at you and not lusting.”

“Stop it,” I say. Even though my breasts are safely underneath the table, I cross my arms over my chest.

“Stop not lusting? You want me to stop not lusting?” He’s grinning at me, now.

“I can see why you need socialization,” I say. It’s the absolute truth, and that’s how it comes out. The grin dies on his face, and I read a whole section before he speaks again.

“Know who we prayed for last night?”

“No,” I say, without looking up. I’m leaning in so close to my book that I can smell its clean pages, like split wood, and the tangy wet hint of ink, too.

“Guess,” he says.

“That’s okay,” I say.

“Someone who thinks he’s a prophet.”
I snap up to full height in my chair, breasts or no. “You shut up,” I say, dropping my voice to a hiss as Mrs. Catterson enters the kitchen. She opens the refrigerator door and bends from the waist to ponder the contents. Then she stands, turns, and frowns at me. Behind her, the refrigerator door sucks shut, a sound, in this room, as familiar as my own heartbeat.

“No whispering,” Mrs. Catterson says sternly. She approaches Seth from behind and palms both sides of his face. “I don’t know what you and your family practice, Charmaine, but in our home we have a policy of full disclosure.” Seth’s face, under his mother’s, wears a complicated expression of satisfaction and sorrow. His mother’s hands smush his cheeks towards his nose, and his lips pucker up like a fish. “And we never, ever, tell other people to ‘shut up.’”

Phoebe is better in the hours before it gets dark. At dinner we sit across from each other at the RV’s fold-up dinette set, eating by candlelight. Candlelight, she says, even before the sun has gone down, is elegant, and elegance is a state of mind, not a station in life. A fully set table is also elegant, and so even though our meal is canned tuna and two apples a piece, washed down with powdered milk, I lay my unused knife across the top of my plate, blade in, when I’m finished. Then I wash it with the rest of the utensils and dishes and return it to the silverware jar that holds both our place settings when not in use.
As long as Phoebe is not in her cryptic mode, expecting me to ask questions, I generally learn more about what’s going on with my father if I wait for her to bring it up. While I do the dishes, she sits outside in a lawn chair, watching the river. Then, when I take the dishpan outside to dump, she tells me that my father slept through her visit again today. I stand behind her chair, waiting with the empty dishpan and blinking away the last image I have of him, sleeping.

"From the medicine?"

"That’s right," Phoebe says. "And from exhaustion, still, the doctor says."

"When can I visit?"

"I’m not sure," she says. "But soon. Even when he’s awake, he’s very, very groggy. When he’s rested they’ll start figuring out if the medication is working, which I guess can take a while, but it doesn’t seem right that he’s so groggy. I wish I knew the right thing to do."

As she’s speaking, the crickets fall quiet, but after a few moments of silence they gear back up, hesitantly at first, then throbbing with song. The river is still, just a splash here and there from a fish or bird. A ways off someone starts a car.

"I never told you about the first time I met your father," she says.

"You did," I say. "You told me a million times."

"I never told you where I was coming from. My friend and I had just been to a wedding in Ohio. We were just passing through
East Winder on the way back to North Carolina, and we stopped when we saw all the people. It was the funniest thing.”

“And Daddy saw you. And God told him you were the one.” I say. “I know already.”

“This boy who was getting married in Ohio, this brother of my friend? My friend said the girl he was marrying had been abducted a few years before when she was not much older than you. Some man held her captive in an apartment. Her parents were frantic.”

“Kidnapped?” I say.

“I guess so,” says Phoebe. “But not for ransom. I guess the man did things to her. Unspeakable things. But she stood up at the wedding and gave her testimony about how the Lord restored her virginity. And about how glad she was to have come through to the other side of that experience and to have found a wonderful man. So afterwards my friend and I are driving back to North Carolina and we stop at a restaurant for the bathroom, and these two women from the wedding, from the bride’s hometown, happen to be in both the stalls, talking to each other while they do their business, never thinking someone else from the wedding might’ve stopped at that same place at the same time. One of these women was saying she had a sister who’d known the bride back when, and that the girl had just shown up back at her own house after escaping from the man’s apartment. That she’d just shut herself in her room for a week and wouldn’t talk to anyone. By the time she finally said what happened, and her parents called the
police, all trace of the man was gone, and so was all trace of the things he’d done to her.”

“So he didn’t do the things?” I say.

“I don’t know,” Phoebe says. “Probably he did some things.”

Titus is squeezing himself through the window over the sink, dropping onto the pile of cement blocks underneath left over from some project of my father’s. The sun falls fast behind the palisades, but after that it takes a while for the gorge to grow fully dark. You can look way up to the top of the cliffs and see the sun still shining in the leaves and on the limestone ridge.

“Anyway, the women in the bathroom were pretty sure she’d made up a whopper to cover for a broken heart, which my friend, the groom’s sister, was none too happy to hear about, by the way. We talked about it the whole trip back. Whether or not your virginity was restored if you lied about the circumstances, and what kind of life her brother might be in for with a woman like that. That’s what was on my mind when God pointed me out to your father. And now you know,” she pauses dramatically like the man on the radio, “the rest of the story.”

As I’m washing my face and brushing my teeth inside the cabin’s tiny bathroom, I try to decide which sounds worse or maybe which sounds more exciting, having unspeakable things done to you, or having a broken heart. And whether or not a broken heart is something so unmistakable that you know immediately when it happens, or something that’s different for every person, so
there’s a moment when you can decide whether or not your heart is broken. Or if it’s just something other people say about you, observing from the outside in.

Phoebe is waiting for me when I fold back the accordion door to the bathroom, perched on the narrow tweed sofa where I sleep. “Now that it’s just the two of us,” she says, nodding her head thoughtfully like she agrees with what she’s about to say, “I’ve been thinking that we need some house rules. And that rule number one should be to make it a priority to tell each other ‘I love you’ every day. Otherwise, with your father in his condition, whole weeks might go by without either of us hearing those three important words.”

These are the kinds of things that come up after dark.

“I don’t need to hear ‘I love you’ every day,” I say.

“Yes, you do,” says Phoebe. “Come over here.”

I sit beside her on the sofa and she leans over me, inspecting my face. Then she unclips the gooseneck lamp from the kitchen counter and clips it to the window sill over the sofa. We have two of these lamps in the cabin, with cords long enough for us to fasten them where they’re most needed.

“Maybe we’ll even write them up,” she says, “the new rules. And tape them to the wall.”

“It was just the two of us while he was in the Holy Land,” I say. “We didn’t make new rules then.”
“This is different. This time, we don’t know what to expect. I might just discover that I like being an independent woman.”

I keep myself very still. Phoebe has a way of trying ideas out, even ideas that she doesn’t really mean. But if you challenge her, or react in any way, she can start to argue for what she’s only been trying out and become more and more convinced. The word divorce comes back to me from the girl in activity, and I taste tuna in the back of my throat. I have never considered Phoebe and my father anything but a unit, even when they’re an unhappy unit. It has never occurred to me that she could think of herself as separate from him. An independent woman.

Phoebe positions the lamp so it’s shining right into my eyes. She leans in and plants her thumb on my nose, pushing the tip to once side. On my cheek, her breath advances, retreats, advances again like a small, soft army. “Your nose is a nest of blackheads,” she says.

“No.” I squirm away from her grip on my face and stand up.

“Come back here,” she says. And because I am afraid that if I don’t she will launch back into the subject of her independence, I sit down again. She traps my head between her hand, pins it to the back of the sofa, then goes after my nose with her two thumbnails.

My voice comes out in nasally disguise. “You said not to pick.”
“There’s picking,” Phoebe says, digging in hard, “then there’s extracting.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Picking is what you do. Extracting is what I do.”

“I don’t pick, though,” I say.

“Hold still. And all I’m saying, Charmaine, about the rules, is that with me at this new job I’m going to need some serious support from you. I always wanted to be a teacher, and now I’ll see if I’ve got the stuff. If I don’t make it I don’t know how we’ll survive.”

“You’re a substitute, though. Ow. All you have to do is follow the teacher’s notes and tell people if they can go to the bathroom or not.”

“I don’t need your backtalk.” Phoebe’s thumbnails skid towards each other on the side of my nose and I feel a layer of skin come away. I wrench my head up from the sofa and clap a hand over my nose. “What I do need,” Phoebe goes on, “is to hear an ‘I love you’ every day.”

I press my fingertip to my nose and it comes away bloody. I hold this up to her, bright red in the glare of the bulb.

“So you’re bleeding a little,” she says. “Don’t be dramatic.”

While Phoebe gets ready for bed, I slip outside to check for Titus. I like to shut him in at night when I can, but if not then I’ll leave the window open and he’ll steal in late to sleep in the passenger seat, or at my feet, and wake me up in the
morning to be fed. The moon is out, an odd-shaped moon, waning and oblong like a hard-boiled egg. I make my way down to the dock, calling for him, hoping he’ll come. Then I’m praying he’ll come, and I catch myself. It’s not that you can’t ask things of God, it’s just that you have to be okay with whatever answer you get back, or with no answer. What I want to ask is for Titus to stay inside, where no larger animal can get him, and where no teenager, drunken or cruel, or both, can try to throw him from the bridge, something that you hear about, down here, which is the worst thing I can imagine happening to him. I want to ask for my father to be okay, for things just to go back to the way they were. Or maybe even a little better, for him to pay just a little more attention to Phoebe so that she will love him as much as she loves me and forget all her talk of being an independent woman. But even if God’s silence is evidence that my faith is strong, it’s a wretched feeling to ask for what you want so badly and to hear nothing. It’s the kind of feeling that turns familiar things, comforting things like the moon or the way the river smells after dark, strange and impersonal.

You can’t go wrong, though, with the prayer without ceasing. I am sure that it pleases God more than longing for the past, which could very well turn you into a pillar of salt. Only I’m so bad at it. Sometimes I remember only once a day, and only then until I’m distracted. I think of my father, and how he somehow manages to pray without ceasing all the time, even as he’s talking, or eating. I start it up now, whispering to the
moon, but by the time I’m back inside and we have both gone to bed, I catch myself having stopped again already and I smack my forehead in frustration. Which is a mistake.

“Are you still awake?” Phoebe says from the loft over the dash where she sleeps.

I don’t answer immediately, because I know she’ll keep asking until I do. A few nights ago I didn’t answer at all and she believed me to be asleep and started to cry, quietly at first and then so loudly that I thought the sound must be carrying across the lawn and down the riverbank to the water, where it would spread across the surface and echo against the cliffs.

“Are you awake?” she asks again, and I tell her yes. “Is there anything you’d like to say to me?”

“I don’t think so,” I say.

“Think hard.”

“I’m sorry for backtalking?”

“Something else,” she says. “Remember?”

Then I remember, and even though I would be hard pressed to say I do not love my mother, the words she wants to hear drop from my mouth like reluctant stones.

“I love you too,” she says. “Goodnight.”
Chapter 7

I am getting used to the stale, ashy way Tracy Pogue smells on the bus every morning. But I do not expect her to be holding on her lap, over her single spiral notebook, an old-timey blue lace purse. It’s the kind Daze carries to weddings, with a clasp like two silver bubble gum balls.

“Take a picture,” Tracy says, opening her eyes to catch me staring at the purse. “It’ll last longer.” She pops open the purse and there, beside a pack of Virginia Slims Menthols and a pink cigarette lighter, is a neat cylinder of five white cardboard tampons held together with a rubber band. A reminder that my own period will come back, again, though Phoebe describes all the women in her family as “irregular.” “I’m on the rag,” Tracy says. “I go through, like, six of these in one day. But at least I get to get out of gym.” She flicks her gaze disdainfully over my chest. “Is that a padded bra?”

“No.” I feel myself blush.

“I’m just asking because your boobs are getting kind of big. And your nipples don’t show through.”

Tracy says the word nipples loudly, but the only kids on the bus so far besides the two of us are the Hogue brothers, who are growing sideburns, and Fat Freels, who is one of the skinniest boys I have ever seen. All three appear to be sleeping.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I say.
“About what, your nipples? Okay, Charmaine. I won’t say nipples.” Tracy snaps her purse closed. “You didn’t see my cigarettes, either.” We both look quickly towards the front of the bus, but Ravenna is busy opening the door for the Carsons, one kid in nearly every grade. “I know you’re a church girl.”

I wait for more. This is how it goes with Tracy Poague. She says things that don’t seem like they need a response, then watches me as if she’s waiting for one. “I go to church, too, you know,” she says finally. “Baptized in the river and everything. You go to church in town. You used to be a town girl, but you and your mom live in that trailer cabin, now. I know a few things.”

“You got baptized in the river?”

“Yeah, dumbass, where do they do it at your church?”

“Down front,” I say. “At the altar.” The word dumbass is so appealing and new that I find myself smiling instead of insulted. “You just get a little sprinkle on your head.”

“Look at you smile,” Tracy says. “Jeez. You town girls light up like you got goosed just thinking about church. My mother wouldn’t darken a door. My uncle comes to collect us on Sunday, but my mother says if the Lord needs anything further from her he can come and get it himself with a tongue of fire. She says it’s been downhill since she got pregnant with my sister Candy seventeen years ago. You allowed to get pregnant? My mother says she’ll kill me if I get pregnant.”

“I’m not allowed, either,” I say.
Tracy cocks her head and squints at me like she’s watching my face change from green to blue. “What, you want a baby or something?”

“No.”

“What, you don’t like babies?”

I blink hard, caught in the net of a question with no good answer. “I like babies. Why, do you want a baby?”

“No.”

“Then what’re you asking me for?” I say. I take a deep breath and add, “Dumbass,” turning away like I’m disgusted, hoping Tracy can’t see how hard I tried to say it right. I’ve never called anyone a name before, and I like the tiny, stunned gap of silence in its wake.

Outside it’s getting light, the slow, gray way it does down at the bottom of the gorge. I never knew all the different ways dawn could look. On fine crisp mornings as the bus climbs out of the ravine, there is a point where the rim of the cliffs above begins to glow, and the sun bursts over the top so intensely that my eyes water.

Tracy pokes me hard in the stomach, her face friendly. “See this?” she pulls her t-shirt out from her shoulder and nods at a wet stain. “Smell.”

I incline my head, barely, and sniff, though I can’t smell anything except cigarettes.

“My sister’s baby, Tracy Lee-Ann, named for me, spits up all the damn time. You get so you hate to feed her when you know
it’s coming right back up. When J.D. Carson started giving Candy the look, she lost her good sense. When a boy starts giving you the look, my mother says to look right back at him and say, ‘one thousand days,’ because that’s how long the look lasts. At the outside. After that you’re in pure hell. Maybe with a baby on top of it.”

“You’re an aunt,” I say, as it dawns on me. “I’m an only child, so I’ll never be an aunt.”

“Just you and your mother live in that trailer cabin, right?”

I nod. The bus is running along the bottom of the gorge, the narrowest part of the road that’s closed when the river floods. We’re nearing where the Child of God gets on outside a clapboard cottage with a sunken roof just across the road from the river. You can barely see the trailer behind the cottage where Tracy has told me that Cecil and two of his brothers stay. It’s a rusted tan color, and it almost disappears into the rock and dirt behind it, like some kind of natural boulder. Or huge barnacle, like I saw the time we visited the Atlantic Ocean. This is the point every morning where I close my eyes and start pretending to be asleep.

“I know who your daddy is,” Tracy says. “I watched him make that trailer of yours into a cabin. What’s the inside of it like now? Still like a trailer?”
I nod and lean my head against the dirty window. The bus hisses and stops and there’s the banging up front as Ravenna prepares the ramp. I close my eyes.

“Here he comes,” Tracy says in a low voice. Then, as if she wants to see if I am really going to sleep, she says, “Here your boyfriend comes,” but I use my special sleep faking technique, which is to imagine that my eyes aren’t just shut but sealed and burped for air, like the lids of Tupperware. “Your boyfriend, Cecil,” Tracy whispers in my ear, and in a few moments I hear the Child of God shuffling towards his seat three rows behind us. My boyfriend. “Hey Cecil,” Tracy says respectfully. I hold my breath, and soon he is past us without incident. But we have a long way to go yet to school. I keep my eyes sealed, and think about the road curving up away from the river. The bus chugs into gear, which feels like something settling into place far beneath me. Out of the blue the prayer comes to me, and I pray it. *Inhabit me, O Lord God.* And the last thing I remember thinking is whether or not I will know it if I am ever fully inhabited, or if it’s possible that I already am inhabited and it’s just not something that feels different from normal. I get through the prayer it a few times, but by the time we level up out of the cavern and onto the rural route, where the stops are over and it can pick up speed and smoothness, I am asleep for real.

Mrs. Teaderman insists on journals for free-writing, but journals can be whatever you’d like them to be, as long as you
understand that if the assignment is to write a page, and you have a tiny pocket notebook for your journal, then you have to write five pages to complete the assignment. She also doesn’t care whether you write with pencil or pen, or marker even, and she, alone among all junior high teachers, doesn’t care whether you use cursive or printing. Sometimes there’s a topic on the board, which you can choose to address. Or you may feel free to choose your own. What you can’t do, for the entire fifteen minutes of journal writing, is stop writing. Instead of stopping to think, you must write your efforts to think. Mrs. Teaderman calls this part of changing the prison of the unconscious to a prism of the unconscious, and she writes both prison and prism on the board, with a big arrow to indicate the right direction.

After journal writing, if you are called upon to share what you wrote, you may say “pass” and it won’t hurt your grade. You may also write DO NOT READ at the top of your entry if you have written something you don’t want even Mrs. Teaderman to read. Every night she looks them over and hands them out as each student comes through the door the next day.

*Phoebe is fine,* I write to my father, though I know he has seen her, briefly, in and around his sleeping. *We are fine down at the river,* although I am worried that a wildcat or a dog will get Titus, or that some kids will try to catch him and throw him off the bridge. I think I am going to see you very soon. Once everything is okay with the medication. How is the medication going?
As we write, Mrs. Teaderman patrols the rows on her long legs. Today she wears the red slacks with a billowy pink top, and she looks like a flamingo the way she steps and stops, steps and stops, reinforcing the policy of absolute silence. Except when she has something to say, which is, now, from somewhere behind me, “The truth can set you free. But it can also bind your hands. Inventiveness can be a ray of light in the prison of the unconscious.”

I am going to be in a new play, I write, trying out inventiveness. I’m going to play Ruth. I sit at the feet of Naomi and receive her wise counsel. Dr. Osborne is still trying to cast the right Boaz and Naomi. I imagine myself in Old Testament dress, an attractive blue headpiece framing my face, and I think of how impressed my father will be that I have been recruited for the role. As I put down the words, I sneak a glance at Kelly-Lynn, who is printing in purple pen. When Mrs. Teaderman calls time, I set down my pen, satisfied when I remember that the truth can bind your hands, and it’s only a lie, anyway, if I end up giving it to him.

I have managed to put my hair into the world’s tiniest ponytail, but it has taken all five barrettes I have, including the chipped red one and the bent gold one and the three that are just about the same color as my hair, which I use on the tops and sides, where they show the most. In activity, Kelly-Lynn lifts the ponytail straight back and measures it with her fingers.

“Just don’t cut it, whatever you do.”
“It looks shaggy when I take it down,” I say, thinking of the way my hair kinks and sticks out, not curly enough to be curly, not straight enough to be straight.

“Then don’t take it down,” says Kelly-Lynn, “even at night. Get a ribbon, or something for a bow. And you might think about cutting out junk food and pop. Your clothes are tight.”

“I’m big boned.” I take the thumb and forefinger of my right hand and fit it around my left wrist. This is what Phoebe says.

“Everyone’s bones are the same size,” says Kelly-Lynn. “Big boned is just what people say when they mean chubby.”

“I never drink pop,” I say. Then, without thinking, I say what Phoebe says about pop. “We can’t afford it.” Most of the things I say seem to pass right over Kelly-Lynn, like birds that fly by, briefly separated from their flock, never to be distinguished that way again. But now her expression sharpens, like I’m coming into focus.

“Pop is only 35 cents,” she says. Then, “What’s the matter with your nose?”

“Nothing,” I say, touching the dime-sized scab from Phoebe’s fingernails.

“We used to be poor, too,” says Kelly-Lynn. “The first time we lived in an apartment was before my mom met my stepdad. Then we lived in another one in between my stepdad and Rob. And my dad was poor, he said, because he had to send us money for the
apartment. I had to wear all my sister’s old clothes. Only she was fat the year before so everything hung off me.”

“My mother knows how to take things in,” I say. “She sews a lot. Or she used to.”

Kelly-Lynn nods but my comment is already gone, a distant bird. “The key is not to start eating at all,” she says. “Once you get the taste of something, especially something salty, or sweet, you just want more of it. You have to think, what do I want more, to be skinny or to eat. It’s like growing out your hair. You think you’re making it look better by cutting it, but if you just wait a while it’s going to look better than any kind of short style. Like skinny makes you feel better than eating any kind of food. I’m eating one meal a day until Ronnie Rietz’s party in a couple weeks. I have a little more than two weeks to be even skinnier than I am now.”

I’m still thinking about this conversation when Daze offers me a snack after school. “Since when don’t you want a King Dong?” She says, looking down the length of her nose at me.

“I don’t know.”

“Can I tempt you with some RC Cola and peanuts?”

I shake my head. “Do you have any Tab?”

“Since when do you drink Tab?”

“I’m on a diet.”

“You’re not fat, sweet pea. You’re just developing an hour-glass figure. A woman can’t really fight her shape, and the sooner you learn that you’ll save yourself a world of grief.”
Daze holds out one of her slinky robes, and I change out of my clothes in her bathroom. Her whole apartment smells like Pine Sol and Windex, because she wants to avoid what she calls the vapors of death, which is old people at the Custer Peake Memorial Retirement Center covering up their smells with potpourri. In the living room I hand over my clothes. Daze has her own stackable washer and dryer off the kitchen, and she loves to use them. Back in the day, she says, she had to wash everything by hand, on a washboard, and she had to wring it on a wringer and then hang it up and take it back down. Now everything in her apartment, every towel and every piece of clothing, has just been washed and dried. As soon as you use it, it is snatched from your hand and retired to the dirty clothes bin to be washed, very soon, again.

“I want to be skinny,” I say. “Like you.”

“I’m skinny alright. And spent my whole life pining for an hourglass figure. Like movie stars.” She pours detergent into the washer then turns and makes wavy motions like she’s moving her hands over breasts and hips. “And dresses used to be cut to set them off. Your mother, she’s an unfortunate pear. Only she’s so thin now you can’t hardly see it.”

“What’s Daddy?”

“Your father is a man after God’s own heart,” says Daze, “any way you look at it. But I take your meaning. Men are short or skinny or tall. Your father’s on the tall side, like his father, but not too tall.”

“Is he still a man after God’s own heart?”
“Of course. Who told you otherwise, your mother?”

I shrug.

“Once a man after God’s own heart, always a man after God’s own heart,” Daze says. Then she draws each of us a footbath, with bath beads, which fight with the clean smell of the room, filling it with a kind of oily candy smell. She turns on her small black and white television set, the one that used to be ours before I snuck and watched an episode of Happy Days and told Phoebe I wanted to grow up to be the Lone Stripper. That was a long time ago, and I didn’t really know what a stripper was, but no one’s gotten over it. And now, as a result, Daze is addicted to soap operas, which she calls her stories, and I’m not supposed to tell anyone because they are all secular. Except for Ryan’s Hope, which has a priest character. She keeps her TV Guide right under her Bible—it’s a sin to put another book on top of the Bible—on the little lamp stand beside her chair. I sit on her loveseat, which is actually lot bigger than the sofa I sleep on in the RV-cabin.

In the prime spot over Daze’s television hangs a black and white picture of the late, great Custer Peake in a document frame. It’s a shot of him I’ve come across in other places. Magazines, including The Good Word and Holiness Weekly, still run it during campmeeting season. My father keeps a yellowed clipping of it from the Lexington Herald Leader in his Bible. It was taken during the great revival of 1973, and shows him standing at a podium under the water tower, spotlighted by the flash and by
portable lamps. He wears a suit with narrow lapels, a thin tie and wire-rimmed glasses, and he grasps the pulpit so tightly that his arthritic knuckles bulge like golf balls. His hair is wet from sweat. His specialty was father-and-son sermons, which start out with modern-day stories about fathers who have to choose between saving their sons and saving lots of people they don’t even know. Stories about bridges that hold only so much weight, contagions so virulent that doctors’ own sons must be experimented on for perfect inoculation, rabid dogs unleashed in schoolyards, burning buildings where hundreds of crippled senior citizens make their homes. There is always a moment when the father and son look at each other above the syringe, or across the flames, and each understands the decision, and feels the love, and anticipates the loss. It is hard not to hope that one of these fathers, just one of them, choses his son instead of the rest of the world. But none of them ever does. Then the sermons focus on the sad, sad moment when Christ takes on the sin of the world which forces the father, God, to abandon him. But what I always like to think my grandfather is saying in the moment of the picture, as he flattens his upper body across the pulpit towards the congregation, is how hurt Christ’s feelings were. How even though he knew it would happen beforehand, when God the father abandons him it still makes him feel bad enough to cry out.

When the buzzer on the dryer sounds, Daze fishes out my clothes and I change back into them. The hand-me-down Jordache
jeans are even tighter just out of the dryer. I suck in my stomach hard and button them, and now they hurt, but I can get them zipped, which means I can still wear them. Out in the living room I bend over, painfully, and cuff the bottoms, feeling the blood rush to my nose.

“How’re your clothes holding up?” Daze says, frowning at me.

“Okay.” I straighten up and suck in my stomach. “I’m just going to take off a few pounds and then everything will fit better.”

“Don’t take off too much,” Daze says. “Your mother’s skin and bones.”

In the lobby we find Phoebe using the front desk phone to call Ron’s Towing to come get the Pinto. In public, in her black bespoke pants and blue blouse, she looks pretty. I forget she can look that way. None other than Dr. Osborne stands tall behind her, wearing a pair of golden colored corduroys and a black shirt. He is the only grown man I have ever seen, besides my father when he got back from the Holy Land, who has let his hair grow long. Around his neck on a leather cord he wears a large cross made of two entwined iron nails, like those that pierced the palms of Jesus. I feel like I’ve conjured him by making up the play about Naomi and Ruth.

“Let me give you a lift,” he says to Phoebe after she hangs up.
“Aren’t you kind,” Phoebe says. She glances up, uneasily, at the same shot of my grandfather that hangs over the reception area. It’s big and glossy, in a gold frame, and someone has brushed on thick clear paint to make it look like a painting instead.

“It’s no trouble. You’re at the river these days. Am I right?”

“Dr. Osborne likes to keep up,” Daze says crisply. “He’s a regular around here, visiting us shut-ins.

“Daze,” says Phoebe.

“I still have the Buick,” Daze says, frowning. “I’m not so old and infirm that I can’t take my own daughter-in-law home.”

“I didn’t mean to suggest otherwise,” says Dr. Osborne. “You’re as wry and spritely as ever, Ms. Peake.”

“I don’t know about wry and spritely,” Daze says. “Let’s not get carried away.”

“I don’t know what happened.” Phoebe puts her fingers to her temple. “It made it to the parking lot, like it knew I needed to get here, then it just sputtered out. I don’t know what we’ll do without that car.”

“You’ll get it fixed the way the rest of us do,” says Daze. “Let me get my jacket and I’ll run you home.”

Phoebe looks uncertainly at Dr. Osborne.

“Ms. Peake?” Dr. Osborne dips his body, just barely, from the waist in Daze’s direction. “I don’t want you to miss dining hall.”
“Very often I prepare my own meals,” Daze says, even as Phoebe is saying to Dr. Osborne, “If it’s really no trouble.”

Whatever Daze thinks, she will not stage a family confrontation under the watchful eyes of the receptionist, or even in front of Dr. Osborne. She recovers quickly and echoes Phoebe. “If it’s no trouble, then. Charmaine, come give me a hug.” And when I do, she squeezes me extra long, as if I’m supposed to take meaning from it.

Outside, when I open the door to the back seat of Dr. Osborne’s Toyota, a book falls out and I pick it up. *The Cost of Discipleship*, by Freidrich Bonhoeffer. The whole back of his car is full of books.

“Let me move some of those,” he says behind me, but when I step aside to let him, Phoebe says, “She can squinch in there just fine, Dr. Osborne.”

“Morris,” says Dr. Osborne.

“Morris.”

He holds the door open for Phoebe as she climbs in, leaving me to push a sliding stack of books across the backseat and into another sliding stack. Under my feet are more books, and I nudge at them until I can feel the car mat under my shoes.

“Whoops,” Phoebe says upfront, as Dr. Osborne catches the strap of her handbag in the door. He opens and closes it again, and while he’s circling the front of the car to the driver’s side, she looks over her shoulder into the back seat. “My, what a lot of books. Isn’t that a lot of books?” She bats her eyes and
me and keeps doing it until I say yes, Phoebe, it is a lot of books.

Dr. Osborne opens the driver’s side door and slips behind the wheel. He’s not thin, but he’s not fat, either. He moves easily.

“I was just commenting to Charmaine on what a lot of books you have back there,” Phoebe says brightly.

Dr. Osborne shakes his head and peers, sadly, into the backseat. “It’s my weakness. My Achilles heel. And then the due dates creep up on me, for the ones I’ve borrowed, and soon as I know it they’re overdue, the library books, and I haven’t even finished reading them.”

“You need an assistant,” Phoebe suggests.

“You’re probably right.

Through the window I watch our Pinto slide backwards out of the lot, the sky and clouds slipping across its windshield. We pull out and follow right behind the tow truck to the garage, and when Phoebe gets out to speak to Ron Deeds, Dr. Osborne gets out too, and stands beside her like it’s as much his business as it is hers. Ours. When they return to the car he opens and closes the door around her so gently he might be tucking in a child.

The pile of books on the seat beside me shifts, and I push a few of them onto the other side of the seat, onto more books.

“Don’t bother Dr. Osborne’s books,” Phoebe hisses at me.

“I’m not.” When Dr. Osborne gets into the car again, I deliver the line I’ve just come up to remind Dr. Osborne that I
like to act. “I’m going out for the school play.”

“Wonderful,” says Dr. Osborne. “What’re they doing this year?”

Which is the next logical question, but which I have, somehow, not anticipated.

“Our Town?” Phoebe prompts.

“I can’t remember.”

“I believe last year they did Annie Get Your Gun,” says Dr. Osborne. “Were you in that?”

“No. This is my first year in junior high.”

“Well, that would have been at the high school, I guess,” says Dr. Osborne. “I didn’t realize the junior high had their own program.

I make a responsive noise in the back of my throat, something that could be yes, or it could be just an acknowledgement that he said he didn’t realize there was a program. Because I realize I don’t have any idea if the junior high has its own drama program, either. “Naomi and Ruth would be a wonderful play,” I say, helplessly, wondering what kind of play he and Seth are doing. Maybe some kind of father-and-son play.

Dr. Osborne makes a polite noise that doesn’t leave his mouth. Phoebe echoes him, but shoots me a strange look.

Then Dr. Osborne turns to Phoebe and does something with his voice. He’s not whispering, exactly, because I can hear clearly, but he lowers the volume to a kind of privacy, and when
he mentions my father he calls him “David,” which excludes me. “How’s David?”

Phoebe starts nodding before she speaks. I prepare for her standard, public response, which is, “better, fine, just overtired and under stress, getting some much needed rest.” But she doesn’t say this after all. She opens her mouth to speak, then closes it and nods some more.

“It must be hard,” Dr. Osborne says.

“Dr. Osborne,” Phoebe begins.

“Morris.”

“Morris. It’s hard.” Which is not something she should say, because it is discussing family outside family. Then he starts nodding with her, and I see, from the back seat, a tear slip down the side of Phoebe’s face, over the loose patch of skin where her dewlaps are beginning to come in.

“He’s been under a strain,” I say, poking my head in between the driver and passenger seats. “He’s getting some much needed rest. He’s exhausted from his work. And his traveling.”

Neither of them respond to me. They just keep nodding together, like they know each other much better than they do. After a time, like I’m not even there, Phoebe says, “It’s hard on Charmaine.”

“It’s not hard on me,” I say.

“You seem like a tough cookie,” Dr. Osborne says, keeping his eyes on the road. It could be a compliment.
“She’s a tough cookie, all right,” says Phoebe, making it sound a little less complimentary. They both laugh. Then they are talking about the car again, about future rides needed, and Phoebe is explaining that she can catch the children’s school bus to East Winder Elementary, where she will be subbing for the rest of the week.

I’m fuming in the back seat. I pick up The Cost of Discipleship, a book my father has in his library. I flip through it, snapping the pages loudly. Phoebe shoots me a warning look, but I ignore her. There’s an index in the back and I look through it for Ruth, or Naomi, for something more intelligent to say, but they aren’t in there. Prayer is in there, but not pray without ceasing. The word I do find, the one that stands out to me, is LUST. Then I look up the short passage on it:

Lust is impure, because it is unbelief, and therefore it is to be shunned. No sacrifice is too great if it enables us to conquer a lust which cuts us off from Jesus. Both eye and hand are less than Christ, and when they are used as the instruments of lust and hinder the whole body from the purity of discipleship, they must be sacrificed for the sake of him.

Sacrificed. I think of the verse in Matthew that commands you to pluck out your eye if it offends you, and I think if Seth looks at me with lust then he will have to do this, to pluck out his eye, and if Dr. Osborne looks at Phoebe with lust he will have to do the same. Up front, Phoebe is laughing at something Dr. Osborne has said, and when he pulls up to the cabin, she tells me to go on inside and she’ll be right in.
“Good luck with that play,” says Dr. Osborne, with nothing at all to indicate I’ve made him think about casting me in a future project.

I close the door to his car harder than I have to, disturbing Titus from a nap on the sofa bed. “Sorry,” I whisper, and I hold him on my lap until Dr. Osborne’s car pulls away.


I push past her and settle myself in the passenger seat. “Charmaine?”

“What?”

“Don’t you think Dr. Osborne is a thoughtful person?”

“Yes.”

“We had the nicest conversation.” Phoebe waits. When I don’t ask what they talked about, she sighs. Then she starts humming to herself, a song called “Pass It On” that she sings when she feels good.

“Homework,” I say, rudely, and the humming stops. A slice of moon shows over the top of Tate’s Bridge, bright as the edge of a plate. A movement down by the trees, barely perceptible, turns out to be Titus coming up from the riverbank. Phoebe lets him in and he jumps into my lap, on top of the social studies book, right under the warm gooseneck lamp. “I love you,” I whisper into his velvety ear, and he purrs and pushes his head into the crook of my elbow. Behind me, the humming starts again as Phoebe runs the faucet to begin boiling something for dinner.
She keeps it quiet, to herself, but the sound runs beneath everything else like something she can’t help.
Chapter 8

On the first youth group meeting of fall, about seventy-five of us crowd into the Upper Room, a low-ceilinged space built onto the side of the sanctuary during a long-ago church expansion. The room is lined with windows. On one side they open onto the main church sanctuary. The opposite side opens onto the church parking lot.

Our church is big enough to support a full-time youth minister, a man named Pastor Chick, who is not just a youth minister but an expert on youth ministry who teaches at the seminary with Dr. Osborne. Some of his seminary students work with the youth group as interns, without getting paid, even, just for the experience of working with Pastor Chick. One of these interns is a lanky, twenty-something Texan named Conley, and to start off the meeting he bounds through the crowd carrying a guitar. He stands in front of the marker board and starts strumming hard, playing the beginning of a song I know called “The Horse and Rider.” It’s from the Old Testament, a verse about God throwing a horse and rider into the sea. Someone in back starts clapping, and soon the music rolls through the room until everyone is keeping time.

Up front, as he sings, Conley dips his bearded head towards different people. It looks like he’s meeting one set of eyes and then another, a tiny light of warmth and recognition flickering across his face. But when he looks towards me, and I watch for
the tiny light, I see that he’s not looking right at me at all but rather smiling, in his friendly way, at the empty wall just over my head, and I realize that’s probably what he’s doing with everyone.

Conley’s voice is like a voice you would hear on a record. It stands out, rising high on the song then skimming just over the surface of the other voices, like a hunting bird on the river. As the final chorus dies down, and the clapping peters out, he changes up the chords and we find ourselves launching into another old favorite, one I’ve been singing since I was a kid, “I’ll Fly Away.” It’s a softer song, and it needs harmony. I am sitting in the middle of the room, sharing a large beanbag with Mary-Kate and Karen, and we’re trying to do the harmony part, all three of us together, and even Seth, sitting a few feet away, is singing, and it’s easy to feel like everyone’s friends with each other. I’m concentrating so hard on the harmony that at first I don’t even see Pastor Chick and his bald head as he makes his way from the back of the room. He weaves around kids sitting Indian-style, or with legs outstretched. A few of the older kids, who already know him, pantomime tripping, and then he pantomimes falling, waving his arms and staggering to recover.

Pastor Chick is stocky like a bulldog. He wears his plaid shirt tucked into faded jeans, like a lot of the farm kids from the county, but his shoes give him away. Rich brown leather with heavy rubber soles. Expensive shoes. Daze has mentioned that the Collinses, Pastor Chick’s family in Tennessee, are Old Money.
Daze knows, because her own family used to be Old Money, back before the women started to marry preachers. And the late, great Custer Peake was Old Money, too, before the brave Peake ancestor took a stand against growing tobacco. Daze says money’s not important, though, and she doesn’t wish she had more, doesn’t wish for a Cadillac like only “dime-store millionaires” drive. And she’s right because Pastor Chick drives a beat up Ford pick-up truck like it’s all he can afford.

Now he stands humbly to the side of Conley and joins in the singing, raising his hands above his head and dipping his knees to the chorus, “When I die hallelujah bye and bye, I’ll fly away.”

This time, when the song’s over, Conley strums the guitar quietly, switching in and out of the chords for the song so it’s still in our heads, even though no one is singing anymore. Up front, a high school girl named Sarah Hindman has lifted her sweet face to the ceiling, and, under the florescent panel light, it looks radiant. Over the quiet thrumming Pastor Chick says, “Yes, Lord.” His hands are still in the air. “Praise God, people.” He closes his eyes and seems about to pray, but then changes his mind, turns to Conley and says, “Let’s hear that chorus one more time, my man,” and Conley revs the guitar back into business and we all run through it one more time, pulled into the music again like a tide back to the moon. It seems like our voices must swell into the walls of the room, bowing them
outward as they try to contain it all. This is what it’s talking about in the Bible, making a joyful noise unto the Lord.

Then, as if he and Pastor Chick have worked it out through mind reading, Conley shifts the song to Hallelujah, the slow one where you sing the same word over and over again until you work yourself into a prayerful state. I sing with everyone else, and though I can’t think the words of my own prayer and sing at the same time, I feel prayerful all the same.

“Lord God,” Pastor Chick begins as the last Hallelujah fades, “You are a mighty God.” His voice is deep and throaty. “You know everything we’ve ever done. All the ways we’ve sinned against your perfect son, all the ways we’ve hurt you by disobeying your word.” Pastor Chick pauses, and when I sneak a peek at him he’s frowning down at his shoes, his hands in front of him, palms spread flat, like he’s blind and expecting to run into a wall. I crane my head to the row of windows that look out over the darkened sanctuary below, where Phoebe and I have not attended Sunday morning services in two weeks because, she says, she’s too tired from her schedule. The round dove stained-glass portal is lit from the outside and casts a huge, rippled disk of light over the central pew section. “We hurt you when we hurt the people in our lives,” Pastor Chick is saying. “How many times this week have we said things that are unkind?” He gives us a moment to think, and what I think of is how unconvincing I sound, saying “I love you” to Phoebe every night, wishing I didn’t have to. I close my eyes again.
“How many times have we thought of ourselves before others? How many opportunities have we missed to share the love of Christ with people in our lives?” The silence in the room, when he pauses, retains its own pressure. It slithers into my ears and inflates itself there, two tiny balloons. Far away and down below, a car door closes with a snick, the way new cars do. “How many times have we seen that girl in the cafeteria sitting by herself,” Pastor Chick says, “and maybe we wondered if she was lonely, or if she wished she had friends, but we were too cool to pick up our lunch tray and sit beside her. Maybe she had the wrong kind of sneakers. Maybe she looked like she hadn’t washed her hair in awhile. Maybe she said something in the hallway, something that made other kids laugh at her. Maybe we laughed too, Lord. Or maybe we didn’t. Maybe we thought about approaching her but we wondered what those around us would think if they saw us sitting there.” He pauses to let this sink in. “Maybe we were that cowardly.”

“We ask forgiveness, Lord, for forgetting that you walk among us in the people we meet, that everything we do unto the least of these, we do also unto you.”

“Yes, Lord,” says Conley up front. I open my eyes again and catch Seth with his eyes open, too. He sees me but just blinks them closed again behind his glasses, and I feel stupid about the way I bow my head quickly, as if I’m the only one who had my eyes open, as if Seth’s the one who caught me.
“Or maybe,” Pastor Chick says, “maybe we have been that lonely girl ourselves. That lonely boy. Maybe we have been the one who longs for someone to simply say hello to us in the hallway, but we’re burdened by cares that tie us down. Maybe our parents can’t make ends meet. Maybe our older brother doesn’t know the Lord. Maybe our sister throws up in the bathroom after she eats. Maybe we think we weigh too much. Maybe we don’t weigh enough, or we want to have biceps like superman and our arms are as weak as wet noodles, and we hope nobody notices.”

The prayer is long, and I rest my head on my knees. This time when I crack my eyes open I regard the weave of my jeans, the white threads and deep blue threads like a thicket you could enter and get lost in. These are the fake Levis Phoebe made, and they’re already too small. Almost as tight as my other pair.

“Who knows better than you, Lord, what it feels like not to fit in? In Jerusalem they expected a mighty king swathed in silk and crowned in gold, The King of the Jews, and what they got was the grace of a baby, lying in the manger. What they got was a humble carpenter’s son, led into the city on a donkey. A King to be sure, but many knew him not. Who better than you can comfort us when we feel like nothing we do is cool. Thank you for the way these moments help us imagine how others might feel, and as you comfort us, allow us to comfort others, to be the humble vehicles of your divine acceptance. In your holy name, Amen.”
Mary-Kate and Karen lift and lower themselves on the beanbag beside me as we all open our eyes. Everyone blinks, dazed to find the room still there.

“Folks,” says Pastor Chuck, as he looks over the whole room, “young men and women, we’ve got a big night.” Conley does a drum roll on the guitar with the knuckles of both hands. “Many of you know that we live in a town that has hosted some of the world’s most exciting revivals. Any of you heard your parents talking about the Spirit of ’73, when an evening Bible Study turned into a three-week celebration with hundreds coming to the Lord?”

Pride lodges in me, a wedge between my ribs, with the special power only pride has to crack a person wide open. “Literally hundreds,” Pastor Chick is saying. “Folks came from far and wide, and do you know why? Because, people, when the word got out about the joy, the joy unspeakable and full of glory, when the word got out people had to see it for themselves.

“What if I told you that right here, in this very room could be the beginning of an underground revival in our school, our town, the whole great Commonwealth of Kentucky? It can happen people, as long as we allow the grace of God to work a miracle through us.”

Pastor Chick turns to the marker board and gropes around for an eraser that isn’t there. Someone hands him a roll of paper towels that had been propped in a window sill, and he tears off a handful. Before he begins wiping down the board, he steps back
and carefully, exaggeratedly, checks out two messages—“Billy was here” and then, smaller, down below as if in imitation, “Seth was here.” Pastor Chick shakes his head, smiling as he wipes the board. “Seth and Billy,” he says, with his back to the room. “This could only be the work of Seth and Billy.” Then he turns around and sweeps out a hand to where a chubby, red-faced boy with a crew cut sits under the sanctuary windows. He nods at Seth, too. “My main men,” he says, laughing as if what they wrote on the board was clever, as if no one but them would have thought of it.

“Welcome, gentlemen,” says Pastor Chick. I have no idea how Pastor Chick already knows who Seth is, and I wonder if he knows me. As if he hears my thought, Pastor Chick says, “People, let’s back up. I was going to wait until later, but before we go any further, let’s take a moment to meet our new seventh graders. Seventh graders, stand up.”

Beside me, Mary Kate and Karen spring up, which sinks me deeper into the beanbag. By the time I’m on feet, Pastor Chick has greeted the first few newcomers, repeating the names they give him just as warmly as he talked to God during the prayer.

“Mary-Kate,” says Mary-Kate.

“Mary-Kate,” repeats Pastor Chick with a voice that makes Mary-Kate’s pale hair, and even her slumping posture and her receding chin, seem special.

“Karen,” says Karen, and my knees lock into place. I am next.
“Karen,” repeats Pastor Chick. “I believe I know your brother Brian, don’t I?”

Karen giggles.

“Brian Price?” Pastor Chick grins around the room. “The legendary Brian Price of the pancake breakfasts.” A few people laugh, and Matt Pickett, a high school boy, lets out a whoop. “I’ll have to tell the rest of you about that sometime,” Pastor Chick promises, winking at Karen, who’s smiling so hard her lips catch on her braces.

Then Pastor Chick shifts his eyes to me, and I understand that he knows. Not only who I am, but who my grandfather was, and who my father is. And where my father is, and everything that has led up to that. Then I think of course he does, and so does everyone else. But Pastor Chick tilts his head to the side in a way that seems to say, “Don’t worry,” and “I know how it is.” I open my mouth, but when my name won’t come out right away, Pastor Chick scans the ceiling, pretending to have to recall it. “Gotta be Charmaine,” he says finally, pointing to me and smiling. “Charmaine Peake.”

It is impossible that I am important to him, and there is no reason it should matter to me one way or another. And I have not cried even one time since watching the I Love Lucy show with Mrs. James after I saw my father in the hospital bed. But now tears are coming. As long as I don’t blink, I know they’ll go away. I try to smile back at Pastor Chick, but I can see him seeing me, only what he sees stays private, like he’s momentarily
switched channels to a frequency only the two of us can pick up. Then he does the perfect, merciful thing by moving on to the next newcomer, and I drop back down into the beanbag away from the roomful of eyes.

There are the missionary twins, and three more new girls to welcome, and another boy, the angelic Sarah’s brother, Paul, whose neck turns red when she calls out, “That’s my baby brother, y’all.”

“An illustrious start,” says Pastor Chick, sounding like he’s teasing and that he means it all at the same time. “Now people.” He pushes his hands deep into the front pockets of his jeans. He rocks forward on his expensive leather shoes, then rocks backwards, balancing on his heels.

“Operation Outreach,” he says thoughtfully, as if he’s just come up with the phrase. The room is so quiet that it’s as if he’s speaking right in my ear. He pauses so long that people start to fidget.

Pastor Chick nods seriously into each corner of the room. “How many are we,” he asks. “How many in this room tonight?” Seth pops up from the floor and begins to count heads. “Fifty?” says Pastor Chick. “Seventy?” Beside me, Mary-Kate has also started counting under her breath.

“Seventy-two,” calls out Seth.
“Seventy-three,” Mary-Kate corrects him. Both immediately begin recounting, falling all over themselves to impress Pastor Chick.

“Seventy-two, seventy-three,” says Pastor Chick. “Close enough. I like the enthusiasm of our new seventh graders. Now I’d like for you all to close your eyes again. No more counting, people. I want you to think of three individuals.” Pastor Chick separates each syllable of individuals, five short deposits to make up the word. “Three people who may or may not know the Lord. These can be people at school, or on your Pony League team. Members of your family. Point is, if you don’t know for sure that someone knows Jesus, then they may not. And if they don’t know for sure that you know Jesus, then they may not think to ask you why you have that something special about you.

“A world about that, people, before I take this any further. Go ahead and open your eyes again. There is no greater honor than for the light of our Lord to shine through you in such a way that those around you want to know your secret.” Pastor Chick turns his face to the ceiling and holds up his hands as if he could cup the very light of God. “That’s the purest way,” he says. “For Mary-Kate back there,” beside me Mary-Kate gasps, “to be walking down the hallway at school so naturally full of the Spirit that everyone who sees her knows she has a peace that passeth all understanding.” And now Mary-Kate smiles gently with her glossy lips. She truly does seem peaceful, lit from within, if you didn’t know any better.
“So first we pray and ask the Lord to let his love shine through us in such a way that people are abuzz, the gossip wheels are rotating, they’re spinning off their axles, with the need to know what makes Billy, here,” he motions to the chubby boy under the window, “Sarah, here, Seth, here, what sets you all apart from those around you. Maybe,” he muses, palming the back of his neck, “maybe it’s how you don’t laugh when someone takes their precious sexuality, that precious gift from the father to be honored within marriage, and turns it into a dirty, embarrassing joke. Maybe it’s how you always pick the least likely of your classmates when it comes to choosing teams, just so they don’t feel left to the last.

“Whatever it is, it’s the way your own one-of-a-kind personality interacts with the everlasting, ever-understanding joy of Christ.” He drops his bald head then passes both hands over it as he lifts his face to the room, slow as a sunrise. “I hope that kind of thing happens to you on a regular basis, people,” he says. “I do. There is no greater privilege than to testify to the work of God in you.”

“So,” he claps and does a little jump like he’s waking himself up. “That’s the first thing. You know what? Let’s write these down.” He spins to the marker board, uncaps a marker and starts squeaking out letters. “Pray for the light of God. People ask your secret.” Pastor Chick writes in all caps only he makes the real capital “P” and “G” in “Pray” and “God” bigger than the other caps.
“That’s one kind of opportunity.” Pastor Chick turns back to the room and holds up the marker like it’s the numeral “one.” For good measure he turns back to the board and writes the numeral one beside the point he’s just made.

“Two.” He wheels towards the room again. “Two, in just a minute I’m going to ask you to be very, very still, folks.” He stops suddenly and stares in the direction of the windows to the sanctuary at someone who has been whispering. “In this stillness,” Pastor Chick resumes when the whispering fades, “I want you to allow three faces to appear to you. You may find you see a face or two you don’t really like that much. Pay attention to that.” On the board he writes, Three people on your heart. “We’ll take them one at a time.” He raises his hands, says, “Dear Lord,” and I close my eyes and wait, feeling an emptiness where Pastor Chick’s voice used to be. The room is beginning to heat up, but in two seconds a breeze comes from the direction of Mary-Kate, who is fluffing the thin pages of her miniature leatherette Bible.

Karen shifts heavily and the beanbag underneath us makes a quiet husking sound.

“Humble yourself before the Lord,” says Pastor Chick.

I try to make my mind as blank as possible.

“Enter into a holy state of reception.”

I breathe in, and then out. I pray my own prayer one time, and then there is a face. The girl from English and activity period, Kelly-Lynn, with her pearl earrings and pretty, straight
hair. Behind my eyelids, I consider the girl with dread. I imagine that when I witness to her she will lump me in with the missionary twins, and that I will feel the thin coating of her disdain whenever she looks at me. My father would be deeply ashamed of me for fearing this. It speaks to a weakness, a failure in the constant attitude of prayer that, like a force field, could prevent all thoughts of the self. It is not the job of the prophet or any servant of the Lord, to be well liked. To be popular.

“Got the first person?” says Pastor Chick. “Eyes closed, people. Now ask God for someone else.”

Tracy Pogue’s face appears to me so fast it’s like she’s been lying in wait.

“Thank the Lord for the first two people,” says Pastor Chick.

Thank you, I pray. Inhabit me, O Lord God.

“Seventy-five of us in this room, and already we’ve thought of a hundred and fifty more individuals. Think of it, people. Soon we’ll be so many in number that we’ll grow out of The Upper Room and spill over to the sanctuary down there. I love it. Now,” Pastor Chick pauses, and Conley starts up with some low guitar strumming. “Pray for the last one.”

I pray even though I already know the third face. I give God some extra time in case he wants to change his mind, because this last one I’ve seen coming, his warped, incomplete body
hovering at the edge of my thoughts. My unconscious, Mrs. Teaderman would say. He’s the prison guard of my unconscious.

After the prayer Pastor Chick records more instructions on the board. First: pray for your people. Second: Pray for an opening. Third: invite them to The Main Event, which Pastor Chick explains is a thrilling, town-wide scavenger hunt that will take place the Friday after next.

Now comes even more singing, and this time I have to force myself to go along.

“Who are your three?” asks Mary-Kate afterwards, as we join the crowd of kids descending the stairs to the sanctuary level and then another set of stairs to the church basement for refreshments.

“Just people,” I say.

“I got my uncle and my two cousins,” says Mary-Kate. “But I can’t invite them to the scavenger hunt because they live in Ohio.”

“So when do you even see them?” I say.

“Once a month.”

“So you don’t even have to do anything except once a month?”

Mary-Kate shrugs. “I didn’t pick them, God did. Who did you get,” she says, turning to Karen.

“I don’t think you’re supposed to say who you got.” I say.

“I think it’s like a birthday wish that way.”

“It’s witnessing,” says Mary-Kate. “The whole point is to tell people.”

“Okay but yours are already in youth group,” I say to Karen. “They are already thinking of their own three people.”

“I know,” says Karen. “But they’re the people God gave me.

I tip back my head and regard the ceiling of the church basement hallway, just to be looking somewhere else. Its rectangular panels feel like they might be closing in. “What if the people you got don’t like you,” I say to the ceiling. “What if they’re not people other people make fun of, but they’re the people who make fun of you?”

Mary-Kate sucks her teeth and the inner edge of her eyebrows dive downward in thought.

“Maybe you don’t make fun of them back,” says Karen. “Turn the other cheek.”

“Already doing that.”

“Maybe you tell them how fun The Main Event is going to be,” Karen says.

“Or maybe you don’t invite them personally,” says Mary-Kate. “Or maybe you write them a note on the back of one of the flyers.”

I try to imagine handing Tracy a note I wrote her, how confused we would both be. I think of how my voice would sound when I tried to explain The Main Event and why going around town
asking people for things would be fun. The truth is that the most
fun thing about it will probably be walking around East Winder
after dark, without adults. But that doesn’t seem like a selling
point to anyone who doesn’t live here.

“You don’t have to do anything at first except pray,” says
Mary-Kate. “And since I don’t see my people until I go to Ohio
then I’ll pray for yours this week. Who were they again?”

“That’s okay,” I say.

“No, I will,” says Mary-Kate. “Even if I don’t know their
names, I really, really will. And maybe, when you go to your old
house and see Seth, you can mention my name. We had kindergarten
together but I don’t know if he remembers me. Don’t say something
obvious, like, ‘Do you remember Mary-Kate?’ Say, ‘Mary-Kate is so
pretty,’ or, ‘I wish I looked like Mary-Kate,’ something like
that.”

“It’s true,” says Karen to Mary-Kate. “You are pretty.”

Both girls look at me, waiting.

“Pretty,” I say. They keep looking at me. “Really pretty.”

“Thanks,” Mary-Kate says, modestly smoothing the hem of her
sweater over her skirt.

We stop by the bathroom on the way to the rec room and wait
our turn at the mirror to blot the shine off our noses and
reapply lip gloss. I take down my small ponytail and redo it.
It’s getting longer--long enough that it doesn’t come out of any
of the five barrettes but not long enough to swing, even a
little. It curls into itself against my head, taking on the tight
shape of a shrimp. In the mirror I pinch the apples of my cheeks, which Phoebe says is the same as blusher. I look into my eyes, which seem less blue since the last time I checked, and I wonder about the people the Lord laid on my heart, and if this can be considered hearing his voice, or feeling his presence.

In line at the refreshments counter in the basement hallway, Seth pokes me in the back, which I ignore. The thin blonde seminary wife from joining-the-church class, the enthusiastic spirit flag waver, has laid out napkins in a perfect grid, and is depositing one dark brownie on the center of each white square, pausing to admire it before sliding the spatula back into the pan.

Seth pokes me again, and his finger hits my backbone.

“What,” I say loudly, without turning around. The blonde woman snaps her head up. “Sorry,” I say to her.

“I’ve missed you in class,” says the seminary wife with a friendly pout.

I smile uncertainly. Phoebe and I haven’t been to either of the Sunday morning services since we moved down to the river. She says she’s too tired from her schedule and that she will worship in her own private sanctuary until things settle down.

“Guess who I got,” says Seth, close to my ear.

I shrug and accept a brownie and napkin from the blonde woman.

“How’re things,” she says, tilting her head shyly at me.

“Fine, thank you.”
“I’ve been reading back issues of The Good Word,” says the blonde woman. “I want you to know your father’s column really speaks to me.”

“Okay,” I say, nodding.

“If you get to see him, would you let him know?”

I’m still nodding, holding up the line, and I get another hard poke in the back from Seth. When I turn around this time, my friends are gone. Seth snatches a brownie, and I scoot into the rec hall, another flat layer of the church. This room lies directly under the sanctuary and can be made into a basketball court with low, flimsy goals wheeled in from the supply closet. It can also be made into six four-square courts. You just have to remember to run around the plaster pillars that hold up the ceiling, one of which I’m leaning up against to eat my brownie.

Once, when I was here for daycare as a child, I saw a boy knock himself out by hitting a pillar while trying to dribble backwards.

“What are you doing back here?” Seth says, coming up behind me. Even when he’s just standing, his arms and legs seem to jerk in different directions, like each part of his body has its own ideas about what to do next.

“Nothing.”

“Because you still don’t know who God gave me.”

“Tell me. Please. Who did God give you?”

“Guess.”
I look around the room. “Anyone I would guess would be someone you and I both know. And anyone you and I both know is going to be saved already. You got someone who’s saved?”

“There’s saved and there’s saved,” says Seth.

“Really.” Really is the word Phoebe hates most, because it can be said with a deniable hint of challenge.

“You and your family have different ideas,” Seth says.

I stuff the rest of the brownie in my mouth and feel it give way comfortingly around my molars. The chewing fills up my ears, too, which is good. If he has anything else to say, I don’t want to hear it. But I hear it anyway.

“We pray for your family every night. When we sit at your kitchen table we think of you sitting there and that makes it easy to lift you up in prayer.”

“We pray for you, too,” I say with my mouth full. “We pray for everyone. That’s what you’re supposed to do.”

“My dad says your dad’s misguided,” Seth says. “That’s why I got you and your family to pray for. That’s why God laid you and your family on my heart.”

“What’s going on over here with the newbies,” says Pastor Chick, emerging, somehow, from behind the pillar. He crosses his arms over his chest and rocks back, grinning first at me, then at Seth, then rocking back even further and grinning at both of us.

“How can you tell if someone’s a real prophet,” Seth says. “Nowadays.”
I look at my tennis shoes. The white shoe polish has begun to crack and now they look older than they did before.

“Prophets, huh,” says Pastor Chick. “Parts of the Bible that are most helpful to me were written by prophets.”

“But there are false prophets,” Seth says.

“I’m sure there are,” says Pastor Chick, scratching his chin. “But to answer your question, I don’t know how you tell ‘em apart. I haven’t reached that level of clearance with the heavenly commander in chief. Know what I’m talking about, soldier?” Here Pastor Chick playfully punches Seth in the elbow.

“But I do have the down-low on the brownie situation, and Mrs. Whitson is serving up seconds.” He gives Seth a push and says, “Go get ‘em, brother.”

Then Pastor Chick turns to me and I wonder if he would be interested in hearing about what’s just dawning on me, that his own Operation Outreach, with my three people from the county, plays right into my father’s mission inspired by the spirit of the Apostle Paul. I wonder if Pastor Chick would listen, and nod, and tell me that he’s never surprised at the mysterious ways of the Lord. But Pastor Chick never stays in one place for too long. He is already winking at me and turning on his expensive shoes. Like a superhero, he’s off in a flash, back across the room and slapping Conley on the back before I can say anything, even thank you.
“How come you only ride the bus home sometimes?” Tracy Poague asks me in the morning. “I see you getting on the other bus. You go home with people?”

“Not really.”

“Well you go somewhere, don’t you?”

“I go to some people’s houses,” I say.

Tracy uncaps her pen and works the tip into the seam of the top of the seat in front of us. She seems mad, which makes me uneasy. There is no logic to what she’s curious about and what she isn’t. The bus stops and Ravenna stands up to unhook the ramp for Cecil Grimes.

“Here he comes,” Tracy says. “Your boyfriend.”

I roll my eyes.

“You wait,” Tracy says. “Some nights he picks a girl to sit on his lap.” She’s still digging her pen into the seat, opening up a space between the stitches. Now she peers up at me from under her eyebrows to check if I’m buying this. “He can’t finger girls so he picks them out to sit on his lap and feel his you know what.”

I look doubtfully towards Ravenna.

“She don’t drive every night,” Tracy says. “She started her Tuesday class. That stupid sub, Eli, it’s all he can do to keep this bus on the road.”
“I know you’re not smoking that on this bus,” Ravenna says in the front as Cecil Grimes makes his way up the ramp. His head appears over the first seat, an unlit cigarette in his mouth.

“Nope,” he says around the cigarette. “Just saving it for later. You got here early.”

“Same time I get here every day,” Ravenna says.

“If you say so,” says Cecil when he reaches the top of the ramp.

“I say that and a whole lot more,” says Ravenna.

“A whole lot more,” Cecil agrees. He heaves his body down the aisle, leading with his shoulders, first one side then the other. The movement squeezes his lungs, and there’s a wheezing in his voice. “In fact you got more words in one morning than most people got all day.”

“Every single one a pearl of wisdom,” Ravenna says, “cast before swine.”

“I got your pearls,” Cecil mutters suggestively. Everything you say, I am learning from the bus, can mean something nasty if you say it right.

“Good thing I can’t hear very well out of my right ear,” Ravenna says. “Good thing I couldn’t quite make that out.”

Ravenna doesn’t ever move the bus until she sees Cecil’s settled himself in. The rest of us, when she stops, have to get to our seats fast before the bus lurches and whatever we’re carrying goes flying as we grab on to stay upright. But Ravenna waits for Cecil and sasses him the whole time, and lets him sass
her back, even though he’s a kid, and white, and even though he comes from a place where people say “nigger” this and “nigger” that without ever having been told not to. And he always lets her have the last word, even though she’s black, and a woman.

When Cecil reaches our seat he tells Tracy to take the cigarette out of his mouth.

“Hold that for me,” he says, “and don’t smoke it, neither.” Tracy pinches the cigarette from his mouth and opens her purse. “Girl?” Cecil says, and I almost answer ‘she won’t,’ for her, out of distress, but then I realize that even though he’s still looking at Tracy he is talking to me. “What, you want your own cigarette?” And now he turns full-on to me, the round brown eyes, and I blink and look somewhere else, which ends up being his empty red plaid sleeve tied into a knot, but which could be anywhere, since all I want is not to look at his eyes. “Look at me,” he says. “You were all fired up to look a second ago.” He knocks Tracy’s shoulder with his gleaming chrome hook. “What’s her name?”

“Charmaine,” Tracy says, dropping the cigarette into her purse.

“No,” I manage.

“No, what?”

“Her name’s Charmaine,” Tracy says, looking at me like I’m crazy.

“No, I don’t want my own cigarette.”
“Listen up, ladies’ man,” says Ravenna from up front. Her eyes, separated from her face in the sliver of one of the complicated rearview mirrors, flick over mine in irritation. “Leave the girls alone. I got a route, here.”

Cecil Grimes just nods like he’s amused. He moves on by and I let out my breath.

Tracy’s pen still sticks out of the upholstery. As Ravenna puts the bus in gear and starts up the hill from the river, the pen begins to quiver.

“Cousin,” Cecil says from two seats back.

“What,” Tracy says, not looking at him.

“Cousin,” he says again, then again, until she finally sighs and turns around.

“What?”

“You tell your friend there that if she likes to look there’s a lot more to see.”

“What do I look like,” Tracy says. “A telephone operator?” Then she turns to me tiredly. “You hear him?”

“Yeah.”

We hit the part of the river road that’s a tree bridge, where you can feel the low branches scraping the top of the bus.

“You scared?” Tracy says.

I shrug and try not to look uneasy.

She sets her mouth resentfully and yanks her pen out of the seat. “You’re stupid, then,” she says. “He’s only mean because he likes you, and he only likes you because you’re prissy.”
I don’t know what’s hardest to believe, that Cecil Grimes likes me, that I am prissy, or that prissy could be why he likes me.

“You know what prissy means?” Tracy says.

“Yeah,” I say. Then, “Do you?”

“You think I’m stupid?”

“No one ever called me ‘prissy’ before.”

“You’re all, carry your books to school every day. You do your homework.”

“Sometimes.”

“You talk like people on TV.”

“Which ones?”

Tracy throws up her hands. “All of them. Or like a teacher. You talk like a teacher through your nose like you think you’re better than everyone.” She pinches her nose with her thumb and forefinger. “After school I go to peoples’ houses,” she says in a high nasal, wiggling her shoulders back and forth. “I don’t want my own cigarette.”

“I don’t sound like that.”

“I don’t sound like that,” says Tracy, sounding more like me that I care for.

“Stop it,” I say, and she mimics that, too.

“Girl,” Cecil Grimes calls from his seat, and I know he means me. “Girl!”

“She don’t want to talk to you,” Tracy says with venom.

“She don’t want to talk to anybody on this bus.”
I open up my last book from the bookmobile, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. I have marked my place in it with the three flyers for The Main Event, each one folded into thirds and ready to distribute. There’s also a letter from my father, unopened, that Phoebe hand delivered last night when she picked me up from Youth Group.

“She just wants to read her prissy book,” says Tracy, ducking her head to look at the cover. “Something Wicked Something.”

I am on page 57, and I read that one page three times while Tracy keeps talking.

“Silent treatment,” Tracy says.

I stare at the page, pondering how two of the three people God has laid on my heart are right here, and they’re both talking to me, and I can’t make an opportunity out of it. Pastor Chick says the first step is to pray. And my father says to pray without ceasing, of course, which I have forgotten about, predictably, again. I sigh and start in. *Inhabit me, O Lord God.*

“You’re not supposed to do that,” Tracy says. “Read with your lips moving. I thought you were smart.”

In English I open the letter from my father. It’s a printout sheet from one of the brain scans they gave him right after he got to the hospital. The sheet has seven black and white pictures of his brain, outlined by a thin white line that must be his cranium, which is perched on a neck of bone. A skeleton neck.
In each picture, white blotches show up in different areas over the grainy black and gray brain parts. Lobes. I thought you might be interested, he writes on the back. Everything shows up on the brain. On the different parts. Happy, sad. Everything.

I flip the letter over and study the printouts. Maybe the white blotches are the different emotions, but there’s more than one white spot in each picture, so I’m not sure I’m looking at the right thing. Or maybe it’s showing how you can feel different things at once. It’s like looking at pictures of those storms on the surface of the sun, the way we did in science. After a minute of staring you can’t tell what’s on the sun and what might be coming from your own eye. I wonder if the different pictures could be labeled, by emotion, and which small white explosion might indicate confusion.

Prayer without ceasing will serve you well. I am having trouble hearing the voice of God at all, in the last few days. I believe he is there, but it is lonely. My thoughts are changed. I used to think many thoughts at one time, but now they come slowly and from a long way off, like cars on a highway. I see each one coming, then I study it as it goes by, then I turn to watch it disappear into the distance before the next one arrives. They tell me this is just the medication slowing my brain down to normal. Maybe God is still speaking to me plainly only his words are coming at me one at a time, like the thoughts, and if I contemplate prayerfully soon I’ll be in a better state of reception.
I didn’t think visitors were a good idea at first, but now I think I could manage. Your mother has some reservations. However, I think she is planning to bring you towards the end of the week. She says you are worried about Titus being dropped from Tate’s bridge, so someday I will tell you about cats, and falling. Or you can look it up in the library. They are good at it. I am finished with the moccasins and look forward to giving them to you.

For free-writing, I begin to write him back.

We’re doing Operation Outreach at church, and guess what, the three people who appeared to me are all county people. Two from the river and one from Clay’s Corner. I think I got them because of your vision of the ministry of the Apostle Paul. I already think they are looking to me for evidence of the light within me here I glance over at Kelly-Lynn, who raises one bored eyebrow and keeps writing and I can tell they are hungry to know the Lord. This letter is kind of like an epistle, like Paul wrote to all those people. In Galatia and Thessalonica. This is like the letter of Charmaine to God’s servant David. Through these letters I can give you reports on the progress of Operation Outreach. I hope reading hasn’t gotten as slow as your thoughts, but I bet when you don’t need the pills for your brain then everything will be back to normal and you’ll start to hear the voice of the Lord like before. I print DO NOT READ across the top of the page, so Mrs. Teaderman won’t read it. I’ll erase the
words before I give the letter to Phoebe to give to him so that it doesn’t make him more confused.

I’m making friends with the people, I write, shaking my head to get rid of the memory of Tracy calling me prissy, of Cecil’s hard stare. And if I bring all three of them to the Lord then when you get back I can help you with the rest of the county. And maybe they will help, too, by that time. And I am praying without ceasing all the time which will not be a lie, exactly, if I redouble my efforts starting right now and have more success. Part of an epistle’s purpose is to shore up the spirits of those in captivity, or in otherwise challenging situations, and thinking that his daughter is faithful enough to conquer prayer without ceasing has got to be encouraging news to my father in the absence of the voice of God. With my pen, I make a small hatch mark on the ball of my thumb, and promise myself to make another one every time I catch myself not in prayer. Also, I write, here is another perfect word. I found it in the Bible. Cleave. Right?

“What are those?” Kelly-Lynn says during activity, pointing to the brain pictures.

“My father had some tests,” I say. “They made him feel things and then took pictures of his brain during the feelings.”

“Does he have a brain tumor?”

This possibility has never occurred to me, and I like it for its simplicity. A tumor seems like a cleaner thing than
unbalanced chemicals, something that could be removed, maybe, once and for all. But of course I don’t want my father to have a brain tumor. “I don’t know,” I say.

“You didn’t say he was sick. You just said away.”

“He’s probably not. Sick, I mean. They’re just making sure.”

“So maybe your parents will stay together, then.”

“They’re not getting divorced. My mother goes to see him. I’m probably going later this week.” I’m holding the bookmobile book on my lap, with The Main Event flyers. All I have to do is pull one out and hand it to her.

“My step-dad has that book,” Kelly-Lynn says. “Bob. He has lots of books. He and my mom got in a fight last night because when he flushed her cigarettes down the toilet she called him a fag. Guys hate it when you call them that, but my mom says he needs to lighten up.” Kelly-Lynn stops talking and peers into my face, and I’m wondering if she’s seeing the light of the Lord shining through me. I am peering closely at her, too, at the gentle way her eyes lead into a small, straight nose. Kelly-Lynn is, I feel it sinking into me, a beautiful girl. Even as I show her my teeth in what I hope is a beatific smile, I am realizing that I don’t look anything like Kelly-Lynn. And that I would like to. And that at the same time as I want to look like her, I want to keep looking at her.

“How’s your boyfriend?” she asks me.
“Fine,” I say, with some dread. I am going to have to start keeping track of my untruths. No doubt this has something to do with why I keep forgetting to pray without ceasing. Which I have stopped, and so I dig out my pen and make another hatch mark on my thumb. Inhabit me, O Lord God. Sometimes it works to think of my untruths as imaginative, like Mrs. Teaderman says, rather than as lies. Other times I feel the wretched weight of them and wonder what unredeemable thing I might be turning into. Then I hear myself share an actual truth. “He wants to look at my, you know.” I dip my chin towards my chest and feel my neck grow hot.

“Tell me about it,” Kelly-Lynn says. “They all do. Did you let him?”

“No.”

“It feels funny the first time,” she says. “And when they want to touch. But you get used to it.”

“Lust,” I say, and I feel I can nod with some authority.

“Whatever,” says Kelly-Lynn, giving me a funny look.

“Ronnie Rietz’s party is this weekend on Friday, and cheerleading tryouts are Saturday and I heard he likes me but he’s going with Theresa, so, you know.”

I feel like I should know, so I keep nodding. I look down at the printout of my father’s brain and now I’m wondering if one of the white storms indicates lust, and if lust is still a sin if the doctors make you feel it in order to make sure your brain’s okay.
The flyers for The Main Event are still right there in my book, waiting for me with their own agenda. With my fingertips, I separate one of them and take a deep breath, preparing to smile so invitingly at Kelly-Lynn that I will look like the idea just occurred to me, so that I will look like I actually expect her to want to come. But when the bell rings, and she turns her head the other way, I slip the flyer into her book bag instead. Which, depending on how the Lord wants to look at it, could be seen as cowardly or as taking advantage of an opening he may or may not have provided himself.

“You tell your mother to watch herself around Morris Osborne,” Daze says after school. In front of the mirror over her dresser, she runs a comb straight back from her face into her chignon, leaving faint parallel tracks. She slips into her black patent leather shoes and we step out of her apartment and head down one of the long halls of the Custer Peake Retirement Center. We’re visiting one of Daze’s longtime friends, Mrs. Pitney, who Daze says is temporarily laid up but will be back on her feet in no time.

“There’s people who help out, then there’s people who help out,” Daze says. “Some people just can’t stop helping out. You can bait those types like fish with the lonely and the sick. That’s how they get their jollies.”

“We’re helping out right now,” I say, “seeing Mrs. Pitney while she’s laid up.”
Daze waves her hand in front of her face to make my words go away. “And when the person who needs help is a married woman, living on her own for now—a moderately attractive married woman—and the person who gets his jollies from helping out is a bachelor, well then.” I think of how Phoebe called Dr. Osborne “Morris.” How she admitted the hard times. We stop in front of Mrs. Pitney’s door. “There’s some marrieds who should have thought better of it, for sure,” Daze says. “But there’s plenty who never married who would have been well served. Mind my words.”

“Ohkay,” I say, hands up. Daze’s voice has an edge that sounds less like a grandmother and more like a mother, and I’m sensitive to it. She is almost never cross with me.

“Sorry, doll,” she says, softening. “Your mother’s a married woman, but she’s still young.”

“She’s almost forty.”

“She has a pert figure,” Daze says. “Let’s pray your father gets home soon.”

“I’m going to see him,” I say.

“That’s wonderful, doll. He’s looking a little better.”

Now she changes gears, whispering. “Mrs. Pitney stepped on a needle and it went clean through her foot. And she has diabetes. And people with diabetes have to be careful of gangrene.”
“Did the needle go from the bottom of her foot up?” I feel the prick of an imaginary needle, and my toes curl. “In the heel? In the toe?”

“Right through the sole of her slipper,” Daze says. “They had to use a bone spreader in her foot to get it out, and now she’s in one of those boots.”

With the words “bone spreader,” my whole foot begins to twitch in sympathy for Mrs. Pitney.

Daze squares off her shoulders again and raps at Mrs. Pitney’s door. “Hidee,” she calls, and then we are both inside. Mrs. Pitney is awake and alert, a cheerful woman with a helmet of stiff, dyed black hair. She reclines on her couch with one foot in a puffy white hospital boot elevated on pillows.

“And you’ve brought your granddaughter,” chirps Mrs. Pitney. “What a treat.”

“You remember Mrs. Pitney,” Daze says to me, as if we haven’t covered her condition just outside the door. There is only one other chair in the room, a wingtip upholstered in a blue and gold pheasant pattern that was probably carefully chosen for the living room of Mrs. Pitney’s old house on Walnut. “I have always loved this print, Diane,” Daze says, running her hand over the fabric of the chair before taking her seat.

“How’s your foot?” I start to perch on the arm of the chair but Daze swats my thigh and I stand up again.

“Just silly,” says Mrs. Pitney. “How long have I been doing needlework? Silliness. Charmaine, in the cupboard over the sink
you’ll find some snacks.”

“I’m on a diet,” I say.

“Me too,” says Mrs. Pitney. “Try the Carnation Breakfast Bars in there. Just like candy but good for you. Diet food, really.”

I haven’t eaten since lunch, and the breakfast bars are chocolate-covered. I devour the first one, even though I can feel the hand-me-down Jordache jeans shrinking right on my body. From the kitchenette, the high back of the ornately upholstered wing chair hides Daze completely. She is obviously mouthing something silently to Mrs. Pitney, whose cloudy brown eyes narrow as she tries to lip-read. Then she shakes her head. “That man should get married,” the woman whispers as if I can’t hear. Then she says, “When’s your boy coming home,” and just like that, I reach into the Carnation box and pull out another bar.

“Soon,” says Daze.

“I so enjoyed that one article he wrote on the Pope a few years back. And the Papists. It’s like I’ve thought for a long time.”

“He’s gifted,” says Daze.

“He comes by it honestly, enough,” Mrs. Pitney says. “I could have listened to Custer Peake preach every week if I had the choice.”

I still can’t see Daze but I know she is smiling modestly. Then Mrs. Pitney missteps. She says, “It’s good your boy can get the help he needs.”
And even though Daze acknowledges that David, in his receptivity to God, sometimes gets more than he can handle on his own, and even though Diane Pitney is a close enough friend that she and my grandmother can discuss third parties, like Morris Osborne, Diane Pitney is not family, and she has not been invited to discuss family, and she is spending her twilight years at the Custer Peake Memorial Retirement Center, which was not named after Diane Pitney’s deceased husband or founded with Pitney family seed money. The wingtip chair creaks as Daze changes her position, but that’s the only sound in the room except, inside my head, the sound of my own chewing. I grab a pen from the canister on Mrs. Pitney’s counter and make a third tiny hatch mark on my thumb as I start up my prayer again. I get through it six times before Mrs. Pitney thinks of what to say next.

“What do you use on your hands,” is what she comes up with, and I have to admire the appeal to Daze’s vanity. Mrs. Pitney extends her own hands, steady but speckled with liver spots, towards my grandmother in a kind of petition.

“Just a little hand lotion,” Daze says, which is an untruth, plain and simple. She has a special bleaching cream, which I’ve watched her apply, and in high sun she wears gloves, but there is no way Mrs. Pitney is getting this information. Not now.

“Your grandmother’s a beautiful woman,” Mrs. Pitney says, lifting her cloudy gaze to me.

I nod with a mouthful of Carnation breakfast bar.
“She’s what we used to call a ‘head-turner.’

“How you do go on,” Daze says, standing. “We mustn’t tire you out. Charmaine?”

I nod again, embarrassed that my mouth is still full.

“It’s a shame,” Daze says when we’re back out in the hall, “that one little injury can lay a person up like that. When you’re laid up like that at this age, and when it’s your foot, and when you have diabetes,” Daze lets her thought trail off with a regretful turn of her mouth. “I worry she’ll lose that foot.”

“Lose her foot? I thought you said she’d be up and around again in no time.”

“You can’t tell how these things will go,” Daze says. “I want you to promise me you’ll add Mrs. Diane Pitney to your prayers.”

“Okay.”

“Because I can assure you that she is in mine.” And with that, my grandmother lifts her chin and smiles with cold generosity at a short, round nurse squeaking by in her plastic soled shoes.
All week in English, I look for some sign that Kelly-Lynn has found the flyer, but she says nothing. We brainstorm, as a class, about possible topics for our how-to speeches. Mrs. Teaderman wants us all to commit to the process of preparing a speech, from brainstorming to research to outlining to index cards to props to memorization.

“How to cheer,” Kelly-Lynn says, when called upon to share the best of her brainstorming options.

Mrs. Teaderman prompts her to be more specific, to, perhaps, discuss how to write your own cheer.

“How to sew,” I say when it’s my turn, and then, “How to sew a skirt.”

“Those might be some complicated props to bring in,” Mrs. Teaderman cautions.

For freewriting, I tell my father that two out of my three people are already on board with The Main Event, because I believe that telling him this will inspire me to invite Tracy right away, before he gets my letter. I feel in my heart that if I get them to The Main Event, the Lord will guide me from there. I’m not sure I feel this in my heart, exactly, but I am trying to have faith. Then I am erasing the “I feel in my heart” part and write “I have faith that.”

“No erasing,” Mrs. Teaderman says.
Maybe by the time I see you, maybe tomorrow? I will know how to approach the last person, though not for The Main Event, probably. Another thing, Dr. Osborne may be starting a new play about Ruth and Naomi, maybe with a flashback to Lot to show how being a Moabite made Ruth an unattractive partner for Boaz and he took pity on them anyway. If I am in the play, I can invite my new friends from the county to something where they can hear about the Bible. I stop writing, but keep my pencil tip to the page. I want to write to him how much I remember about the lineage of David, of Christ, but I’m afraid he will be able to tell that I am trying to impress him. In a town of seminarians, my father considers Biblical knowledge a duty, not something one should congratulate oneself about. Maybe you will be back in time to see the performance, I say, which hopefully will glorify God. Which doesn’t sound quite right, but might reassure him that I know that plays are not for vain striving but for demonstrating the living word.

Eli, the substitute bus driver, wears a blue cap and a padded grease monkey jumpsuit. He doesn’t even look up as I climb the steps and make my way down the aisle. Tracy, already in our seat, scoots over for me like it’s a big hassle.

“Eli doesn’t give a shit what goes on,” Tracy says. “You’ll see.”

“Does he stop everywhere?”
“Yeah,” she says. “He’s not stupid. But he doesn’t stop at your place because you’re the only one gets off there, so you have to holler at him when it’s time.”

The junior high side of the building lets out first, and while we’re waiting for the high school bell to ring, Eli climbs down from his seat and heads around to the back of the bus for a cigarette.

It’s always weird to hear the bell ring from the outside of school. Muffled but familiar and kind of disturbing, like hearing someone you don’t know get yelled at in the next room. When the high school doors open, Cecil Grimes, who gets an official head start, emerges flanked by the skinny helper with the thin fan of hair, the one I saw trying to burn a textbook. They move slowly, so slowly that I catch myself tracking their progress by comparing the size of the part of the lawn behind them to the part of the lawn they have yet to cover. When Cecil slows way down, though, his legs almost seem even with each other, and he walks with less of a hitch. Not like a normal walk, but almost what you might call a swagger. And the skinny guy’s talking the whole time, and using his hands to play an invisible guitar. When they get to the bus he hooks the bag he’s been carrying crosswise over Cecil’s body, taps him on the back then hunches away down the row of busses, burying his hands deep into the pockets of his jeans.

Eli’s still behind the bus smoking, though, and Cecil has to wait at the bottom of the bus steps.
“That bus driver should fix the ramp,” I say.

“He will,” says Tracy.

“Before the other kids come, though.”

“All right,” Tracy says. “I heard you the first time.”

But Cecil is still waiting at the base of the steps for Eli as the rest of the kids spill out of the high school side and swarm over the lawn. There’s a hollow banging on the bus as Cecil starts swinging his hook into the area beside the door.

Finally, Eli appears below our window, headed towards the front. He shuffles up the steps and struggles with the plywood while the other highschoolers who have to board collect in a rowdy group.

“Any day now,” Cecil says, and when Eli has finally hooked the ramp into place Cecil lurches more violently than usual, attempting to move up the ramp as fast as he can. It’s different than in the morning, when no one else is waiting for him to get on. At the top, facing the head of the aisle, he breathes hard, and when he passes us I can see that he’s been sweating. He falls into his seat with a grunt and catches his breath. But two seconds later, as the rest of the group begins to board, I hear, “Look who it is,” in his low voice.

“Hey,” I say, not turning.

“Hey,” the boy says in exactly my tone of voice.

“He’s been waiting for this day,” Tracy whispers. She arches one of her nearly invisible eyebrows me. This morning when she got on the bus her bright red hair was a scraggly mop and her
face was blanched white, bare of make-up. Now all her hair, even her bangs, has been slicked back into a tight ponytail that bushes out behind her in a giant ball of frizz. She has lined her eyes in bright blue and has applied so much mascara that her eyelashes look thick and spiky as thorns.

“I’m not going to sit on his lap,” I say. “No one can make me do that.”

“It’s just for a second,” Tracy says. “Just until you feel how big his thing is.”

“I don’t want to feel how big his thing is.”

“You have to or else you have to take what’s coming.”

“What’s what’s coming?”

“Depends,” Tracy says.

“Have you done it?”

“What, sit on his lap?”

“Cousin,” he says to Tracy as the other highschoolers file onto the bus. “You tell that girl she’s next.”

I hunker down in the bus seat and push my forehead against the dirty window. The river kids jostle each other down the aisle with a lot more noise than they make when Ravenna’s behind the wheel. It’s a warm day, and the bus even smells different than in the morning. Even more strongly of cigarettes, and then I see that one of the girls in the aisle is still smoking.

“You wish,” she says in a bored voice to one of the Carson boys behind her.
“What,” says the Carson boy, shrugging his shoulders.

“What?”

The bus feels heavier as it fills up, sinking a little, on its tires.

“What’s up, Eli,” a few of the boys say to the bus driver, but Eli just looks straight ahead out the huge windshield, like he’s serving a prison sentence he can barely endure.

“It doesn’t hurt none,” Tracy whispers in my ear.

“You did do it?”

“No,” she says. “We’re kin.”

“Then you wouldn’t know.”

Tracy screws up one side of her face, squinting at me. Her crusty eyelashes meet and when she stops squinting the lashes stick together for a second before letting go so her eye can open again all the way. “It’s not for real,” she says, finally. “I mean it’s for real but not really.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Why you have to be so snotty? You don’t have to give me your dictionary talk.” Tracy throws herself back against the seat. “You just can’t help yourself,” she says in disgusted wonder.

“Tell her,” comes Cecil’s voice. I raise myself up and turn towards him, and he looks down at where the front of his pants is, behind the seat, then looks back up at me and winks.
snap my head around and duck again. In my lap, my thumb is covered in hatch marks, and I dig out my pen to make another one.

“What’re you doing?” Tracy says.

“Praying.”

“You that scared?”

There are at least two dozen hatch marks on my thumb, now, from forgetting. I cross a group of four for a bundle and put my pen away.

“What’re you counting?”

“Nothing,” I say, then go back to the prayer. I say it over and over again, though I know as well as anyone that prayer is not a force field, not something that prevents bad things from happening, just something that’s supposed to give you strength to deal with them.

Eli pulls the lever and the bus doors swing closed. One kid is still jogging across the lawn, one of the Pelphry kids, and Eli lets him pound on the window in the bus door once, pretending not to see him, before swinging open the doors again. “Late,” Eli says. The first word I’ve heard him say.

The bus backs slowly out of the parking space and creeps down the school drive in a long line of buses I can’t see the beginning or end of from the window. It looks like the segmented tape worm we saw magnified pictures of when Mr. Catterson gave his missionary presentation. One of their friends, he said, had a worm like that in his stomach, once. The real size of the worm segments is about the same as a sesame seed. The friend was in
prison in Ghana, or it might have been a missionary friend of theirs to the Congo, but whoever he was, he told them he got so hungry that he could feel the tapeworm coming up through his throat and poking around at the back of his mouth for food. The tapeworm was starving, too. I gag just thinking about it.

“Hey,” Tracy says. “You don’t have to get that upset. It’s not that much of a big deal.”

“Do you know what a tapeworm is?”

“A worm that’s flat like tape?”

“Kind of.” I tell her about the segments, how a tapeworm lives in your stomach and eats what you put in it.

“I’d chop it up,” she says.

“Each segment has its own head.”

“You’re making that up,” she says.

Behind us, Cecil says, “Rosemary Cooley, you know what you want.”

“I did it last week,” says a girl from the very back seat.

“Come on over.”

“Rosemary,” a few kids start in. “Rosemary.”

“That’s right,” Cecil says. There’s a shuffling behind us, but I don’t turn around to look because I’m so glad it’s not me. Now I worry for Rosemary, a girl I don’t even know.

“Rosemary, Rosemary.” Most of the back of the bus is chanting, now. Everyone keeps it low, but Eli doesn’t even check
the rearview. We’ve begun crawling slowly down the highway, still in a line of buses.

“Rosemary always gets tapped,” Tracy says.

I peek over my shoulder and the high school girl who was smoking when she got on the bus, a girl with enormous breasts and fried blond hair, shifts over her seatmate and does a crouched walk up the aisle to Cecil’s seat, while Cecil’s seatmate makes his way back to Rosemary’s place.

“Yeah,” a couple voices shout. Still nothing from Eli, up front.

“He just lets this happen?” I say to Tracy.

“What did I tell you? He probably wishes Rosemary would come sit on his lap. You see her titties? They’re bigger than yours.”

It’s true. The girl’s chest is so ample that it makes me think of the word “bosom,” which Daze uses, more than “titty.” I look down at my own chest. My breasts have started to ache again. They stopped after my period and I didn’t even notice. My only bra is tight and gray, even though Daze puts it through the wash.

“You got some titties there, too, though,” Tracy says, catching me looking down. “Me, I’m not going to get any ‘til I’m 16. My mom was flat as a board until then. What size bra you wear now? D?”

“I don’t know,” I say. My breasts make me feel gloomy. When I look again, Rosemary is sitting on Cecil’s lap, her knees and face to the aisle. The top of his head is fitted underneath
her chin and she’s looking out towards the opposite windows on the bus, giggling. She wears a deeply scooped t-shirt, and Cecil dips his face into the crevice between her breasts.

“Go, go,” says the Pelphry boy. “Can you feel it, Rosemary?”

Rosemary rolls her eyes and giggles again. She has a pair of long front teeth that catch on her lip, rabbit-like, when she laughs. She looks around the back of the bus, then swivels her head towards the front and catches my eye.

“She likes it,” Tracy says. “Maybe you would, too, with those titties of yours.”

I cross my arms firmly over my chest.

“Sometimes I see you at school,” says Tracy.

“In the bathroom.”

“Yeah, but other times,” Tracy says. “I see you sometimes when you don’t see me. With that girl everyone hates.”

“Who?”

“Kelly something from somewhere. Did you know she gave Mr. Cole a pair of her panties?”

“She did not.”

Tracy shrugs. “She’s stuck up. Her name didn’t even used to be Kelly, or Kelly-Lynn, or whatever, when she was at Rowland County Elementary School. I heard it was Susan. I heard she changes her name every time she changes schools. I heard she’s a lesbian. A girl who likes girls.”
“If she’s a lesbian, why would she give her panties to Mr. Cole?”

“She really gave them to Mrs. Teaderman. You—all both have Mrs. Teaderman. I have her, too. First period. You have to do the speeches?”

“How-to speeches,” I say. I try to imagine Kelly-Lynn giving her panties to Mrs. Teaderman, and all I can think is that Mrs. Teaderman would wash them, maybe, and give them back, like Daze does with me.

The bus is approaching the turn-off to East Winder, where the road gets narrower and the shoulder gets shaved down to only about a foot. I don’t like to look down through the window, at this point, because it’s easy to feel like the bus is about to go off the pavement. Once in the morning it did, when Ravenna was adjusting one of the mirrors. The tire caught the edge of the road and the whole bus felt like it was going to tip over for about two seconds. I look down at my marked up hand. Inhabit me, O Lord God.

“I feel it,” Rosemary is saying, behind us, still giggling. Out of the corner of my eye I can see Rosemary squirming on Cecil’s lap. Cecil is silent, his face still buried deeply in the girl’s bosom.

“Rosemary,” says Tracy. “That girl poured a whole bottle of peroxide on her hair last summer and turned it white and when it grew out she had to dye it something so she dyed it red. Not natural red like mine. She had regular brown hair before, like
yours. I don’t know why anyone who didn’t have red hair would want to dye it.”

I’m looking at Tracy’s hair, at the bright orange of it. “I think it’s neat, though,” I say. I didn’t mean to say it, and I didn’t know I thought so, but when I hear it, I know it’s true. Her hair is one of the neatest colors I’ve ever seen. It’s brighter even than the kind Daze says comes with meanness.

“You’re crazy.” Tracy squeezes the bushy ponytail and looks away from me, sideways, into the aisle. She doesn’t say another word until we’ve hit the river road, and we’re passing the lookout sign at the Top of Tate’s Bridge. Rosemary makes her way back to her seat.

“Cousin,” Cecil sings softly. “I got time for one more.”

“You finished for the day,” Tracy says without turning around.

“Maybe, maybe not. The rest of the back of the bus has lost interest except for the Pelphry boy, who echoes, “One more.”

“Tell that girl,” Cecil says.

We’re nearing the Tates Bend gas station where Tracy gets off, still high above the river. Today she stands up early. “She’s getting off the bus with me.” The skin on Tracy’s face and neck is so white it looks blue. Light from the window panels, sliding across it as the bus slows down, turns her skin yellow. “She’s coming over.” Tracy snaps her face to Cecil, then down at me. “She’s going to help me write my how-to speech.”

“How-to not kill your own cousin,” Tracy says.

Eli has brought the bus to a stop by the gas station, the only store around for miles.

“You coming?” Tracy says to me, but I’m already standing up.

“Next time,” Cecil promises as I follow Tracy off the bus with a small crowd of kids. We stand there in the dirt while the bus rolls away and the rest of the kids disappear into the store.

“Thanks,” I say, but Tracy ignores it.

“You got any money?”

I shake my head.

“Come on,” she says, and I follow her into the store. I’m almost a head taller than she is, which I never even noticed before now. We set off the bell when we enter. The light inside is dim and the air smells old. The other kids are bent over a cooler of pop, lifting cans out of the ice.

“Want some chips?” Tracy says.

“I don’t have any money,” I remind her. I figure I have about an hour before Phoebe gets home from school, and it will take me about half that to walk home down the hill.

Tracy pulls two bags of potato chips from clips on a rotating stand. “Momma,” she calls, and I look up to the woman behind the counter, orange hair fading to gray and tied back in a red bandanna. Behind her, floor to ceiling, are cigarette packs
stacked neat as cells between narrow plastic barriers. “This is Charmaine,” Tracy says.

The woman behind the counter lifts her hand, but she’s keeping her eye on the kids at the cooler.

“Two bags.” Tracy holds up two fingers towards her mother. “You get that?”

The woman raises her hand again and nods. She’s counting change on the counter with the fingertips of her other hand, mouthing the count softly to herself. Several of the kids grab their paid-for sodas and leave, and when Tracy and I start to follow them the woman stops us.

“What’s your last name?”

“Me?” I say.

“I know Tracy’s last name.”

“Peake.”

Tracy’s mother tucks a red curl into her bandanna. Her eyes are small, bright blue chips of glass set deep into a squint. “Daddy knew some Peakes.”

I wait for her to say something else, but she goes back to counting change.

“Thanks for the chips,” I say.

“That all you want?”

“We gotta go,” Tracy says, pushing open the door.

“Tracileen, wipe off that handprint you just made,” says her mother, and Tracy swipes at the glass with her sleeve as we head out. I follow her across the dirt yard of the gas station to
a cinderblock house in back that I never noticed before. There’s a dog barking inside, throwing himself against the door.

“My speech isn’t due for awhile yet,” Tracy says. She’s trying to shoulder the door open. “Sometimes this sticks.” She takes a step back and rams it hard, bursting into a dark, damp room lit watery blue from the television. A brown and white speckled dog growls at my knees. “He don’t like nobody but Momma,” Tracy says.

The place is a mess. Dirty dishes on the table, beer cans on the floor, and ashtrays parked within arm’s reach of either side of the velour sofa, another two on the coffee table in front of it, all of them spiky with cigarette butts. The dog is still growling at me. I reach my hand down to let him sniff, and he snaps at my fingers. Not hard enough to break the skin, but I jerk it back.

“Corky, stop,” Tracy says.

“I have to get home before my mom,” I say.

“Okay.” Tracy hands me one bag of chips. “Maybe sometime you can come over again. Corky, shut up.” She kicks him and he squeals. “Cecil, he’s all talk,” she says, still pushing Corky away from me with her foot. The dog is really snarling, now, baring long yellow pointed teeth on each side.

“It didn’t seem like all talk.”

“He just likes to scare you.”
“Okay.” I back away from Corky onto the stoop and am relieved when the screen door, and then the main door inside, closes.

I don’t know exactly how long it will take me to get home, but the days are getting a little shorter. Already the sun’s dipping behind the palisades and turning the gorge gray except the bright swath of sky overhead. Then I remember the flyer. One of the people God laid on my heart invited me to her house and I forgot. I turn around and cross back over the yard and knock at the door, and when Tracy opens it, cigarette in her mouth, I thrust a flyer into her hand and say, “Maybe you can come to this,” then walk away fast as she’s trying to keep Corky in the house.

I am happy that when I write my father, or maybe when I see my father, I will have progress to report. All the way down the river road to the cabin, I eat chips one at a time, gratefully, prayerfully, to the rhythm of my steps.

That night, over the dinette, Phoebe informs me of what I already know: my shirt is too tight. I pluck it away from my chest, trying to stretch the fabric, and I wince when it pulls against my nipples.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.”

“Does something hurt?”

“No.”
“Your nipples?”
I hate hearing her say the word.
“Your breasts? Which is it?”
I shrug. “Both.”
“Has your period started again?”
“Not yet.”
“How many days has it been?”
“Since it started or since it ended?”
“Started.”
“You have to keep track, Charmaine. But it might not make much difference. I’ve never been regular.” Phoebe sighs. She brings her hands to either side of her face and draws her cheeks down with her fingertips, dragging her lower eyelids open to reveal the red rims underneath. I look away.
“Go sit on the toilet and take your shirt off.” She drops her hands and the skin on her face reshapes itself, slowly.
“What?”
“You heard me. I’ll be in in a second.”
“Just tell me what to do,” I say. “You don’t need to do anything. I’ll do it.”
“Give me a second.” Phoebe stands, and I stack our dinner plates and hand them to her. Then she runs water in a pan while I fold the dinette against the wall. She puts the pan on the burner and turns it on.
“What are you doing? What are you going to do?”
“Go take your shirt off,” she says. “Bra too.”

“I don’t need you to do anything,” I say again. “Nothing hurts.”

“Charmaine,” she says tiredly. “I don’t have the energy for a fight.”

I step into the bathroom and pull the accordion door shut behind me.

“Leave that,” Phoebe says, but I keep it shut. I close the lid of the tiny toilet, sit down, and peel my shirt off my aching chest. It’s the nipples, suddenly sore against everything, but it’s also the rest of my breasts. There’s a tightness, like whatever’s inside is swelling too fast for my skin. When I release my bra it’s only a small relief. Nothing has ever felt so heavy.

Phoebe switches off the burner and then she is there, collapsing the accordion door with her foot, a dishtowel in one hand and the pot of hot water in the other.

I cover my breasts with my hands. Even that hurts.

“Don’t be silly.” Phoebe settles the pot into the sink and dips the dishcloth in it. “Take away your hands.”

I shake my head. She stirs the dishtowel into the hot water then picks it out gingerly. She wrings it out over the pot, sucking in little gasps of air, it’s so hot on her fingers. Steam rises.

“Take away your hands,” she says again. “This will help.”
“Nothing hurts,” I say again, keeping my hands on my breasts.

Phoebe frowns at me. “This is necessary. Do you realize that at your stage of development you can get calcium build-ups in your breasts if you don’t use compresses?”

“Calcium?”

“Calcium, Caffeine,” she says. “All kinds of things.” She pulls my left hand away and then she is touching me, probing the underside of my breast with her fingers. “Oh, no.”

“What?” I say, but I don’t even care if there’s something wrong. I just want her to stop touching me there.

“Hard as a rock. We need to break up some of that mass.”

“Stop,” I say. “Please. The mass is okay.” I don’t even know what she’s talking about, a mass.

“This is what you’re supposed to do when your breasts grow. Compresses.” She covers my left breast with the hot, wet dishtowel.

“I can do it,” I say. “Let me do it myself.” But then she begins to knead my breast with her fingers, through the towel. “Ow.” I want her to stop, I want her to stop. Titus has been approaching the bathroom with curiosity, and now he sits carefully outside the door, watching.

“This is good for you,” Phoebe says. She stares into the space over the sink, into the mirrored medicine cabinet. “I’m getting old, Charmaine.” She takes away the cloth and probes my naked left breast again with her hand. I press my teeth together
very hard. I don’t want to look at her this close up. “Look at me,” she says. “Do you think I look old? If you didn’t know how old I was, what would you guess? Thirty?”

“I can do the other one,” I say, clapping my left hand over my left breast, wishing I had an extra hand to reach for my shirt. “Thank you. Thank you for showing me.”

“Just stop,” she says. “Stop it.” She pries my right hand away from my right breast. The bathroom is just big enough for our bodies, and I am miserable. She is breathing in my exhales, and I am breathing in hers. Even the words of my prayer don’t have room to surface in here, and I close my eyes and rummage around for them, desperately, in my head.

She holds the hot wet towel to my right breast and pushes my left hand away until she is squeezing the left one, too, squeezing hard, harder. “I think I could pass for thirty, still,” she says. And then something weird happens, because I can still feel it, and I can still hear her, but it’s as though I’m watching it all, too, as if every part of me has climbed up my neck and into my head, like we’re a group of different parts, like they talk about the body of Christ, and water’s rising and we have to move to higher ground, and so we’re all crowded up there together, watching what’s happening right underneath our chin. Now I can pray again, but I am careful not to move my lips.

“Ready to see your father tomorrow?” she says, but it’s as if the words come at me from far away. “It’s been an interesting couple of weeks.”
I make a small sound in the back of my throat.

“I don’t want you to be alarmed. He looks a little different from the last time you saw him. He’s shaved off his beard. He’s a little puffy from the new medication. In funny places, like his neck. And he doesn’t have quite the same,” she takes her right hand off my breast and flaps it around her mouth as if encouraging the right word to come forth. “I don’t know, Charmaine. He’s just not quite the same. They’ve got him on very strong medication. I just want you to be prepared.”

“I’m prepared,” I say, though I understand that I may or may not be. It’s hard to trust Phoebe’s impression of things. She makes a big deal about things that turn out not to be that important, and the things she thinks are no big deal, like her hands on my breasts, are awful in ways she can’t even guess at.

“They’ve got him on ‘mood stabilizers.’ So anyway, his mood is very stable, I guess, and that’s what everyone wants. But he looks different. Tired. And he doesn’t communicate well.”

Then both of her hands are gone. “There.” says Phoebe. All the parts of my body that have gathered up into my head migrate back to their regular places, and then she stands up, blocking the light from the lamp fixture on the wall. I grab my shirt and hold it in front of my breasts. “Go ahead and act like I’m killing you, Charmaine, but you can’t tell me that doesn’t feel better.”
Chapter 11

It’s Dr. Osborne who pulls up to school the next day, with Phoebe in the passenger seat. I’m standing out front, and I keep on standing there until Phoebe rolls down the passenger window and tells me to get into the car.

“The Pinto’s back in the shop,” she says. “Just for an overnight. I couldn’t reach Daze.”

“You couldn’t reach her at the retirement center?” I say, not moving toward the car. “You couldn’t borrow the Buick?”

“Dr. Osborne offered,” Phoebe says through her teeth, “which was very nice, and you’re being rude.”

Inside Dr. Osborne’s car, all the books have been piled on the floor behind the driver’s seat. I sling the butt purse in first then pull the door shut behind me, harder than I have to. Dr. Osborne nods at me as if he knows enough not to say hello out loud.

“Charmaine hasn’t seen her father in more than two weeks,” Phoebe says. Her voice is too cheerful for what she’s saying, which means she’s nervous. “She’s really looking forward to this. I was just telling Dr. Osborne that your father’s finally stabilized. It’s hard to find just the right medication.”

“A tricky business,” says Dr. Osborne, like he knows all about it. His ponytail, gathered at the nape of his neck, is longer than mine.
I stare out the window at the row of waiting busses. I have wanted to see my father, but not like this. Not in front of Dr. Osborne. Right now I wish I was sitting with Tracy, even with the threat of Cecil Grimes, headed on our slow rural route down to the river. Instead, we take the road to Clay’s Corner and then pick up a short stretch of highway to Exit 22, which takes us back a bit the way we came only further west, right into the sun. Already the days are getting shorter. Phoebe and Dr. Osborne flip down their sun visors at exactly the same time. They say nothing, which bothers me more than the talking. It’s as if they’re comfortable around each other when they have no good reason to be.

We drive deep into the horse farms, on the city side of the county. Then there’s a sign for the county west of Rowland, Beacon County, and then Phoebe’s pointing, saying, “That’s it,” and we’re pulling into a long drive for one of the prettiest buildings I’ve ever seen. It sits up on a knoll. It doesn’t look like a hospital. It looks like an old plantation home, with six white pillars out front and an overhanging roof on the side, also propped up by pillars, and when you drive through the side place a man comes out and parks your car.

“This is a porte cochere,” Phoebe says, as the three of us watch Dr. Osborne’s car disappear around back of the house. All you can really see, from where we stand, are green fields dotted with horses, rolling all the way out to the interstate where we turned off. Black fences segment the fields into large undulating
shapes. Every single tree, too, is ringed by its own tiny black fence, as if lassoed there, so that the horses can’t scratch themselves on the tree bark the way they like to. These kinds of farms hire men to just go around scratching horses all day, whenever they have an itch.

“Where do you want me, Phoebe,” Dr. Osborne says, and the way he says her name sounds gentle on purpose, like a retriever delicately holding a bird full of shot.

“There’s the nicest lobby,” Phoebe says, pressing a large square metal button on the side of the building. When a buzzer sounds she pushes open the heavy wooden door and we enter what looks like a rich person’s living room with brown leather sofas and an Oriental carpet. Part of the room is a reception area, with a large wooden enclosure and a low counter, like at the library, where a woman with glasses sits. Next to the reception area, two heavy oak doors are propped open onto a long hallway. A short-haired nurse in blue, standing in the hallway, waves and beckons to Phoebe, and Phoebe lifts a hand.

“See?” Phoebe says to Dr. Osborne. “It’s very kind of you to bring us, and I’m sorry about the wait. Charmaine, I’ll go in first then come get you. Stay here with Dr. Osborne.”

Dr. Osborne and I take seats at the opposite end of the long leather sofa. He’s wearing his cross of nails, which dangles between his knees as he leans forward to shift through the flyers on the coffee table. Residential Recovery. Mood Disorders. Manic Depression. Abundant Living. He offers me the one on Manic
Depression. It has the theater masks on the front of it, the happy and sad faces, and at first I think that’s why he chose it.

“The treatment has come a long way,” Dr. Osborne says as I hold the flyer. Phoebe hasn’t offered me a name for what’s wrong with my father, and even though I’ve never heard this term before, I know what both words mean. Dr. Osborne is watching me, though, so I don’t open the pamphlet. “How’re you two holding up down there at the river,” he asks.

“Great,” I say.

“Your mom’s got a lot on her plate.”

I stare down at the pamphlet picture. The masks with the empty eyes. I do not want to look at this man telling me things about my own mother like he knows her better than I do. Or about my father. Manic Depression.

Dr. Osborne sighs and sits back. “I’ve been thinking about my next play, Charmaine. Your Naomi and Ruth suggestion? Seth and I are going to perform the David and Absalom set in November, and then maybe I’ll get started writing another script.”

“My father’s a very good writer,” I say.

“I’ve read some of his work,” says Dr. Osborne, neither confirming nor denying that he’s a good writer.

“What are you a doctor of?”

Dr. Osborne matches his hands fingertip to fingertip. “I have a Doctorate of Education,” he says, pulsing his palms toward each other, “which I acquired in another life.” He’s speaking like Phoebe does in cryptic mode, like there’s an important
mystery behind what he’s not saying, and that fact that he knows it and I don’t makes him better than me. “And now I teach sermon delivery at the seminary.”

“And direct plays,” I say.

“And direct plays.”

“And help people out,” I say.

Dr. Osborne presses his palms together and narrows his eyes at me. They are icy blue, with pleated skin at the outer edges. “It’s true that I don’t mind helping out when someone needs help.”

I place the Manic Depression pamphlet back on the coffee table, and he spies the pen marks on my thumb. The earliest ones have faded, but altogether they make three rows of tracks that go from the heel of my thumb to the tip of it. I sigh and take my pen from the butt purse. I start another set of hatch marks at the bottom of my palm, a fourth row. *Inhabit me, O Lord God.* I’m still forgetting all the time, but I’m remembering that I have forgotten more and more often, too, since I can’t ignore my own hands. So I’m also starting more and more often.

“What’s that you’re keeping track of?” Dr. Osborne says.

I tuck my hand underneath my leg. “It’s personal.”

“Looks like a system of some kind.”

“It’s between me and my dad,” I say. “And me and God.”

“You must miss your dad. Seth’s dad has to be out on the road fund-raising while they’re on furlough. He misses his dad, too.”
“So you asked Seth to be in a play,” I say, “since his father’s away. And now maybe you’ll ask me to be in a play, too, since my father’s in—” I check the pamphlet on the table, the one with the picture of the house on the front “—residential recovery.”

“Is this how you talk to your mother at home? With all the pressure she’s under?” His voice is still calm, but there’s a finger of steel in it, like he’s been playing nice but is about to pull rank and remind me he’s in charge.

“My father is a man after God’s own heart.”

“So people say,” says Dr. Osborne.

“People say lots of things.”

Dr. Osborne raises his eyebrows and tilts his head to the side. This makes him look curious and unkind, all at the same time, which I wonder if he learned how to convey from his experience with plays.

“People say you should have gotten married.”

Dr. Osborne blinks at me and holds his face.

“My grandmother has your number.”

“Hah,” Dr. Osborne says, opening his mouth wide. But it’s not really a laugh. Over in the corner, the receptionist looks up. Then he says it again. “Hah,” and twists his mouth into a smirk. “Daze Peake.”

I want to rip her name right out of his mouth, and my name, and Phoebe’s, too. And even the words “your dad.” I want him not to say anything about me or anyone in my family, or to see any of
us, or to even know we exist. He untwists his mouth and sighs, like he’s going to say more, but I am no longer in his car, and he is not my father, and I do not have to hear anything I don’t want to, help or no help. I am on my feet and across the lobby before he can get out another word.

“Hold on a sec,” says the woman behind the desk, but I head through the double doors and down the long hallway, which is dark with waxed wood paneling and floors. Most of the doors are closed, except one which is lined with cabinets, like a kitchen. At the end of the hall I turn right and climb an old winding staircase, with an Oriental carpet runner, every step up jiggling my breasts painfully. A nurse is on her way down, not the same one I saw before, and she just nods and smiles at me. The lady from the front desk hasn’t followed, and neither has Dr. Osborne, so I slow down. At the top of the stairs I take the hallway back down the length of the house. There’s a sound of crying coming from one of the rooms, muffled through the wall. A deep, hopeless sound without any highs and lows. A sound that seems like it could go on forever.

At the end of the hall I push open double doors identical to the ones on the first floor, only these give way to the most dazzling room I’ve ever seen. Everything’s painted a gleaming white. The floorboards, the window casings. Even the baby grand piano is white lacquer. All the sofas and chairs, and the room seems full of sofas and chairs, have white slipcovers. It’s big and blank, like something out of a dream. It’s so quiet that
everything you can see and hear separates into itself. The low, distant crying. The shushing sound of Phoebe, who is sitting on one of the sofas along the wall, crossing her stockinged legs. The brown sport coat of the main beside her seems very brown.

“There she is,” Phoebe says, and the man gets to his feet. He is very tall, with a loose neck cinched in by a tight collar and tie.

“I’m Doctor Phillips,” he says.

“Where’s my father?”

“I thought she’d be seeing him,” Phoebe says to the doctor. “I told her so.”

“I understand,” says the doctor. “Unfortunately he’s not up for anything like that today.”

“I don’t need him to do anything, though,” I say. “There’s nothing he has to be up for.”

“We’ll try again Monday,” Phoebe says.

I stand in front of the sofa, my back to the windows blazing with sun. As my eyes adjust, the white room takes on a lavender cast. The ceilings are very high. I can still hear the crying, but just barely. It’s not subsiding, but it might be moving away from me. Or my ears might be throbbing.

“We’re having to make some medication adjustments,” the doctor says. “Do you know what a seizure is?”

“He had a seizure this afternoon,” says Phoebe, speaking at the same time as the doctor.
“He was responding well to a medicine we call Haldol, and today we had a setback,” says the doctor. “We’re trying something new, but it will take a while for him to adjust.”

“Maybe he shouldn’t be on anything,” I say. “He says it doesn’t feel right. He says he can’t hear the voice of God. And you’re making him cry.”

“I hear the crying, too,” says the doctor. “But that’s not your father.”

I know, in my stomach, that it is.

“Charmaine,” says the doctor. “Will you imagine something for me?”

I nod because I want to hear what he’ll say next, not because I have any intention of imagining anything I don’t want to. Not in this white room, with my father weeping nearby. I feel like I’ve stepped into another dimension, maybe the fourth one, the space/time one, like the girl in that book who is also looking for her father.

“What if most of your life you understood yourself to be one kind of thing. A cat, say. Every time you looked in the mirror, you’d see a cat. You cleaned yourself like a cat, acted like a cat, everything. Being a cat felt normal.”

“Like Titus,” Phoebe chimes in, as if I need an example to know what cat means.

“And then one day someone told you there was something wrong with your eyes. Nothing that couldn’t be fixed, though, and when you had them fixed, and then you looked in the mirror, you
didn’t see a cat anymore. You saw a dog. And you’d always been a dog, but what had been wrong with your eyes was getting in the way of your knowing it. So now you know that feeling like a cat wasn’t normal or real, even if it felt that way. Or you might feel that the new thing you see in the mirror is wrong, because it’s not what you know about yourself. It’s not the way you think you’ve ever been. So that what’s accurate, like how you’re really a dog, feels inaccurate at first, because you have known yourself to be a cat."

I look at Phoebe, but she is watching the doctor, dipping her chin at him, her mouth half open in a wary-looking underbite. For once, her expression mirrors my feelings exactly.

"It might take you some time to adjust to the new way you are. Only it’s not new, really, it’s just new to you. You might even feel some grief over the loss of what you thought you were," says the doctor. "In time, you might feel some regret, maybe, for things you did that you would not have done had you understood you were not a cat. Cat-like decisions you made that wouldn’t be appropriate for dogs. And if there was medication that could help you feel more like the thing you really are, then you might want to try it. Am I making sense?"

"Your father’s had a nervous breakdown," Phoebe says, as if summing up what the doctor means. "The medication calmed him down, then it gave him a seizure so now they have to find something else."
“Nervous breakdown is really not a term we use anymore,”
says the doctor. “It might be helpful to think of it in other
ways.”

“Manic Depression,” I say.

The doctor smiles in a kind of low-level, congratulatory
delight. It’s as if I, myself, am a cat, or a dog, who has
started making sounds that are close to human speech. “Close
enough,” he says. “Smart girl. Come again on Monday. I’m
confident he’ll be feeling a lot better.”

Phoebe lifts her hands into the air by her face, like she
gives up, then lets them fall to her thighs with a slap. “Okay,”
she says to the room in general. She pushes herself to her feet
and follows the doctor out of the room.

The crying gets louder as we approach the middle of the
hallway. I lag behind and when I get to the door where it’s
coming from I try the handle as quietly as I can. Then I try it
harder.

“Charmaine,” Phoebe says, spinning on her heel.

Then I’m knocking on the door, banging on it. The crying
stops for a second, then picks up again under the sounds of my
fist. I hear the murmur of a voice over the crying. “You locked
him in?”

“No,” says the doctor. “That’s not your father. It’s
another patient, seeing a doctor. And it’s not locked, it’s just
latched.”
“It is locked,” I say. “Dad,” I say into the door. Then I get down on my hands and knees and speak into the inch of space underneath it. “Dad, open the door.”

“It’s not him,” says the doctor, striding toward me.

“Charmaine, get up,” says Phoebe.

“Maybe he saw us pull in,” I say to Phoebe. “Maybe he saw you come in with Dr. Osborne and that’s why he’s crying.”

“That’s enough,” Phoebe says. To the doctor she says, “Our car broke down again this afternoon. Charmaine, get up now.”

The doctor puts his hands under my armpits to try to lift me up but I wrench my shoulders and throw them off. “It’s not your dad,” the doctor says again. “Listen. The medication doesn’t let him cry like that. It doesn’t let him feel bad at all. It gives him a little break from feeling bad. From feeling much of anything, really.”

In the butt purse, I find the envelope with the letters I’ve written during free-writing for the week, and I find my pen, and I write “Dad,” on the envelope and slide it under the door. Then while I have my pen out I make another hatch mark on my hand and I pray, I pray without ceasing, all the way down the stairs, then down the downstairs hallway, then under the porte cochere as we wait for Dr. Osborne’s car.

I pray most of the way home, too, trying to replace the sound of crying with the words in my head. Dr. Osborne says nothing to Phoebe about our interaction in the lobby. He just
asks how my father is, how David is, in a low voice meant for the front seat only.

Phoebe stares out over the fields as dusk falls. I get through the prayer three times before she answers.

“It’s hard to say,” is what she says. Then she takes a deep breath. “It does him a world of good to see Charmaine,” which stops me cold. My prayer, my heart.

“I’m sure it does,” says Dr. Osborne, just a tiny moment later than he should.

From the backseat I follow Phoebe’s gaze out over all the horse farms, which could really be one big horse farm that goes on and on. It’s hard to tell. The sun is burning on the horizon, large and pink but watchable, now, as the sun rarely is. I wonder if Phoebe believes it really would have done my father a world of good to have seen me, or if she knows for certain it would have made no difference at all. I don’t know who the lie is for, since we both know that I know better, and I don’t know what it could mean to Dr. Osborne, either way. Then I wonder if it’s for herself, and if a lie like that comes easily for Phoebe or if she has to talk herself into believing what she says, first, like I do, and then work hard at ways to make sure it comes true.
Chapter 12

The next day I have to take the bus into town after school and to stay with the Catterson’s at my own house. Mrs. Catterson answers the door wearing a blue sweatsuit and tennis shoes. Her wheat-colored hair is pulled back in a clip and she isn’t wearing makeup, which makes her face looks small.


I nod politely. Seth and Dr. Osborne can have each other and their stupid play, as far as I’m concerned.

“I’m sure Seth wouldn’t mind if you spent a little time in his room while I finish the kitchen floor,” Mrs. Catterson says. “That way you won’t get to watch more television than he does, which wouldn’t be fair. And I know you still have some things there you might want to check in with. I trust you’ll show Seth’s belongings the same regard he’s shown yours?”

“Okay,” I say, wondering what kind of regard he’s shown my things.

It’s weird to push open the door to my room. Some things are the same, like the yellow walls and the old iron bed that Phoebe painted white. But the white sheers at the window are gone, and the white bedspread is gone, too. Instead there’s a navy blanket for a bedspread, and what looks like a flat bed
sheet in a brighter blue strung across the window on a tension rod. In the corner is a trumpet in a metal stand, and my desk is covered with Seth’s books.

I close the door. On its back side, my full-length mirror is tilted askew because Seth has hung his jacket from the frame. I take the jacket off and throw it on the bed and the mirror straightens right up. I have not been alone with my full-length reflection since we moved to the river. What I expected was to look as pudgy as I feel, since my clothes are so tight. But now I can tell I’ve gotten taller, too. I lift up my shirt, careful of my sore breasts. Even though my stomach isn’t flat, and my hand-me-down Jordache jeans still cut into it, my waist looks narrower than I had imagined. I can see the hourglass Daze was talking about. I thought she was just saying it because she was my grandmother. While I’m at it, I lift up my bra and am surprised at how round and white my breasts look. Even though they feel so heavy, they don’t hang low and flap-like, the way Daze’s do, and they don’t have huge brown nipples surrounded by bumpy brown skin, like Phoebe’s. My nipples are small and pink. They don’t even look like they hurt, but they do.

I try not to look at my hair. If it looks bad, pulled into its tiny ponytail, then I am afraid I will cave in and try to make myself more attractive by cutting it again. I try not to look at my skin either, in case there are more pimples than I thought. I have them more often than some people at school, like Kelly-Lynn whose skin is clean and smooth every day, and I have
them less often than other people, like Mary-Kate, whose cheeks have overnight become so raw and red they look like they need to be bandaged. Some girls at school wear foundation make-up, like Daze does, but Kelly-Lynn doesn’t need to. And on Mary-Kate it would probably turn into some kind of infected paste. Phoebe says she will consider buying me makeup when I become more consistent with the soap and hot water, and witch hazel, if I let her keep extracting when she wants to, and if I can keep my own hands off my face. She doesn’t believe that I’m already doing everything she tells me and it doesn’t make a bit of difference, since every time she extracts I end up breaking out more, not to mention the red nail marks that keep showing for days.

In Seth’s room, my room, I put my clothes back together and kneel to look under the bed for the wooden gelatin box. It isn’t there. I stand up. Everything I usually keep on my four-shelf bookshelf has been crammed into the bottom two shelves, and now the top two hold Seth’s copies of the Chronicles of Narnia, identical to mine, below. They also hold his Hardy Boys books, and I am distressed to see two books by Madeleine L’Engle that I have never even heard of. I am outraged that they exist, have existed, without my knowing about them and that they belong to Seth, and that he has most likely read them. I want to read them and, at the same time, I don’t want to read them, just because he already has. And because he’s living in my room, and doesn’t have to go to school, or ride the bus, or know that people are talking about his father.
My box isn’t on the bookshelf, and it isn’t under the file box by the side of the desk which holds Seth’s school supplies. I am probably not supposed to look in the closet, but it is my closet, after all, and I have been looking at it, keeping things in it, for years. When I open the door it smells like something I should recognize but don’t, the way vegetables smell in the trash—familiar but not like they’re supposed to. It might be a pee smell, but I cannot believe that Seth, no matter how annoying he is, pees into my closet. Which is temporarily his closet, with his own clothes hanging there. But boys do weird things with their pee, like Cecil’s friends at school with the lockers.

Thinking about pee makes me think about penises, and how Seth has one and has it here with him in my room at all times, with its pee and its other potential functions. Whatever the smell actually is, I’m confident his penis, or his just being a boy, is behind it.

My box is on the top shelf, deeply into the closet, next to the wall. Even though I am taller, I am not tall enough to reach it, and I drag the desk chair over to stand on. I’m stretching deep into the closet, trying to pull the box out from under some things Seth has stacked on top of it when my knee brushes something hard and flat at the very back of Seth’s hanging clothes. I hit it again, with my knee, because it seems to be among his shirts, and when I kneel on the chair to investigate I find that he’s turned a jacket with a drawstring waist into a kind of knapsack, with the drawstring cinching it all the way
closed at the bottom. If you unzip the front of the jacket partway, you can see inside. It’s a bunch of paper bound with a big clamp, maybe a script, and there’s a file folder, too, and a smaller manila envelope.

“Charmaine?” Mrs. Catterson calls from the foot of the stairs. “You doing alright up there? I heard some moving around.”

“Fine,” I say, but my voice comes from the top of the room and I hear, through the closed door, the bottom stair creak. “I’m looking for my box,” I say, which is true. What I am also doing is grabbing the manila envelope out of Seth’s shirt with one hand and reaching for the gelatin box with the other. I plop myself into the desk chair as hard as I can and tuck the envelope firmly under my legs. “Found it!” I say as cheerfully as I can when Mrs. Catterson’s head pops in. I use both hands to lift the gelatin box in her direction.

“You know, I wondered about that,” Mrs. Catterson says. “I came across it under the bed, and I wasn’t sure what you used it for, so I put it up on that shelf so nothing would happen to it accidentally.”

“Thank you,” I say. And even though I would rather wait until I am alone, I lift the lid of the box in front of Mrs. Catterson to keep her attention away from the fact that I have been going through Seth’s closet.

“What sort of things do you keep in there?”

I lift out the postcard that my father sent me from the Holy Land, the Dead Sea with its lonely rim of sand-colored
mountains. I pick up Daze’s bone fountain pen from Niagra Falls, and right then I get the strange feeling the box has already been gone through. The contents are not taking up the space in a way I understand. This makes me feel a little less bad about the envelope I’m sitting on. I extend to Mrs. Catterson the plastic baggy with a shaving of wood the size of a nail file. “It’s from the cross,” I tell her. “It’s supposed to be, anyway. It might just be a symbol.”

Mrs. Catterson takes it from me and turns it over in the fading light from the window.

I rummage around for something that might satisfy her and hold up the empty Tic-Tac carton.

“Just empty like this?” Mrs. Catterson says, shaking it.

“It smells good.”

She pops the lid and gives it a dutiful sniff. “Very nice. Like Tic Tacs.”

The way Mrs. Catterson’s looking at me, I understand how weird of a thing this is for a person to keep. “Mostly just other stupid stuff,” I say.

“Listen,” says Mrs. Catterson, the way Phoebe does. Even though she is a long, willowy woman, without any fat on her, her hips spread out in a bony way that you can’t see when she’s wearing skirts, the wings of her pelvis straining her stretchy sweatpants. I make a mental note to ask Daze about Mrs. Catterson’s body type. She sits on the end of my mattress, Seth’s mattress.
“I just want you to know,” Mrs. Catterson says, “that I appreciate you being friends with Seth.” She blinks at me like she’s waiting for me to say something.

“Okay.”

“Seth hasn’t had a lot of experience with friends who are girls. And he hasn’t really gone to regular school. You’re kind of his first friend who is a girl. Except for his African playmates.”

“We’re not really friends,” I say, feeling guilty that she is giving me credit for something that isn’t true.

“Oh, I think you are. I’m pretty sure Seth considers you his friend.”

“Did he tell you that?”

Mrs. Catterson smiles. “Not exactly, dear. That’s not exactly the kind of thing boys go around saying. To their mothers.”

“Sometimes we disagree,” I say.

“That’s just the age.”

“A lot of the time,” I say.

“You’re a girl, he’s a boy,” says Mrs. Catterson. “And you’re both bright. Very bright.” Mrs. Catterson lifts both her feet from the bed and shows me the bottoms of her socks, which have leather patches sewn on them in the shape of soles. Shoe socks. She twitches her toes towards each other and away, like a girl. “I’m guessing it’s hard on you not having your own room, right now. On your mother, too.”
“We’re fine,” I say. “It’s actually good to be a part of Rowland County. It’s a good opportunity to spread the word outside of East Winder. My father says it’s a mission field in our midst. Like Ghana.”

“Well, not exactly like Ghana,” says Mrs. Catterson.

“Everywhere can be a mission field,” I say.

Mrs. Catterson unclips her hair and shakes it out, runs her fingers through it, then begins gathering it to put the clip back in place. It is longer than mine. Under her eyes she has tiny inflated half-circles.

“It must be hard on you with your father gone.”

I keep my eyes on the box in my lap. She hasn’t asked me a direct question, so it isn’t rude not to respond, even though she is an adult.

“When do you think he’s coming back?”

“I don’t know,” I say, and even though the doctor said the crying from behind the door wasn’t my father, that’s what comes into my head. That and the length and heaviness of the word residential on the pamphlet.

“Are you counting the days?” she asks, gesturing to the marks on my thumb.

“Yes,” I say. I root around in the box for a pen and make another mark. I try to pray the prayer but I can’t keep it in my head. There’s nothing wrong with Mrs. Catterson asking me when my father will come home, but it makes me want to pry my fingers under my rib cage, right through the skin, and crack it all open.
and say, “See? See? Is that what you wanted to know?” which doesn’t make any sense, even to me.

“Mr. Catterson and I were discussing psychiatric care the other night.” On some words, Mrs. Catterson’s voice gets thin and breaks into two wavering notes, almost like she’s trying to make a chord. Or like she has to cough, but she never does. “We were talking about what the Bible might have to say about tinkering with the human brain, whether that might be outside of God’s design for us, or maybe a new capacity the Lord has given us, through the intellect, to take care of ourselves, kind of like the invention of pasteurization. And maybe studying your father’s brain will help other people like him.”

“No one’s tinkering with his brain,” I say.

“Tinkering’s probably the wrong word.”

“And I don’t know how it could help other people like him,” I say. “Because there isn’t anybody else like him. Every person is one of a kind.” I can hear myself breathing, now, and each breath gets bigger and more desperate, fighting its way through my throat, which seems to be shrinking. I am either going to cry, or pass out, or burst through my skin.

Mrs. Catterson scoots to the edge of the bed and plants her feet on the floor.

“My father is a man after God’s own heart,” I say, and when I look up Mrs. Catterson is nodding. “Honey,” she says. “Honey, of course. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“I’m not upset,” I say with my squeezed voice.
She stands up in front of my chair and reaches her arms out to me like she wants to hug me, but I am not going to stand up. I can still feel the envelope I’m sitting on. She has to stoop over to hug me, and when she’s done I stay very still while she leaves the room in her leather shoe-socks and pulls the door almost but not completely shut behind her. I listen to her shoe-socks on the stairs, which is a sound so familiar to me that I would not even have noticed if I hadn’t been separated from it. I hear another sound I would not have said I cared about, that of the traffic at the conjunction of Main Street and North Maple, the steady slowing down and speeding up of engines at the two-way stop. I have a longing to go back in time, to be here in my room, with Phoebe and my father somewhere else in the house doing whatever it was they used to do that I didn’t pay enough attention to. Phoebe rolling her pantyhose into balls, or my father staying up all night in his study, receiving prophesy and recording it in his notebook to use in his writings for The Good Word. My longing is so deep that I understand how they came up with the term “homesick,” though I don’t know if anyone has ever felt that way sitting in a room that is still, technically, their own. In social studies we have been reading about immigrants, about how in Europe, during the war, countries invaded other countries and took them over, living in people’s houses and driving their cars and, our teacher said, much worse, with a look on her face that could only mean she was talking about rape, which Phoebe says is the worst possible thing that can happen to a woman. I always
thought the people in occupied countries would feel mostly anger about how unfair it was, and vengeful, especially if they were raped. But what I never knew to wonder about is how sad they might feel. I would not have said that sadness could keep you sitting motionless in a chair, in a room that used to be yours, listening to things that you didn’t even know you missed, things you wouldn’t have even said were yours to hear until after you discovered that they are not necessarily yours at all. I wonder if this is a feeling that shows up in a particular spot of the brain.

The days are getting shorter, and even though it’s only about 5:00 when Seth gets back from his session with Dr. Osborne, already it’s nearly dark. Through a crack in the bed sheet that covers his window, the electric cross on the water tower flickers on, and I have missed that, too. I’m impressed with how calmly I move, now, considering how numb my rear end is from sitting. I lift the top off the gelatin box again, with all the things in there that mean nothing to anyone but me, and I deposit the manila envelope, which I see is unmarked, inside. I don’t try to cover it with any of my things. I just close the lid, drag the chair back to Seth’s desk, and head down my own familiar stairs. The prayer comes to me inside my head, and for once I feel like maybe it’s been there the whole time and now someone’s just turning up the volume. Like how I can sometimes hear my own heartbeat in my ears even though I know it’s always there. *Inhabit me, O Lord God.*
“What were you doing in my room?” Seth asks when I enter the kitchen. He is already seated at the table, and his mother is bringing him a glass of juice, just like he’s a little kid.

I hold up my box. “I was just taking back something that was already mine.” I don’t even feel guilty about the envelope anymore. You could make an argument, probably, that everything in a room that is mine belongs to me anyway. Officially. Legally.

“You better not have touched my stuff,” Seth says.

“Seth,” says Mrs. Catterson.

“I saw your trumpet,” I say, “but I didn’t touch it. I don’t even know how to play.” Reasonability is on my side, here, and I use it. When Mrs. Catterson ducks into the pantry, I whisper, “Your stuff smells bad.”

“It does not.”

“Does not what?” says Mrs. Catterson, shuffling back into the room on her sock shoes.

“Why did you let her into my room?”

“Why am I getting backtalk?” says Mrs. Catterson. “Is that what you’d like me to tell your father when he gets back tonight? That you gave me backtalk?”

“Where is Mr. Catterson,” I ask sweetly, as if to demonstrate how Seth should speak to his mother and adults in general. Across the table, my table, he glowers.

“Oh, Mr. Catterson is fundraising,” she says tiredly. “My least favorite part about furlough. I guess your mom and I are both getting a taste of what it must be like to be a single
parent, and let me tell you, Charmaine, it’s no picnic. It’s just not the way things were meant to be.”

On the way home to the RV-cabin, Phoebe is quieter than usual, but even though she’s the one who’s being quiet, she says, “You’re quiet tonight,” as we pass the last of two stoplights and the road begins to get darker. The cross on the water tower shines in the passenger side mirror.

“So are you,” I say.

“I was just thinking about last night,” she says. “I’m sorry it was upsetting, but I’m glad you’re beginning to see for yourself the way things are. I really can’t shield you any longer.”

It’s this thing that happens with her voice, like she can’t help being pleased with herself for having something important to say. Pleased even if the important thing is upsetting.

“Shield me,” I say with full attitude, “from what?”

“Oh, what your father’s going through.”

“I know what he’s going through.”

“From his letters?”

I keep his letters in the butt purse. It is possible she has found them, and read them, or that she reads them before she gives them to me and just puts them in a new envelope, but I am not going to give her the satisfaction of becoming upset about this possibility.

“And I didn’t read them, either,” Phoebe says, “so don’t start getting all justified.”
I roll down my window. It’s a cool October night and the air smells like wet leaves from the rain. I can still see the lit-up cross, smaller and smaller in the distance, and I keep my eyes trained on it.

“Must you?” Phoebe says.

I don’t answer and she sighs, then rolls down her window, too. Soon I am cold, but I won’t roll my window back up because that would be admitting I shouldn’t have rolled it down in the first place. I fold my arms tightly across my sore chest. I can feel the way my jacket, too thin for the weather and too tight to be worn over my sweater, pulls at the sleeves.

Phoebe rolls up her window. “Had enough?” she says. “It’s colder than you thought, isn’t it?”

“It feels great,” I say, and unwrap my arms. I lean my head out into the cold air.

“You’re going to be sick if you don’t pull your head in out of that air,” Phoebe says. “Remember how you and I used to be best friends? Remember”—here she reaches over to poke me in the stomach—“how I used to come into your bedroom and tickle you at night?”

I shift away from her hand. We’re already passing the gas station Tracy Poague lives behind. It’s still open, and tonight there’s a pull-behind horse trailer parked in the dirt, hiding the cinderblock house in back. I like knowing that I’ve been inside Tracy’s house and Phoebe doesn’t even know it. I like that she has no idea of any of the three county people God laid on my
heart for Operation Outreach. Except maybe Cecil, who everyone sees.

“I know he writes to you about not hearing the voice of God.”

The rain has picked up outside, and my window is still all the way down. I am getting wet, but it’s better than being enclosed with Phoebe when she’s talking about my father.

“You want to know what I want to know?” She hits the steering wheel with the heels of both hands, then grabs it. We are on the river road, after all, and it’s dangerous. “Well?”

“What?”

“What I want to know, is when is it my time to question something? Or, hey, even when do I get to say, ‘the voice of God told me to do this,’ or ‘the voice of God told me to do that?’ When do I get a break from my life, from my responsibilities, to figure out what’s the voice of God and what’s a chemical imbalance in my brain?”

“What’s stopping you,” I say.

“What’s stopping me?” She sighs. Her shoulders have been slumping and she draws herself up and forces them straight, her arms braced against the wheel. “I don’t like the spirit of your question,” she says. “Your attitude. But the question in itself isn’t a bad one.”

Now we’re descending towards the cabin and she slows to 20 miles an hour. Driving this road in the dark, in the rain, takes most of her concentration. Built right into the curve of one of
the switchbacks is another little set of buildings, a one-room boarded up clapboard house with a porch and a huge square antenna mounted on the roof, another rusted out trailer, and an open lean-to half-full of wet, split wood. A blue television light flickers from the one window that’s not boarded over.

“I don’t know how those people don’t wash away in this weather,” Phoebe says.

“It’s on rock.”

“What do you mean, it’s on rock.”

“It’s built on the limestone,” I say. Then, “You know, like the wise man who built his house upon the rock? As opposed to the foolish man that built his house upon the sand?”

“Really?” Phoebe says. “I never noticed that before.”

“They’re up high, too. The river doesn’t get up that far when it floods.”

“They’re sitting pretty, then, I guess. Exterior appearances notwithstanding.”

I like it when she says things like this. Things that are a little sarcastic. But it’s a calm spot in a storm, not a change in the weather pattern. When we snake down to the valley floor, clear of the switchbacks, she continues: “And even taking myself out of the whole equation. Let’s just say, for example, that I don’t get to wonder the same things your father does. Let’s just say that I, as the Apostle Paul himself suggests, have been put on this earth just to listen to and believe anything my husband, your father, as the head of this household, says about God. Are
we just to overhaul our lives again and again based on communication I’m not privy to?”

“If you were privy to the communication, then it wouldn’t be faith, though,” I say, because it’s scary to hear Phoebe talk like she doubts everything. “God told Abraham to kill Isaac and then he told him not to,” I remind her. It’s one of my father’s favorite Old Testament stories. “All Abraham had to do is obey. He didn’t have to worry about why.”

Phoebe nods slowly, rocking her whole upper body towards the steering wheel. Our headlights catch the edge of the short gravel drive to the cabin, then, as we turn, they catch the cabin. “You forgot to leave the light on,” Phoebe says. “Again.” She cuts the engine and I roll up the window. “Hold on a sec,” she says as I put my hand on the door. She takes the keys out of the ignition and fiddles with them, trying to find the house key by feel. With only a dim light from the kitchen window of the people next door, it is too dark to see much. You can’t even really see the rain, but you can hear it murmuring against the windshield.

“What if God told me to sacrifice you?” Phoebe says.

I open my mouth but nothing smart comes out.

“Honestly, Charmaine, I try. I don’t hear the voice of God, so I try to have faith. You think I liked living on faith alone? Charging a trip to the Holy Land on Master Card? But your father is a sincere person, and whatever else he may be, he’s not a liar. I have even felt special, like maybe God chose me to be
with a person who hears the voice of God because I had special understanding, or could accept mysteries, like Mary, when she found herself pregnant even though she was still a virgin. I’m sure the whole town was talking about that, too. I liked that God told your father to marry me; I could accept that God gave your father messages for other people, sometimes messages he himself didn’t understand. I felt reassured when people responded well, and when they didn’t I accepted that the Lord’s messages can be hard to hear. Then he starts up with the fasting and the rest. And I didn’t know what to make of it, but your father’s an exceptional man, a man after God’s own heart, as your grandmother likes to say. And if God tells him to fast who am I to say he shouldn’t, and he tells me the history of fasting, and all the cultures that fast, and each time he goes off on a fast I pray to the Lord for strength. Because every time your father fasted he came back with a new idea. And I have accepted it all. And now your father, who has run his life by the voice of God, admits he can’t hear it anymore now that they’ve slowed down his brain to what the doctors agree is a normal pace. He still prays to God, but hearing the voice? Nothing doing. Or not the way it used to be, like someone whispering in his ear, he used to say. So what was it he was hearing all those years, that’s what I’d like to know.”

“He’s having a dark night of the soul,” I say, but it doesn’t stop her.
“Because other people, other Christian people I could name, thought that living on faith alone was pretty weird. Thought it was a pretty strange thing for God to tell someone with a family to quit an honest paycheck and trust they would all be taken care of. What if we’d had an emergency? What if you’d contracted leukemia?”

“I didn’t,” I say, thinking of the child cancer patient I once saw on television with her huge bald head.

“That’s not the point. And the things he tells you. There are some things you simply should not share with children.”

“You share a lot,” I say.

“Oh you think so? You might be surprised. There’s plenty I keep to myself these days.” She reaches up and turns the rearview mirror to her face. Something about the way she moves her chin to the side and blinks at her reflection, like she’s keeping a secret with it, is new, and I don’t like it.

“Like about Dr. Osborne?”

She returns the mirror to its original position, frowning at it and making minor adjustments until she has it where she likes it. The darkness seems lighter, now, a dim green, and there’s a moving shadow of the rain on Phoebe’s face. We look like we’re watching a movie in the seminary auditorium. She turns towards me, a slow swivel, and meets my eyes full-on. “Where is that coming from?” She sounds less shocked and outraged than I expected. Mostly she sounds curious.

“Nowhere.”
“Morris, Dr. Osborne, is a brother in Christ, and there’s nothing in the world inappropriate about support from a brother in Christ.”

“What about the brothers in Christ who aren’t bachelors,” I say. “What about the sisters in Christ?”

“That sounds just like Daze. Bachelors. She’s making a big deal out of nothing.” Phoebe sighs and shuts off the car. The rain hitting the windshield sounds more solid than water, as if the drops hit and stick and spread out a little, like big dollops of pudding. You can see the shape each drop makes when it hits the glass, before it disappears into the rest of the wetness.

“He’s a very brilliant man, Charmaine, with a PhD, do you know what that is? And he’s very articulate. And he knows your father. We talked when he drove us home and there is nothing in the world to hide about it. Dr. Osborne is a man of God, and I am a woman of God.”

“A defensive woman of God,” I say.

“That mouth of yours will get you into trouble.”

I try to imagine Mrs. Catterson and Seth talking to each other this way. The loneliest thing about it is that there’s no way out, once it starts. I have to say the next mean thing, or I feel like I will disappear.

The rain is letting up, and I place my hand on the door to open it.

“I’m not finished with you,” Phoebe says.
I imagine that I am Kelly-Lynn, and I let everything drain out of my face, all the irritation and bad attitude. I relax my mouth into what I hope is a bland, pleasant expression, but it is hard. The irritation and bad attitude keep me from feeling scared, and sad, and it’s a fight to keep a smooth surface, harder than being mad. It’s like I’m in water, and underneath there are these feelings, like bars of soap, that want to bob up and break the surface. And there are too many of them, and I only have two hands.

“What’s wrong with you,” Phoebe says. “What’s the matter with your face?”

I blink at her and shake my head pleasantly.

“You want to know what we talked about? Me and Dr. Osborne? We talked about how there’s more than one way to look at things. You can look at things like in Biblical times, where God speaks to people right in their heads, and tells them to do things like part the Red Sea, or build an arc, or slaughter their own children, or, for that matter, to slaughter lambs and smear the blood on doors. Or maybe--and yes, Dr. Osborne suggested this to me, so what--maybe you can take the idea that God gave us a mind to figure things out on our own, and if we look to him for guidance chances are we’ll figure out what he wants us to figure out.”

“But some people are smarter than others,” I say. “If God gave us brains to figure everything out, doesn’t that mean the
smart people would figure things out better than the dumb people?"

"There are always leaders, Charmaine. It’s called a gift. The gift of leadership."

"What about when one leader figures it out one way and another leader uses their brain that God gave them but they figure out things another way? Like, if Daddy didn’t hear the voice of God, but he figured out with his head a reason God wanted us to live on faith, but you figured out a reason in your head that God didn’t want us to live on faith. Or Dr. Osborne told you he figured out a reason that God didn’t want us to. Who would be right if you were all using your God-given brains to figure it out?"

Phoebe pinches the bridge of her nose like she has a headache. "My point," she says, "the point I started to make, is that I am your mother," Phoebe says, "and it’s an unnatural thing for a mother to kill her own child. You can’t tell me your feelings wouldn’t be hurt if I took you out in the woods to sacrifice you. Things are different now than in Biblical times. Like divorce. Dr. Osborne says we can look at it and say, what did divorce mean during those times, and what does it mean during these times?"

The word divorce hangs in the air between us, delicate as a bubble. If I touch it, if it touches anything, it will burst and cover everything.

"Are you listening?" she asks. "What did I just say?"
“Things are different now than in Biblical times,” I recite in a sing-song voice. It’s the voice of Little Marcy, who I used to listen to narrate Bible stories on a record before I fell asleep. Only the way I say it is laced with something poisonous.

Phoebe sucks in her breath. “I wish you could tell me,” she says, “just to let me in on the big secret, what I ever did to you for you to talk to me the way you do. Seriously, Charmaine. At the time I most need your support. Families in crisis have to stick together.”

“Isn’t Daddy your family?”

“He’s my husband.”

“Isn’t that family?”

“I’m doing everything I can to understand your father,” Phoebe says.

“But isn’t he your family?”

“We’re family. All of us. Even Daze is our family, if just by marriage.”

“She’s my family by more than marriage. I’m her blood kin.”

“Don’t talk like that. ‘Kin.’ You’re picking up the way they talk down here. My point is about support, anyway.”

“My point,” I say, is that you’re the one talking to another man about divorce when your husband’s in the hospital. Do you call that support?”

Then she slaps me. I don’t see it coming, and her open hand catches me full on the face. “Listen to you.” I can feel her spit. “When did you become such a little viper?”
The world stops for two seconds and then everything becomes orderly, clear. I don’t feel like crying, not even a little. I feel calm.

Phoebe recovers fast. “I’m sorry.” She claps her hands over her own face. “I’m so sorry.”

“Can I get out of the car, now?”

“Yeah,” she says, which is a word she never says. She believes you should “let your yes be yes and your no, no,” a verse she uses for saying “yes” and “no” properly; she also uses the verse as the reason never to swear or promise.

A couple fat drops catch me on the way in to the cabin. Phoebe stays in the car, and I fumble with my key and let myself in. It feels too late to start my homework, and I can’t even remember anything about school at this point, despite the fact that I spent the first eight hours of my day there. Titus is not inside, and I see, with some panic, that I have forgotten to leave the window open over the sink. I wrench it open and call for him out into the rain.

In the tiny bathroom I stand in the shower to change into my nightclothes. I brush my teeth and wash my face and soak a cotton ball in witch hazel and wipe my nose and chin. My cheek is red from where Phoebe slapped me. I know that the way I was speaking to Phoebe was ugly. But the part of me that feels like I deserved the slap also feels like she deserved what I said.

When I push open the accordion bathroom door, Phoebe has already spread up the narrow tweed couch with my sheets, pillow
and a blanket, which I usually have to do myself. She’s standing by the kitchen sink, looking out into the night and holding a plastic cup of water.

“Titus is outside somewhere,” I say. “I forgot to leave the window open.”

“He’ll come back,” she says, nodding at her reflection in the window. “I don’t expect you to understand this. Nothing happened that was wrong between Dr. Osborne and me. I don’t know what’s going to happen with your father, but it won’t be because I have been seeing another man.”

I nod, even though she’s not looking at me.

“But you know what? I can’t deny it felt good. Maybe that’s wrong in itself, and maybe it’s wrong to tell you this, but I can’t deny it felt good to talk to a man and have a man listen to what I had to say. Do you know the last time your father showed the tiniest bit of interest in anything I had to say? He never even knows when I’m in the room. So it felt good to talk to Morris. Dr. Osborne. I’m sorry about that. That in itself is probably not okay to feel. Not when I’m still married. And if you don’t mind, I would really appreciate it if you didn’t tell your grandmother.”

Phoebe is still facing her reflection. Now she downs the rest of her water and upends the cup in the drain. I crawl under the covers.

“I know the two of you are close,” Phoebe says. “I know you tell her more than you tell me.”
“I won’t tell her.”

“Okay,” Phoebe says. “Thank you for that. Don’t worry about Titus. I’m very sorry I raised a hand to you.”

Instead of washing up in the bathroom, instead of pulling the curtains and changing into her night clothes in front of me, she climbs the built-in ladder to the loft, clothes and all. “You can turn out the light whenever you’re ready,” she says.

And because for once she hasn’t asked me for the goodnight hug, hasn’t told me she loves me and waited for me to say it back, I feel like I could tell her, right now, that I love her. And suddenly I want to tell her. And also to say that it would make me feel bad, it would make me feel terrible, if she tried to sacrifice me. I want to tell her so badly that it swells up behind my mouth and eyes, the wanting to say it, but I don’t know what saying it would do at a time like this, what it would encourage, so I keep it to myself and turn out the light.
It’s still raining Saturday morning, and Titus has still not come home, and Phoebe is brooding. Maybe about last night, maybe about my father. Over cereal, she says nothing.

“Are you not speaking to me?” I say.

“No.”

“You are not not speaking to me?”

“Correct,” she says, biting off the word.

The Pinto is out of the shop again, though it coughs black smoke as she starts it, and trails black smoke into the rain as she drives off to town to run errands.

The rain continues slow and heavy, like weeping. No storms. I put on my dirty Jordache jeans and a dirty shirt and head outside to look for Titus, even though he’s probably holed up somewhere dry, under someone’s house or car, or even in one of the caves in the limestone my father has told me about. When my father isn’t talking about God, he’s talking about nature, and I miss this. He’s told me that bats cling to the ceilings of these caves like furry, upside-down carpet. You can get bitten by a bat and not even know it, he says, because their teeth are thinner than needles. Bats carry rabies, and Titus may not have had his rabies booster last year, because he was an indoor cat. If I find him, if he comes back, I’m going to make a stronger case for keeping him inside. No matter how small the trailer cabin is or how much a litter box would smell.
The rain is churning the river into a rushing brown froth. Our wooden dock frets against the bank and groans as I step out onto it. Tate’s Bridge hangs high in the corner of my vision, and I try to avoid looking up and having to see, again, how far of a fall it would be. The river chops up against the rough edges of the bank, and things stick there—twigs, a plastic bag, leaves, but nothing that looks like a dead cat. The rain soaking through my clothes is cold, but the wetter I get, the warmer it feels. Raindrops track rivulets through my hair, tickling my scalp.

“Titus,” I call, but in the rain the sound dies two feet in front of my face. I cup my hands to make a megaphone. “Kitty kitty.”

I hike back across the lawn and start down the river road in the opposite direction of the bridge. If I were a Catholic, I could petition a specific saint to help me find him. A saint of pets, or lost things. It seems like a helpful idea, even though of course it would be praying to a false god. I wipe at the pen marks on my thumb. The earliest of them have already faded to pale blue. I am not a success at prayer without ceasing, but without it I don’t know how to pray at all, anymore. I don’t know how to talk to God without tipping him off that there are things that are more important to me, now, than him, like my father, like Titus, like life going back to the way it was before, the same kind of longing for the past that turned Lot’s wife into a pillar of salt. I’m afraid that if I pray God will know how much I want these things and will take them away even more than he
already has. To make sure I think of him as the most important of all. Of course I know that the secrets of my heart are exposed to God as soon as they form. You cannot hide from him. Maybe what I should be praying is for God to help me begin to feel like he is the most important thing, more important than my father coming home, than Titus, the same way God was more important to Abraham than Isaac was, and in the end, because Abraham proved it, God didn’t take Isaac away after all. So I pray for that, quickly, before I start to wonder if I’m sincere enough, then I pray for God to work on the hearts of my three Operation Outreach people, so that I will have encouraging progress to share with my father, then I pray Inhabit me, O Lord God and try to muster up some faith that this will happen, or is happening, because with more than two hundred hatch marks on my hand for effort, I still don’t feel any more inhabited, and though I know it is sinful to pray with expectation, I definitely didn’t expect things to get worse and worse the harder I worked at it. I wonder if there’s a medicine I can take that does the opposite of what they’re doing to my father. Something that speeds my brain up instead of slowing it down, something that allows me to hear God’s voice and to pray without ceasing, even while I go about doing everything else. I rub my hands against my jeans, scrubbing off the ink as best I can to make a clean space for starting over.

The wind pushes the rain into sheets across the road. Even the inside of my ears are wet, now, and I’m getting chilly again. Titus could be anywhere. He could be up a tree, and there are
hundreds of trees. I call for him a couple more times, then turn and walk in the other direction, back past the trailer cabin and down river, right up to the concrete foot of the bridge. The foot itself is twice as tall as I am, and bigger than the whole trailer cabin, and underneath my palms its surface is cool and rough. I swear I can sense, more than I have ever sensed the presence of God, the presence of the bridge, like a current of existence running through every point of its construction and right through me, too. It’s not hard to imagine why people are drawn to it, why they might want to jump from it, even. I close my eyes and whisper Inhabit me, O Lord God, but it feels like I am talking to the bridge itself.

Back in the trailer cabin I peel off my wet clothes, pat myself down with a towel, and slip my nightgown over my aching breasts. The rain beats hard against the tin roof. It has soaked through the towel under the open window, and I wring it out in the sink. My wooden box lies on the passenger seat where I left it last night. I’ve forgotten all about the manila envelope from Seth’s closet, and when I open it carefully, a short stack of pictures spills out onto my lap. I’m thinking maybe they’ll be naked pictures, but I can’t even tell what the one on top is supposed to be. It’s red and brown and black, and there are some stringy things, and it glistens where the flash hits it like something wet. The next picture is of the same thing, only from further away, and it looks like some of the black is oil spilled on pavement somewhere, then I know it’s blood, not oil, and on
top the blood is some kind of mangled carcass, like the freshly
dead deer my father and I found in the woods after wildcats had
run off with great pieces of it. There are shreds of cloth mixed
in, and then the next picture is of the whole thing and below the
carcass part is a pair of legs in jeans, lying sideways on the
pavement, and the shreds of cloth are what’s left of a shirt.
It’s a picture of a person. What used to be a person. I don’t
know how I didn’t see it before, but now, where the face should
be, I see upper teeth. A closed eye. There is no lower jaw
anymore at all. I don’t know how I didn’t see the eye and teeth
first thing, because there they are in the first picture, which I
now understand to be what’s left of a human face.

Besides the deer I have only ever seen one other dead
thing, when Titus brought me a mouse he killed. It looked like a
tiny gray shoe, and the possibility that it might recover and
begin moving made it seem more still than anything I had ever
seen. But it was definitely dead, because after I slid a piece of
paper underneath it and deposited it in the grass outside, I
checked again the next morning and it was still there, and when I
nudged it with my toe it had turned stiff. And the person in this
photo is even more definitely dead.

It wouldn’t be so bad if you couldn’t tell the thing you’re
looking at had been a person, but you can. And now I see
something else in the picture, on the asphalt close to the boot,
and I’m leaning with my nose close to the photograph, when I
discover it’s a thumb and have to lurch to the sink to throw up my breakfast.

The fourth picture, though, I’ve seen before. It’s the cut up baby pieces that come out of the vacuum when a woman has an abortion. They’re at the bottom of a silver mixing bowl, and I know what they are because this is one of the pictures Dr. Osborne blew up into a poster to hold in front of the abortion clinic in Lexington, and he loaned it to Connie Bowls for a seminar on abortion at First Community. And even though the picture is gross, I am already a little bit used to it.

The last photo is the naked one. It’s a very white body, with the entire torso cut open, right down to the privates, which is how you can tell it’s a woman. The skin is peeled back from the middle, and the ribs are gone, and all the organs show, wet and glistening and smaller, relative to the rest of the body, than I would have expected. You can’t tell from the picture how old the woman was or how she died, and you can’t see her face. Her arms and hands lie at her sides, and her legs have rotated outward just a little, and the privates are so close to the camera that the suggestion of them comes through the dark curly hair.

But what gets to me, what I am still staring at when Phoebe pulls into the driveway, are the breasts. They remain attached to the skin of the woman’s chest, only the skin is stretched inside out, up over her neck and chin. The breasts are all turned around, on the underside of the skin, now. Even after I stuff the
photos back into the envelope, and the envelope into the butt purse before Phoebe comes in, this last one stays with me. It’s as if I’ve taken the picture into my eyes and now I can’t not see it, and it’s as if, also, the pain in my own breasts is connected somehow to the breasts in the picture. Slumped out of shape onto the shoulders, half underneath the inside-out skin. Nipples pointing towards the opposite walls of the room as if ashamed to watch the excavation below.

I’m still thinking about the pictures on Sunday night in the Upper Room. We have pulled our chairs and beanbags into a circle, a deep one, with multiple rows, around five buckets of soapy water.

Pastor Chick and Conley, who have lugged the buckets from the downstairs men’s room, now stand over them, waiting, while we stare at the buckets, too embarrassed to look anywhere else. We are barefoot. Our socks and shoes sit in sad little pile beside us. This has already lasted five full minutes. I’ve made sure to position myself across the room from Seth, and every time I sneak a glance at him, the light hits his glasses, as if he’s moved suddenly, afraid to be caught watching me back.

“How can we accomplish Operation Outreach if we are not a unified body?” asks Pastor Chick. “If we are not willing to humble ourselves enough to wash the feet of our brothers and sisters in Christ? Anyone remember John 13?”
I know John 13. Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. I know he says, “Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.” But I keep my mouth closed.

“People,” says Pastor Chick. “Am I to believe that not one of you needs to wash the feet of another? Someone you have sinned against with angry words? Angry thoughts? Jealousy?” Pastor Chick throws up his hands in the touchdown sign. “Maybe you’re all perfectly okay with one another. Maybe I’m way off base. Maybe we’re ready to bring people into our own body just as it is. No purification, no cleansing, required. That would be remarkable, people,” he says, but we are meant to understand that he doesn’t believe this is so.

I could approach Seth. I could tell him I stole his pictures, that I hate him for living in my house. I could humble myself by washing his feet, which would probably please God and give Operation Outreach a huge boost. The carpet of the Upper Room is made up of four shades of blue that from a distance looks like one. I have never looked this closely at it before. I do not want to wash anyone’s feet, and I do not want anyone washing mine. Even if it means letting down Pastor Chick, even if it means placing Operation Outreach in jeopardy, which might put my father’s mission in jeopardy, which might discourage him, even if I know for a fact that if my father were here he would be totally behind the washing of feet, as Jesus did. I wiggle my toes guiltily but stop before anyone sees it as an invitation.
“Maybe we’re just that pure already, folks. And,” he strokes his new beard and chuckles, which is not a very nice sound, “and if that’s the case then you have my sincere congratulations. Never before have I encountered such a Godly group. If that’s the case then all I can say, people, is ‘go get ‘em. What are you waiting for? If we’re all that pure, to a person, then this church should be downright throbbing with people. This room should be putting the great revival of 1973 to shame. I can’t see into your hearts, people. I’ll just have to trust that everyone here is pure. That no one’s feeling too, I don’t know, too manly, to wash the feet of another. That none of our godly ladies feel it’s, I don’t know, too gross to touch the feet of another. But I can only speak for my own heart, and this heart of mine is holding a resentment. Sometimes, brother Conley, I resent your god-given musical ability.”

Now that we all have somewhere to look, we look at Conley as he stands up. His eyes shift from Pastor Chick to the buckets, to the silent room, and back to Pastor Chick, who kneels, now, at Conley’s feet. Which are enormous.

“Maybe I should sit down,” says Conley, and he sits down again.

I did not believe the Upper Room could get any quieter, but it does. I am afraid even to breathe, and I am afraid to look around to check if other people are still breathing.

“Give me your foot.” Pastor Chick holds out his hand and Conley plants a heel, large as an apple, in the palm. “See,
people? This isn’t so bad.” He speaks down into the bucket of soapy water as he feels around for the sponge.

Conley’s eyes are squeezed shut. I feel for him, for the impossibility of flight. I want to create a distraction, to cry out or faint so that I can stop the foot washing ceremony and spare Conley, a person I hardly know, this feeling I know well. Exposure.

Pastor Chick is not a natural. He handles Conley’s feet, first one and then the other, like he has never washed anything in his life. He yanks them one way, then the other, attempting to clean between toes. Water splashes everywhere.

On his pinched, enduring face Conley manages a grim smile. “Thanks, brother,” he says when Pastor Chick has finished. He removes his feet from the bucket and rests them on the blue carpet, his feet outlined in a darker, wetter blue.

Pastor Chick stands and looks relieved. He wipes his wet hands down the front of his jeans. “See? Not the end of the world,” he says. “Not the end of the world at all.”

We are given some time to consider the washing of feet, and during this time, Pastor Chick calls upon us individually to stand, barefoot, and share our progress with Operation Outreach. Have we prayed? Have we invited? Have we taken advantages of all openings? The Main Event, after all, is Friday night.

“I haven’t seen my people,” says Mary-Kate. “But I will next week.”
“Fair enough,” says Pastor Chick. “Keep on lifting them in prayer.”

“I invited my people to eat lunch with me,” says the angelic looking Sarah, “and I led prayer. And I invited them for Friday, and I invited them to prayer meeting at school, too.”

“Terrific,” says Pastor Chick.

“And,” Sarah sets her mouth grimly, “I think I’m ready to wash some feet.” We all watch as she approaches Matt Brumfield, whom everyone knows she broke up with because she dreamt he was smoking cigarettes. Matt blushes deeply as Sarah kneels before him.

“Praise God,” says Pastor Chick, encouraged. “Charmaine Peake?”

I stand in my bare feet on the blue carpet. “I invited two of my people. People from the county. I gave them the flyers but I don’t know if they’re coming.”

“That’s a good start,” says Pastor Chick.

“And I try to pray all the time.” I raise my hand as if to offer the new row of hatch marks as evidence, then drop it to my side. “I really try. And the third person,” I take a deep breath as I remember Cecil’s threats on the bus, “has been talking to me a lot more.”

“That’s joy to the heart of God,” says Pastor Chick, and I contemplate what this might mean. When he gets to Seth, and Seth stands up, the glasses glint my way, and I get ready for him to say something about his people, which are me, my father and my
mother, something about one of his people being in the hospital, or being a prophet. Something anyone would recognize. But then he stammers and glances in my direction again, and I think about the pictures I have with me in the butt purse, and I realize he is worried.

“I don’t know,” Seth says.

I lift the butt purse from the floor into my lap. I imagine Seth looking at the pictures, at the woman with the sad, peeled breasts. I unzip the purse and it makes a loud sound in the quiet room.

“How about with the Main Event?” says Pastor Chick. “Any luck?”

“I guess,” says Seth. He shifts from one foot to the other, like a young boy, then sits down hard.

I zip the purse closed, still watching him, though he keeps his head bent. More than anything, I feel curious about what just happened, what I’ve done. But it’s an inviting curiosity on the edge of becoming something else, something purposeful, like the faint promise of greater understanding and the shadowy reaches of what, in my fallen human condition, I might be willing to do with it.
In English, Mrs. Teaderman demonstrates how-to speeches by conducting an experiment. The freewriting assignment for today is to write a “how-to” paragraph for making a peanut butter sandwich. It seems easy enough, but when we’re finished, Mrs. Teaderman pulls a jar of peanut butter, some paper towels, a plate, a knife and a loaf of bread from a grocery bag and sets it up on the table at the front of the room.

“Now,” she says, “who wants to read their ‘how-to’ while I follow directions?”

The first boy who raises his hand tells her to put the peanut butter on the bread and then mash it together, and Mrs. Teaderman sets the whole closed jar of peanut butter on top of the loaf of bread that’s still sealed in plastic.

“No,” says the boy. “You know what I mean.”

“Use the knife,” says a girl in the first row.

“That wasn’t in the ‘how-to,’” says Mrs. Teaderman.

The second boy fares a little better, because he has used the word “spread” for the peanut butter. But he has not told her to open the jar, or to take out the bread. At this point, students are furiously scribbling on their paragraphs, adding instructions about packaging and the knife. I am sitting there staring at my pen on my blank paper, stymied about whether or not to begin another letter to my father, wondering if he will be up for seeing me today. Kelly-Lynn’s paper is blank, too, but Mrs.
Teaderman is too preoccupied with her peanut butter sandwich to notice. Kelly-Lynn’s face is puffy, like she might have recently been crying.

The peanut butter sandwich demonstration is a lot of trouble for Mrs. Teaderman to go through to make the point that we need to be very specific in our how-to speeches. But after several more unsuccessful attempts to make a sandwich, Mrs. Teaderman explains that maybe what we choose for our how-to speech will be completely unfamiliar to the rest of the class. Maybe Jeff Burns, and she gestures to the quiet, tall boy with reddish blond hair at the back, will tell us how he helps his dad change the oil in a car, and she, for one, wouldn’t know where to find the dipstick and what to do with it when she did find it. She wouldn’t, she says, even know how to pop her trunk open if Mr. Teaderman wasn’t around to help. I don’t know where to find the dipstick, either, but at the service station in town Phoebe sometimes opens the hood, pulls out the dipstick and worries over it while our tank fills up with gas. We’re supposed to think of at least ten things we know how to do, then winnow the list down to one, then begin writing out our speech, then transfer it to index cards to work on memorizing for the big day.

In activity, Kelly-Lynn tells me I’m acting weird.

“I am?”

“Did something happen?”

“Kind of,“ I say, thinking about the hospital visit and then the pictures and wondering what shows up on my face.
“What?”

There’s no way to show her the pictures without the boys sitting behind us being able to see. They’re always trying to listen in on what we’re saying, anyway. “I can’t talk about it right now.”

“Something happened to me, too.” The way her eyes and nose move together, just for a second, make me think again that she’s been crying.

“Are you okay?”

“Give me a hint?” she says, shrugging off my concern. “I can keep a secret.”

I think about it for a second, what a good hint would be.

“Does it have to do with your boyfriend?”

“My boyfriend?” I say, then I remember that I told her Seth was my boyfriend. “Yeah,” I say, surprised by the truthfulness in this. “I can tell you at some point, maybe.”

One of the boys pokes Kelly-Lynn in the back and says to the other boy, “The lesbians are telling secrets.”

“Shut up,” says Kelly-Lynn. “We’re not lesbians.”

“Ask Ronnie Reitz,” says the boy.

“Theresa’s boyfriend?” I say. “The party guy?”

Kelly-Lynn looks grim. I follow her gaze to a tall blonde boy way down on the first bleacher, surrounded by other boys. Theresa hovers nearby.

“What about him?” I ask Kelly-Lynn, and her neck begins to turn red and splotchy even though her face stays the same.
“Nothing,” she says. She turns to the boy who called us lesbians. “Nothing,” she says louder.

“Not what I heard,” said the boy.

“Shut up, Ted,” Kelly-Lynn says, and I am surprised that she knows his name. That she has maybe known his name the whole time.

“Make me,” Ted says, and I admire the way Kelly-Lynn turns her back to the boy and raises her hand for a teacher. Ted buries his nose in his math book.

I expect her to report Ted, but all she says to Mr. Rodriguez is, “Can I go to the bathroom?” She crooks her finger at him. When he leans in she explains, “I’m having monthly issues.”

Mr. Rodriguez sighs and takes out his small pad of hall passes.

“She’s having monthly issues, too,” Kelly-Lynn says, and I feel my face burning.

“Make it snappy, ladies.” Mr. Rodriguez tears off two passes without looking at us. We make our way down the bleachers. So that we don’t pass Ronnie Rietz, we head for the doors at the far end of the auditorium, but we pass near enough that I hear one of his friends say, “lesbian,” and they bust themselves up, laughing.

“Keep walking,” Kelly-Lynn says through her teeth.

By the time the metal doors clang shut behind us, Kelly-Lynn is almost halfway down the hall to the bathroom, dragging me
behind her. Inside, an eighth-grader stands in front of the mirror tracing her eyes with eyeliner pencil. It smells like she’s just finished a cigarette. “Hey,” the girl says, and we both say “hey” back, and the girl leaves. I follow Kelly-Lynn into the handicapped stall, which smells even more strongly of cigarettes, and watch as she wipes off the toilet seat with toilet paper and then sits on it, fully-clothed. “Ronnie Rietz is a toad,” Kelly-Lynn says. Her mascara is running a little, underneath her left eye and I tear off more toilet paper and hand it to her. “He told me to come to his party on Friday, and I did. You should see his house. By that horse farm? With all the buildings painted white and red? And Theresa was there, and everyone said “hey,” and we watched television until more and more people came, then someone put on music. It was a party, you know, just regular.”

I have seen a party that sounds like that, once, in a movie at church about the dangers of drinking. As the revelry went on the camera grew more and more shaky, to indicate drunkenness.

“So then the girls all go upstairs to a bedroom to fix their makeup and it’s just me and some guys on the couch, and one of them tells me that Ronnie Rietz likes me, and I say, ‘No, he’s with Theresa,’ and they say, ‘Well, he wants a word.’ They think it’s funny to talk like that. Ronnie Rietz wants a word. And they tell me he’s in his office and I should go have the word with him. So I follow these two guys upstairs and they knock on a door
and say, ‘Ms. Brooker to see you, Mr. Reitz,’ and I laugh, but nobody else does. Then the guys leave and it’s just me and Ronnie Rietz in his dad’s office, and I sit down across his dad’s desk from him. And then he starts talking about how pretty I am, and how none of the girls want to be my friend because I’m so pretty.”

“You are pretty.” Even right there, with her makeup a mess, it’s true; she’s still pretty.

“Thanks,” she says. “I can tell you’ll be a lot prettier, too, when your hair grows out. Anyway, I don’t say anything. I don’t tell him I like him, or that I would kiss him, or anything else. And I didn’t like him all that much. He’s like every other boy. You just want them to talk to you because you think it’s going to be so great, but it never is. And he keeps saying Theresa and the other girls don’t like me. I will never be popular, no matter how many schools I go to.

“So then who walks in? Theresa with that Misty girl. And even though I haven’t said a single word to him, maybe ‘hey,’ when I first walked in, even though he’s been doing all the talking, Ronnie Rietz tells Theresa that I have been sitting there begging him to let me suck his dick because it will help me figure out if I really am a lesbian.”

My mouth drops open.

“Theresa started laughing like it might be a joke, but that Misty girl says, ‘I believe it,’ and Ronnie said, ‘Ask her,’” and when they looked at me I couldn’t say anything. I just got up
and ran out of the room and down the stairs. And no one at the party knew what was going on, not even the boys, but I knew they would know soon, and my mom wasn’t coming to get me until 11:00.”

“Where were Ronnie’s parents, though,” I say, and Kelly-Lynn looks at me like I’m stupid.

“It was a party? The whole idea is for parents not to be around. I went out the kitchen door into the backyard and hid behind this little gardening shed for forever, and when I thought it was 11:00 I snuck out to the front lawn. I thought a couple people might have seen me but they were definitely too drunk to say anything.”

“What did your mom do?”

“My mom,” Kelly-Lynn says. She frowns at me like I’m speaking another language that has to be translated before she understands. “I didn’t tell my mom. That would be social suicide.”

“But aren’t you already dead? Socially, I mean. You already experienced social homicide.”

“I guess that’s true.”

We both look at the floor, with its tiny square yellow tiles and gummy grout. On the metal stall door someone has drawn what is supposed to be a penis, but it’s the size of my arm. Then, because it seems like the right place and the right moment, I am reaching into my bag for the photos.
Like me, it takes Kelly-Lynn a moment to figure out what she’s looking at. “These are real?” she says. “These are like *Faces of Death*. Have you seen *Faces of Death*?”

“No.”

Kelly-Lynn is squinting at the cut up baby in the silver bowl.

“It’s an abortion,” I say.

She studies the dead woman on the table for a long time then hands the pictures back to me with a sour face. Someone else enters the bathroom and Kelly-Lynn tucks her feet up onto the toilet so that if anyone looks they will think only one person is in the stall. We listen as the girl pees and flushes. As she washing her hands, I whisper, “Did you see the breasts?”

Kelly-Lynn nods. When the girl leaves she says, “This is the thing that has to do with your boyfriend?”

“Sort of.”

“You can’t have them in school.” Kelly-Lynn says. “You can’t get caught with these. Not even in your purse.”

“I didn’t have anywhere else to keep them.” I take the photo with the thumb and tear it in half, then I tear it again and keep going until it’s in little pieces.

“Flush it down the toilet,” says Kelly-Lynn. Then she grabs the close-up of the half-gone human face, looks at it one more time and starts tearing that one up, too. The tiny pieces of the photographs form a crust on top of the water. Kelly-Lynn
presses the lever, the toilet gives a half-hearted swirl, and the

crust lowers, rotates, but remains intact.

“Hold it down,” I say.

This time the flush is more enthusiastic, but as we

watch, the photo pieces pop up from the drain as the bowl

refills.

Kelly-Lynn rummages in her purse and pulls out a purple

lighter. “My mother’s,” she says, rolling her eyes. “I steal them

whenever I see them. One of these days she’ll get frustrated

enough to quit.” We square off on either sides of the toilet and

she flicks the lighter into an inch-long flame. I let it lick at

the corners of the remaining three pictures, which start to

smoke. Then I yank back the picture of the woman on the table and

dip the corner of it into the toilet to put out the flame. “Suit

yourself,” Kelly-Lynn says, as I tuck the picture back into the

butt purse. We watch the fire creep along the edges of the other

pictures, then through them on a charred diagonal. When the flame

reaches Kelly-Lynn’s fingers she drops everything into the

toilet, and as the bell rings she flushes, holding down the lever

until the first girls start entering the bathroom. This time

everything disappears.

“Smokey,” someone says from in front of the sinks. After

the “smokey” comment, it gets quiet, teacher quiet, and when

Kelly-Lynn and I push open the stall door, Mrs. Teaderman is

waiting with her arms crossed. “I am not surprised by the

smoking,” she says, “because it is unfortunately very common in
this county. I am surprised, however, at the two of you. Follow me, please.”

“We weren’t smoking,” I say.

“I’ll let you take that up with Principal Conrad,” Mrs. Teaderman says. “Charmaine, especially. I find this very hard to comprehend.”

In front of class Mrs. Teaderman seems graceful enough, but in the hallways she leads with her knees and lands on her toes. Daze would say she’s a woman who walks like her feet hurt, which is in a category of offenses all its own. Even so, Mrs. Teaderman is hard to keep up with. Kelly-Lynn pokes me in the arm, then lays a finger over her lips. When we get to the principal’s office, and Mrs. Teaderman leaves us in the waiting area to prepare him, Kelly-Lynn whispers, “Tell them you have a family situation,” before one of the secretaries behind the desk says, “Girls.”

Principal Conrad takes Kelly-Lynn inside first, and in the moments the three of them are behind closed doors, I listen to the soft sounds of the secretary slipping things into student files, the gentle metallic sliding of the cabinet drawers as she closes one to open another. I wonder if this incident will go in my file. Then I wonder what difference it could possibly make? My homeroom teacher gave us a scare story on the first day, telling us that anything and everything, every little thing that went into our file, would follow us for the rest of our lives, so we better mind our p’s and q’s. But I don’t see how a file could
follow someone much beyond high school. It’s not like a tattoo on your forehead listing every time you got into trouble. Or on your hand reminding you that you’ve forgotten to pray. I start to get out my pen to make another mark on my thumb, but then I feel too discouraged, all of a sudden, to do it. I’m sorry, I say in my head to God. I’ll do it later, I say to myself, which a sign of the sin of sloth.

When Kelly-Lynn emerges from the Principal Conrad’s office, he’s still talking to her. In fact, both he and Mrs. Teaderman stand at the door, showing her out.

“I will,” Kelly-Lynn is saying. She shows me her calmest face. “Thank you very much, Principal Conrad. Thank you, Mrs. Teaderman.

“No more smoking,” says Mrs. Teaderman.

“I know,” says Kelly-Lynn.

“It’s no way to deal with your problems.”

“I’m done with smoking for good,” says Kelly-Lynn.

“Charmaine?” Mrs. Teaderman says, and as Kelly-Lynn passes me, I get to my feet. I don’t risk a look in her direction.

“Have a seat,” says Principal Conrad in his office. “Do I know you?”

“I don’t think so.”

“She’s an East Winder girl,” says Mrs. Teaderman.

“Peake,” says Principal Conrad. “Peake.” He has my file in front of him on the desk, completely flat. Beside my file,
Kelly-Lynn’s file is as thick as the Bible, probably from all her transfers. Principal Conrad is famous for having walked on to the University of Kentucky basketball team for one year, back in the day. This means he doesn’t even have to be friendly to kids for everyone to like him. And he doesn’t have to be strict for everyone to respect him. He’s so long-legged and thin that his baggy suit pants flap around his ankles and you can hear him coming down a quiet hallway, pants flapping like a flag, but no one even makes fun of that because they like him so much.

“I know I know that name,” Principal Conrad says.

I sit across the desk from him and wait.

“What’s the story, again, Mrs. Teaderman?”

“I found her smoking with Kelly-Lynn.”

“I wasn’t smoking.”

“No?” Principal Conrad and Mrs. Teaderman exchange a glance.

“Was Kelly-Lynn smoking?” Mrs. Teaderman asks.

I know Kelly-Lynn told them she was smoking, so if I say she wasn’t, which is true, then I sound like a liar. But if I say she was, which isn’t true, then I really am a liar. I shrug.

“Can’t remember?” says Principal Conrad. “That’s funny, because it just happened.” He’s not speaking in an unfriendly way, just an unyielding way. The dome of his head is a perfect oval, like the top of an egg. “Want to know what she said?”

“Okay.”
“Well, Miss Brooker admits she was smoking, but says you weren’t. Would you say that’s accurate? Or would you say she’s just being a good friend?”

“Kind of,” I say. “Both.”

“I don’t understand that answer,” says Principal Conrad reasonably. “But if you say you weren’t smoking, and Miss Brooker says you weren’t smoking, then I’m inclined to give you the benefit of the doubt. Just this once.

“Anything going on at home?” Mrs. Teaderman says.

“Anything we should know?”

“No.”

Mrs. Teaderman frowns like she knows better, and I understand her to be a nice person who means well. I also understand that every single time I have written DO NOT READ across the top of my free-writing journal she has read the entry anyway. All the letters to my father.

Principal Conrad touches his fingers and thumbs together in a sort of triangle, then lowers his head and peers through it.

“A lot of educators like to tell young people that these years are the hardest,” he says, “but I like to take a more realistic approach.” He trades another glance with Mrs. Teaderman, who is listening politely, then peers at me again through his hand triangle. “I like to tell young people that these are the years when people figure out which kinds of problems they’re going to keep on having for the rest of their lives.”
I take in this heavy, hopeless prediction, which makes the rest of my life seem like a long, long time.

“Any last words?” says Principal Conrad. “Anything to say for yourself?”

“I wasn’t doing anything wrong,” I say helplessly. But it’s true only in the most specific of ways. There is a lot that I have been doing wrong. In word and deed. More than I could keep track of on my hand.


Mrs. Teaderman squints thoughtfully at me.

“Charmaine, I don’t really think this offense warrants a phone call home. But don’t let it happen again. Mrs. Teaderman?” says Principal Conrad with finality.

“Principal Conrad,” says Mrs. Teaderman, in an exact imitation of his tone, “thank you for your time.”

“My pleasure,” says Principal Conrad. “And Charmaine, what you can tell your grandmother is that John Conrad sends his very best wishes.”

Mrs. Teaderman follows me out the door of the office and stops me with a long, skinny hand before I head down the hall.
She peers down into my face and says, “You can talk to me, Charmaine, if you ever need to. I can be a good listener.”

“You read my DO NOT READ entries.”

“I absolutely did not.”

“It doesn’t even matter. Read all the DO NOT READ entries you want.”

“I didn’t,” Mrs. Teaderman says. “And I won’t. I’d like for you to believe me, but it’s okay if you don’t.”

We have fallen into awkward step in the hallway, Mrs. Teaderman attempting to match her walking to mine, even with her long legs and heels. It seems like the hall stretches on forever, blue lockers on one side and closed classroom doors on the other.

“I’m just going to duck in here, again,” Mrs. Teaderman says as we reach the ladies’ restroom. “But think about what I said. And then she pushes open the door and it swings shut behind her.

Final period is almost over, and instead of heading out the side doors by the gym to the line of buses, I head out the front doors near the office to wait for Phoebe. After the bell rings it gets crowded fast, the cement benches filling up with people I’ve seen only in the hallway. I stand and lean against the rough surface of the brick wall. Station wagons and vans pull up and kids climb inside. I had no idea how many kids’ parents picked them up and dropped them off.

It’s warmer out than it’s been, and I take out my free-writing journal and fan myself as more kids get into cars. Soon I
am sitting there on the cement bench by myself, waiting for Phoebe. To my right, down the length of the school, the busses thread themselves out of the parking lot and file down the drive and, one by one, then make their right or left turn onto the county highway. Both busses I take, numbers 17 and 44, are towards the end of the line, and both take a right-hand turn towards East Winder and Tates Bend. Even though the day is over, the bell still rings, and I wonder if this would be an appropriate use of the word for the day from homeroom. Vestigial. Vestigial means something left over from when it was useful when it’s no longer useful. Like nipples on men. Or your appendix.

I fight an urge to reenter the front doors of the school and see what teachers are up to after this bell, which seems to go on for longer than usual. I open my English notebook and write my prayer once, twice, three times. I never thought of writing it out over and over again, like lines on the chalkboard when you get in trouble, but I write it a few more times, then on a separate piece of paper I start a letter to my father about my new friendship with Kelly-Lynn, one of the people the Lord has laid on my heart. When the bell rings again, I wonder if it goes on ringing all night, as if students were still in there changing classes. It doesn’t seem possible that I have been waiting there for an entire 50 minutes, thought the sun has dropped on the west side of the lawn, now shining through a stand of trees. Mr. Doran bursts out of the front door and does a doubletake at me sitting on the bench.
“It’s getting late,” he says. “Your ride coming?”

I nod at him and he heads out to his car, an old, rattley orange Volkswagen Beetle. I write to my father that Kelly-Lynn comes from a broken home, and then I wonder if I should have written that, but I’m using pen and don’t want to make the heavy scribbles I would have to use to keep him from reading the original words. I wish I hadn’t brought up the whole concept of “broken home,” though, and soon I am scribbling over it anyway. I don’t want to give anyone any ideas. Then I am scribbling over the rest of it, all of it, and by the time Phoebe turns into the semi-circle drive in the red Pinto, I have covered all of the front of a page and most of the back with scribbling.

As she pulls up to the curb, the Pinto coughs and dies in a cloud of black smoke. When she restarts the car, a grinding sound echoes against the building.

“Hop in,” she says when I open the passenger door. “We need to get a move on.”

“You’re late.”

“I’m only a little late. Quick, quick, shut the door. We have an appointment.”

“To see daddy.”

“And the doctor again.”

I fasten my seatbelt and, as we drive away, I look back at the cement bench where I was sitting. If I concentrate I feel like I can make time go back to that moment, because it seems like anyone, even regular people who aren’t prophetic should be
able to do that. To travel around in time that has already passed. I crane my neck, looking at the cement bench, until Phoebe says, “What on earth are you looking at,” and I turn back around. “I don’t know what we’re going to do about dinner,” she says. “I don’t have a cent on me. We might be able to eat with your father in the cafeteria.”

“Okay.”

“Would you like that?” she says.

“Sure.”

“Would that be agreeable to you or disagreeable? Because it’s hard to tell with responses like ‘okay’ and ‘sure.’ It’s impolite to respond in a way where people can’t tell what you’re thinking.”

“I’d like that.”

“That’s better,” says Phoebe. “How was school?”

“Fine,” I say. It is impossible to tell her about the pictures, about Kelly-Lynn, about being sent to the principal’s office. The gap between Phoebe and me makes anything she says hard to pay attention to. She doesn’t know about anything that matters, and even though there’s nothing to be done about it, it makes me feel lonely.

“Do you have any homework?”

“No,” I say. We’re passing a tree, and as we pass it a dry, curled leaf drifts to the ground right outside my window. Everything slows down for a second and then it becomes possible
to answer, less automatically, the question she has asked. “I have algebra.”

“Curious about anything?” Phoebe says.

“What?”

“Are you curious about anything,” Phoebe says again, drawing out the words like I might not understand English. I have no idea what she’s getting at, so I look at her hair, which seems the same, and her clothes, which seem to be what she was wearing when she left this morning.

“Um, why you were late?”

“I wasn’t that late. And it didn’t kill you to wait for a few minutes. What I’d like to know, I guess, is if it ever occurs to you to ask me how my day went. If you’re ever even curious about anything that happens to me when we’re not together.”

It has never occurred to me to think about what Phoebe does when we’re not together. It has never occurred to me even that it would be a good or bad thing to think about. “How was your day,” I say.

“Fine,” says Phoebe, “thanks for asking.”

I wait to see if she is finished, and when she doesn’t say anything more, I open my Algebra book.

“I don’t know how you can read in a moving vehicle,” Phoebe says. “It makes me positively sick to my stomach.”

I listen for something in what she says that needs a response, but nothing does, so I copy out the first algebra problem. I am not great at math, but there is relief in the way
copying out each problem feels like a new chance to get it right.
I almost never see the problems through to their right answers,
and when I am finished with math homework, whether I use pencil
or pen, the paper is a disaster.

Phoebe sighs loudly a few more times, which is what she
does when she’s mad that I’m not keeping her company. I wedge my
finger into the crack of my algebra book and wiggle it until the
space gets bigger. I feel as though my I’m making a place I could
disappear into, that if I could make myself small enough I could
find a whole world in the spine.

Phoebe is silent until we get to the two-way stop sign
for the road that takes us to the interstate ramp. Then she asks
me to check to the right for traffic while she looks to the left.
“Am I good?” she says when her way is clear. “Am I good?”

“No,” I say, because on the right a red pickup is
crawling toward the intersection.

“Plenty of time,” Phoebe says.

“I couldn’t tell,” I say. “What if the car died?”

“We need to just say a prayer right now that that doesn’t
happen,” Phoebe says. “How about now?”

“A prayer?”

“No, am I good?”

A boxy blue car is headed in our direction from a ways
off but traveling fast. “I don’t know,” I say.

Phoebe swivels her head and glares at the blue car. “For
heavens sake. I could have gone.”
“Why don’t you look for yourself, then,” I say, and Phoebe blows a long breath out her nose.

“I know it’s a lot to ask, Charmaine, but I need your help, here.”

“How do you make turns when you’re driving by yourself?”

“Do you understand the concept of rush hour?” Phoebe says as another ancient truck crawls towards the intersection from the left. It’s another red one, with rust spots over the back wheel well, like on the Pinto.

“I guess I don’t,” I say, as we wait for the slow truck to pass.

“Maybe ‘rush hour’ is a stretch,” she says. “But people have died at this intersection.”

“Of boredom?”

“Very funny.”

I copy out another algebra problem as neatly as I can in the car.

“Your father has shaved off his beard,” Phoebe says after a time. We have left the town of Clay’s Corner behind and are on the stretch of highway that leads to Exit 22, where the hospital is. I raise my head from Algebra to see if she will say more, but now we’re driving west, into the setting sun, and she just squints at the road. When I return to my homework she says, “I just don’t want you to be surprised when you saw him.”

“I’ve seen him without a beard before.”
“I know, but the last time you saw him he had that Holy Land beard. And now he’s put on weight. In funny places, like his neck. And he doesn’t have quite the same,” she takes her right hand off the wheel and flaps it around her mouth as if encouraging the right word to come forth. “I don’t know, Charmaine. He’s just not quite the same. They’ve got him on very strong medication.”

“I know.”

“And they’re still trying to get it just right. ‘Mood stabilizer,’ they call it.” The term “mood stabilizer” doesn’t sound like a bad thing to me. In fact it sounds like something a lot of people could use. “So anyway, his mood is getting more stable, which is what everyone wants. But he looks different. Tired. And he doesn’t communicate well. I just want you to be prepared. It’s good the way you’ve been writing to him. I’m very proud of the way you’ve kept that up. You have a very sweet side, Charmaine. There’s a side of you that’s very thoughtful. And one of these days I hope to see more of that thoughtfulness directed towards me.”

I stare out the window. We’re still driving through the tobacco farms, haven’t hit the horse farms, yet. Most of the tobacco has been put up already, and you can see right through the front doorways of the big black barns to where it hangs from the roof beams in rows of rough, yellowing sheaves. Some of the fields are still being harvested, and on those fields the tobacco plants look like orderly rows of teepees. We pass one farm where
the rows go back so far and straight you can’t see the end of them. They are regular as breathing, and I count four rows as I breathe in and four rows as I breathe out, which reminds me to pray, which I do. The sloth has left me for now.

“What are you whispering,” Phoebe says.

I clamp my lips together.

“If you have something to say, you need to say it out loud.”

“Are you mad at me?”

Phoebe gives me a hard look, then keeps on frowning at the road. “Believe it or not, Charmaine, the world does not revolve around you.”

When we pull up to the big brick mansion, Phoebe says, “Here we are again. Not too shabby. First class all the way, thanks to your grandmother.”

“She’s paying?”

“Not exactly,” Phoebe says. “She just has ways of making people want to do things for her. Arrange things for her. Talk about a gift of the spirit.”

We enter the same stately waiting room, only with two new women behind the dark wood reception counter. One woman has red hair as bright as Tracy’s, but with a purplish sheen and dark brown roots. She breaks into a smile and a “Hi-dee.”

“Martha.” Phoebe steers me towards the counter. “This is Charmaine.”
“Well hi-dee, Charmaine,” says Martha, sounding like she’s correcting her first “hi-dee.” “I bet you came to check in on that daddy of yours.” She holds my eyes until I confirm this with a nod. As if I would be here for any other reason. She says, “He’s doing so much better, he really is,” and then she gives me a wink.

“We’re seeing Dr. Phillips today,” Phoebe says to Martha. “Both of us. I mean, all three of us.”

“Well, that’s fine,” says Martha, the way older ladies say “that’s fine,” with “fine” meaning “wonderful,” as in, “Isn’t it a fine day.” Then she winks again, and I wonder if I am supposed to wink back.

The other woman behind the counter has a nurse’s hat bobby-pinned into her closely cut brown hair. From the neck down she’s dressed like a doctor, in blue scrubs, but when she moves out from behind the counter I see that instead of a stethoscope around her neck she wears a long cord with a heavy keychain strung on it. She steps in our direction but still hasn’t taken her eyes off the clipboard she carries. When she does, she inclines her head at my mother, not quite a nod, then turns to me with the same kind of gesture, as if she’s thinking, or maybe directing her thoughts toward us like a beam of light coming from the top of her head. I like it that she doesn’t say just anything. But I also know that without Martha’s “hi-dees” this lady probably would have had to have said something. Martha freed her up.
The brunette lady’s nametag reads “Lilly,” and we follow her down the long hallway, Phoebe’s heels ringing out behind me, and up the curved staircase at the end of it. I concentrate on following Lilly. Her hips are substantial, more powerful than fat. At the end of the hall we turn right and head up the curved staircase.

We end up in the same white room as before, and although the doctor isn’t there yet, my father is. He sits near the window at a roughly made worktable, facing away from us towards the glass like he’s trying to make the most of the afternoon light. My father is moving, a little, dipping and raising his head as if in a kind of concentration. When he hears us, he looks over his left shoulder then right away turns back to his work as if he is practiced in registering, then ignoring, such interruptions. I am thinking he might not have recognized us. Then he straightens up as though the thought of who we are has just occurred to him, and he pushes back from the table, stands up and turns around.

“Look who’s here,” says Lilly, encouraging him.

“Go and say hi to your father,” Phoebe encourages me.

And I want to, or I feel like I must want to, somewhere in me. But my father is silent and standing absolutely still, silhouetted against the tall window of fading daylight so that his face doesn’t really show, and what I’m thinking is he is here, he is here, when of course I knew he would be here all along. And I am at once emptied out of the way things used to be, even if it was a crazy way to live, as Phoebe says, and I am
filled up with how they are now another way. For the first time I understand that they might be another way, from now on, and they might change again after that, and again after that, until there’s nothing left to recognize. This thought is like a wall of air at my back, resolving itself into something solid and chilly, menacing and strange. Something that’s pushing against me, keeping me from breathing. When I try to step forward I can’t. I seem to be moving my arm instead of my leg, as if reaching for something, and then I see that I am not moving my arm at all. I am stuck between the sad strangeness of a new life and heavy familiarity of the old, the very position of Lot’s wife, unable to move forward or backwards until she crystallized into a pillar of salt.

“Let’s all sit down and relax,” says Lilly, which helps me find my legs again. All of us, three from one end of the room and my father from his window, make our way to a slip-covered white couch and two chairs arranged in a corner near the piano.

Clean-shaven, my father looks like a puffy child. When he sits down his knees round out under droopy slacks. His pant cuffs pool around a pair of brown suede moccasin slippers. I point to them.

“Yes,” he says, nodding at me, noticing me noticing the moccasins. I have yours. I read your letters.”

“The letters are so nice,” says Lilly, and Phoebe just sits there with her legs crossed carefully, moving her head politely towards whoever’s speaking. I’m glad Lilly’s here, even
though I don’t know her. I get the feeling certain things that could be said, whatever they might be, might not be said in front of her.

“It’s good to see you,” my father says to me. He does not sound nervous, and there is room, by which I mean time, for me to say something back to him, which hits me as unusual. Usually my father and Phoebe talk hard at each other, and over each other, filling in all the quiet spaces.

“It’s good to see you,” I repeat. I feel much older than I did before I saw him. In the corner of my eye I catch Phoebe running her tongue thoughtfully over her bottom lip.

My father turns to her. “Mother visited.”

“She told me,” Phoebe says.

We all keep sitting there in the white room. It’s starting to feel to me like something that happened a long time ago, something I’m remembering. I can’t think of one single thing to say, but as long as I don’t look at my father, or at Phoebe, I feel peaceful. And, suddenly, sleepy.

“I guess it’s been awhile.” Lilly turns to Phoebe. “How long has it been?”

“For Charmaine? About three weeks.” Phoebe’s short words echo off the room’s white walls.

“I think I hear the doctor,” says Lilly, and we all turn gratefully to watch her make her way to the door, her thighs swishing against each other through the polyester uniform pants.
“Doctor,” she says warmly into the hallway. “We’re ready for you.”

Today Dr. Phillips wears a gold corduroy coat and those shoes with the rippled rubber soles that Mrs. Teaderman has, only on hers the wedges are three inches high.

“This is an event, isn’t it, David,” he says. “Phoebe and Charmaine both here.”

“It is,” my father says. “An event,” he adds on.

The doctor turns to me. “This must all seem a little strange.”

“I guess,” I say, as my manners come back. The truth is that everything feels strange. Or, with the memory feeling, nothing does.

“I want you to be able to ask any questions you might have,” says Doctor Phillips.

Phoebe and my father are both studying my face like they’re waiting for something to land on it.

“But not just yet. First I’d like your father to tell you a little about his days, here, maybe. And your mother will want to catch him up on the news since last week.”

Phoebe has been holding her purse beside her, wedged in between her thigh and the chair. Now she extracts it and leans over to place it on the floor. “Well, okay.” She turns to my father. “School is going well. The Pinto is fixed. Temporarily. We’re thinking of starting up cell church again. Ezra Deeds told me he read your piece in The Good Word about prayerful
expectation. Everyone asks about you. Your mother seems fine. We’re all looking forward to having you back.” She stops on the word “back” when my father and Doctor Phillips exchange a glance.

“What is it,” Phoebe says.

“Let’s keep going,” says the doctor.

“Has something been decided, here?”

“Let’s just keep going,” says Doctor Phillips again.

“What else went on this week. You talked to David’s mother, I believe you said?”

“I think I’m a little more interested in the kind of week you’ve had here.” Phoebe looks full-on at my father. “Last I heard there was a complication.”

He blinks at her, slowly.

“Everything working right? The Haldol?”

“Lithium, now,” says the doctor.

“I have it written down,” says Phoebe. She straightens her shoulders with a little twist of her upper body, and I steel myself for whatever’s coming. “I just don’t want there to be any communication loss here. Doctor?”

The doctor brings his glasses down onto his nose and keeps his hand over his mouth, listening to her. One finger in the mustache, the rest curling around his chin. “I understand you’re concerned,” he says through his fingers.

“Oh you do?” Phoebe’s voice is like a plucked wire. “I can’t tell you what a relief that is.” She shifts her whole body away from the doctor as if he’s not there, and turns the full
wattage of her gaze on my father. “I said we were looking forward to having you back, and you looked at the doctor. Am I to understand you may not be coming home?”

“Perhaps this is conversation is premature,” says the doctor.

Phoebe nods quickly, still looking at my father. Her voice changes to something almost pleasant, but I know better. “Because of Charmaine, here,” she says. She gestures towards me with kind, cupped hands, all without turning from my father. Still looking at him she says, “We wouldn’t want to expose Charmaine to anything painful.”

“And because of David,” says the doctor. “And because of you. It’s a complicated time. Can we back up a little?”

“Oh, let’s,” says Phoebe with a delighted little clap. It’s as though she has a fever. “Let’s back up a month to when David came back from the Holy Land inhabited by the Apostle Paul. Or how about a year when the Lord told David to live on faith alone, and guess what, his family too! Or how about when God laid it on his heart to eradicate the pagan holiday of Christmas and we all passed out those brochures.” She reaches back to where I’m sitting, still without looking, and gives me an affectionate push in the shoulder. “What were you, Charmaine, nine? The year you wanted a Cabbage Patch doll? Remember we all went to Clay’s Corner and handed out the brochures that gave everyone the 10 reasons real Christians don’t celebrate Christmas? Wasn’t that fun?”
My father has leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, eyes closed. When he opens them they seem set deeper into his head, like he is trying to shrink into himself. He opens his mouth to speak, then closes it. He and the doctor trade another glance.

“It’s okay,” David tells him.

“Oh, it is?” says Phoebe. “That’s great to hear.”

“You’re angry,” says the doctor.

“You’re a genius,” says Phoebe.

“Are you coming home?” I say to my father. My words come out like a little bleat, and he turns his calm, unhappy eyes on me.

“Sweetheart,” he says, a word he hasn’t used since I was very young. I look at Phoebe in case I misheard. I can’t help it. He glances at Phoebe, too, but the “sweetheart” has been for me. He reaches his hand over the space between us, palm up like he’s feeling the weight of the air. “I’ve been confused.”

“Doctor,” says Phoebe, bending at the waist and reaching into her purse. She pulls out her pocket New Testament with its red leatherette cover. “Are you familiar with Ephesians 5:22?”

“Hold on a second,” says the doctor.

“Or Colossians 3:18?”

My father closes his eyes again and drops his head into his palms. I hate that he doesn’t say anything. I wish that he had an idea he was trying to convince us of, or a new plan.
Something so that I could tell him I got it, that I was willing, and he could tell me he was grateful for my spirit.

“David, are you okay?” says the doctor.

“Yes,” says my father, speaking straight down into the floor. “Let her go on.”

“Let me,” Phoebe says. “Let me?”

Outside the long windows it still seems like daylight, but when Lilly cracks the door open, sticks her head in and then a hand, to flip on the light switch, the windows turn black against the blazing white room. She quickly dims the lights with a dial and closes the door behind her.

“How about those verses, Charmaine?” says Phoebe. “Do I need to look them up?” Some of the air’s going out of her, and her voice sounds tired.

“Do you know them?” The doctor’s loose neck turns toward me, a soft rudder.

“Does she know them,” Phoebe says.

“Wives submit to your husbands,” I mumble. “As to the Lord.”

“You’ve been confused,” Phoebe says to David.

“Do you still pray?” I say. “Have you heard the voice of God?”

My father raises his head, but leaves his body bent forward. “I still pray,” he says.

“Without ceasing?”
“Charmaine brings up a good point,” says the doctor. “About the voice of God.”


“Do you want to try to explain?” the doctor asks my father. “You don’t have to. Not right now. Are you tired?”

I hold my breath and will Phoebe not to say anything, and she doesn’t.

“Can you hear this?” the doctor asks Phoebe. “I’m concerned for you.”

The fire has gone out of her, now, and what’s left is worse. She palms her brow and lifts, and the skin above her eyes stretches upwards. Then she takes her hand away and everything settles sadly into place.

“You’ve heard a bit of this before,” the doctor says, and Phoebe nods tiredly. She pats my knee.

“Can you hear this?” she says to me.

I move my knee away from her hand and look at my father. I don’t want him to feel like Phoebe and I are in allegiance against him. I don’t want her to think that, either.

“The voice of God has been a pretty powerful idea in your home,” says the doctor.

“I’m guessing you’re not a believer,” Phoebe says.

“Does it matter?”

“It might,” she says. “I don’t know.”
“Phoebe.” It’s the first time my father has said her name, and at the sound of it she tears up.

She turns to the doctor. “Has he told you how the still, small voice of God whispered in his ear and told him I was to be his wife?”

“This must be very difficult for you,” the doctor says.

The tears are leaking out of Phoebe’s eyes, now.

“I’m sorry,” says my father.

“How about you?” the doctor says, turning to me.

But Phoebe is crying, and Phoebe has been mad. And when she feels something I stop feeling anything, which I can’t believe I am just now figuring out. “Fine,” I say.

“I don’t know what to believe, anymore, about the voice of God,” says my father softly.

“Are you still a prophet?” I ask.

“I’m guessing not,” Phoebe says.

We look at my father, who is shaking his head. “I used to feel a lot clearer but now everything’s upside down. I don’t feel like myself. Or I feel like I have to get used to feeling like this, and I’m not sure what myself is.”

“I’m not sure who anybody is,” says Phoebe. “Whatever that means.”

My father looks sad and lost, and I want to tell him that I know who he is. It’s like he’s the father of the girl in the book I read, who was stranded in a little room, in a big building, on another planet, a planet that is controlled by one
big centralized throbbing evil brain. Only the other planet is in a whole different dimension, and the father can’t find his way home and the girl has to go and get him. And it’s not just a matter of getting on a spaceship and traveling there. The girl has to figure out how to move through time, too. Which, even though it’s impossible, still seems easier than helping my father find his way back to himself.

When we stand up to leave, my father hugs me goodbye. His new bulk is softer than I’m used to, but there’s no comfort in it. “I’ll always be your father,” he says. “No matter what else I am. It’s incontrovertible,” he adds, and as he says the word, he frowns. “And if it turns out to be a curse maybe I’ll be in a better position to help out.”

“That’s about enough,” Phoebe says, stepping in between us and steering me towards the door. “We’re not borrowing trouble. She’s half me, too, you know.” Phoebe does not say goodbye to my father. We wait for the doctor in the hallway, and when he joins us I listen to him tell Phoebe there are things she can do for herself to help get herself through this tough time.

“You know what?” Phoebe says. “I think you’ve got enough on your plate right here, professionally, without worrying about me. And I’ve done a lot already. In fact, I think I’ve done just about all I knew to do and it hasn’t really done any of us any good. But thanks for all your help.” Doctor Phillips squints down at her, like he doesn’t quite know how to take what she’s saying. His neck pools over his collar and I’m thinking he might
be able to take a deep breath and fill it up, like a frog. “I can
tell you don’t think I mean it,” she says, “but I do. I’m not
being sarcastic anymore. Sorry about that, by the way. I just
wish we’d met you before we all became so ridiculous.”

The word “ridiculous” hangs in the air at the top of the
curved staircase. Behind us, my father has emerged from the white
room and is ambling down the hall, eyes focused with effort, as
if he’s determined to reach us before we disappear. He holds a
pair of suede moccasins out to me. They have been unevenly
stitched together with heavy leather cording, and the footbed is
made of fleece. I slip a hand into each of them and when I look
up at my father his face scares me more than anything so far,
because he’s smiling uncertainly at me, as if I’m someone who
could tell him what’s supposed to happen next.

I follow Phoebe downstairs, and as she handles paperwork
at the front desk, I take off my tennis shoes and slip my feet
into the slippers. I try them out a little in the lobby before
heading outside to wait for Phoebe under the porte cochere. It’s
nearly dark, and the air has a tiny chill that comes, sometimes,
in late September after a warm day when the temperatures cool off
but the humidity remains. I keep walking, thinking I’ll wait for
her at the end of the long drive. But when I reach the point
where the drive meets the country road that leads to the
interstate, and she still hasn’t come outside to claim the car
from the valet, I start walking towards the interstate on the
shoulder of the road, its rough gravel cushioned through the suede and fleece.

There’s hardly any traffic. I can still see the huge house, with the one big white room lit up from the inside on the second floor. Beside the road runs a ditch, and on the other side of the ditch runs a black horse fence, with the top two slats crossed. This is the old kind of fencing, made of real wood, not the new, plastic kind that’s supposed to pop apart on impact with a car. On the other side of the fence are two large horses, watching me. “Hey there,” I say softly. I would like to cross the ditch and climb the fence and stand beside them, if they’d let me, between their solid, comforting bulk.

Phoebe pulls up behind me on the opposite side of the road. “What’s the idea,” she says, leaning out the driver’s side window. “Get in.”

I keep walking and she inches the car forward. It’s full-on dark, now, and the Pinto’s headlights make the rest of the world seem darker. I can sense all around me the huge empty spaces over the horse farms, all that air, stretching all the way to the top of the atmosphere, and then everything beyond that, all outer space. I see myself walking on the surface of the globe, on the underside of it, maybe, and I get the idea that gravity is an arbitrary thing I’m choosing and that all I have to do is lift my feet in the right way and I could fall into all that dark air, all that space.
"You want to walk a little?" Phoebe says. I can hear her sigh over the struggling engine. "Okay. Walk your heart out. For a little bit." She slows the Pinto down to a sputtering idle and drops back, so that I’m walking in the swath of light from the low beams. The darkness becomes instantly more opaque, less like something with depth that could be fallen into, but I don’t turn around. I keep walking as if away from the light, as if God himself has told me not to turn around for any reason, the way he told Lot’s wife not to look back. But when you stop and think about it, he didn’t tell Lot’s wife. He told Lot, or he told his messengers to tell Lot, and Lot’s wife had to take his word for it third-hand, and run for her life with their two unwed daughters, no questions asked, and no matter that their other two daughters, the married ones, maybe with grandbabies, had decided to stay behind and were now all being burned alive under the fire raining down on the cities of the plain. How could Lot, himself, not look back at that? Maybe that’s what did it for Lot’s wife. Maybe she just decided to take what was coming in exchange for one last look—at things she could touch, and taste, and hold. Her grandbabies but maybe the things she did with her body, too, even the most sinful, lustful things. Maybe she finally figured out that those things meant more to her than a God who revealed himself only in layers of mystery, through messengers, through marriages to distant, Godly men.

When I stop walking, the house no longer shows up behind me. Phoebe pulls alongside and I cross the road in front of the
car and get in. We pull onto the interstate and ride in silence for several long minutes. Phoebe breathes heavily, like she is trying not to cry, and her breath makes a little circle of steam on the windshield form the growing chill outside. When she speaks, though, she sounds matter-of-fact. “Your mother is a fool.”

I let the words sit there and wait for more.

“Not for the reasons folks might think,” she says. “Not because I believed my husband was a prophet, or because I followed him as the head of my household, against my own better judgment. And that’s plenty to make me a fool, you better believe it.”

“You’re not a fool,” I say, because her voice is so flat I can’t stand it.

“I’m a fool because I thought I was already completely worn out,” she says. “I really thought I was beyond feeling hurt.” She turns to me and her eyes are sad and terrible. For the second time this evening I find myself wishing one of my parents wanted something from me. But her words are not a petition for me to say something or to feel sorry for her. All the emotion is moving in one direction, from her to me and there is none of the usual undertow. “Don’t forget this,” she says. “Be smarter.” Then she laughs, a single chop of sound. “And if I knew how to tell you to do that, I would.”

The rest of the drive home is silent, and dark, and I’m looking out into the black expanses outside the twin cones of our
headlights, thinking of all the fields and horses, all the tobacco barns, everything that I know is there but still can’t see.
The next few days feel kind of hollow. For one thing, I have given up on the prayer, and there’s an empty spot where the effort used to be. I catch myself thinking I’m forgetting something, and then I remember that I don’t have to try to remember anymore, and this gives me a little rush of relief. But the relief has a shadow of fear, as if there’s a holy committee determining how best to make me feel the full consequences of such a decision. And the prayer doesn’t die easily. I find it rises in my head without my cooperation, filling silent moments, or rhythmic moments of walking, and when this happens I just listen to it, letting it play out like something that will die from neglect if I wait long enough.

Kelly-Lynn is moving. She tells me this on Tuesday, explaining that her mother broke up with Bob and needs to go back to Omaha to regroup. Kelly-Lynn will be in a new school system, there, and can try out for cheerleading all over again, and choose a new name.

“Maybe I’ll be Theresa,” Kelly-Lynn says.

I imagine her making her way down the hall of a strange school, pretty enough to turn heads and no one knowing one single thing about her. Except the school officials with their thick files.

At the Cattersons, Seth won’t speak to me except in monosyllables. During two back-to-back reruns of “Get Smart,” he
keeps his eyes trained on the small television screen which sits in a corner of our living room on a table that used to hold one of Phoebe’s ferns.

“Are you going to The Main Event?” I ask him.

“Yeah.”

Mrs. Catterson slips into the room with a dust cloth.

“That’s going to be so much fun,” she says before she slips back out. I catch Seth scowling at me and I focus on the fine brown hairs that sprout, tentatively, from his upper lip. Then the lip moves. “Did you take something out of my closet?”

“Your closet?” A little flame of anxiety flickers in my stomach, then turns angry. “Your closet?” I’m still staring at his upper lip, trying to figure out why the beginning of his mustache seems so disgusting. It’s just hair. I feel my own upper lip curl. “Half the stuff in there is still mine.”

“Stealing’s a sin.”

“You should probably notify your mom, then.” And as I say it, I start to smile.

“Cut it out.” Seth turns back to the television, where Agent 99 and the Chief are conferring at a big, dark desk.

“What’s wrong with you,” I whisper.

“They weren’t for anything bad,” he whispers back furiously, as if to the television. His cheeks are bright red. “They help you stop thinking sinful thoughts. You wouldn’t know anything about it. You’re a girl.”
It rankles me that even when Seth has something to hide, he has a Godly explanation. “I know what I saw looked bad,” I say.

“I know you should probably shut up.”

Mrs. Catterson breezes through the room with a can of air-freshener and stops short, can poised over her head to spray. “What did I just hear?” she says, while Seth slouches deeper into his chair. “Seth, you know how I feel about the words ‘shut up.’”

“Sorry.”

“He was mad that I went into his room last time. He thought I bothered his stuff.”

“Seth, I’m sure Charmaine wouldn’t bother anything of yours,” says his mother. “It’s kind of a tough situation, since it’s usually her room anyway. She’s loaning it to you, so you both have to be flexible.”

“We’re paying rent,” Seth says. “She’s not loaning me anything. And we’re just renting to be nice, because her father’s in the loony bin and they need the money.”

Under normal circumstances, what Seth has said would make me angry, but I’m distracted by what’s happening to Mrs. Catterson’s eyes, nose and mouth. They seem to be shrinking towards each other like they’re about to have a conference in the middle of her face. When she speaks, it’s out of a tight circle she makes with her lips, but all she says is, “To. Your. Room.”

“I’m just telling the truth,” Seth says.
“While you’re up there, you may consider the spirit behind such words.”

Seth glances nervously towards me, worried that I’m going to be alone with his mother.

“It’s okay,” I say to Mrs. Catterson. “I don’t think Seth meant what he said.”

“Not okay,” Mrs. Catterson says. Her features are recovering, migrating back to their original positions.

“Seth’s just upset because he thinks I took something out of his closet.” I use a helpful voice, and Seth stands up quickly and stares at me, fists clenched down by his hips.

“Possessions are fleeting things, Charmaine,” she says as Seth slinks out of the room. “I don’t care if you took everything he owns.”

When Phoebe comes to pick me up, she’s driving Daze’s Buick instead of the Pinto. She has a quick, whispered conversation with Mrs. Catterson, then they both turn to me.

“Your grandmother’s had another stroke.” Phoebe’s brows lower into a hard, concentrated expression. “I’ve just been to see her.”

“Which part of the brain?” I ask her, thinking of the printout from my father’s cat scan.

“What? I don’t know.” Phoebe shakes her head. She has not trimmed her hair in a long time, and her Dorothy Hamil cut is growing out, swinging in strange layers under her chin.

“What’s been affected,” says Mrs. Catterson.
“Her speech. Her left side.”

“The right hemisphere,” I say, as if accurate information, accurately stated, can protect anyone.

In the Buick, Phoebe tells me that Daze has been moved to the third floor, the medical care floor, of the Custer Peake Memorial Retirement Center for a while. I can still visit, she says. I can do my homework in the lobby and go see her whenever she wakes up. “It’s bad timing,” Phoebe says, “but if I know your grandmother, she’ll pull through. Everyone will be praying.”

But I won’t be praying. Not for my father to come home, or Titus to come back, or Daze to get better, or even my safe prayer, the prayer without ceasing that doesn’t indicate anything in my life that might come before God. I understand that my soul, in addition to everything else, is probably now in jeopardy. And I remember Job and how he kept his faith when every bad thing under the sun happened to him, but where I used to admire Job, now I wonder why he put up with God making bets about him with Satan. I am not Job. I am, I think, more like the Puritan women, willing to drown their own babies to escape the uncertainty of a mysterious God. Or like Lot’s wife, choosing sides once and for all.

We’re passing all the familiar things. The First Methodist Church of God. First Community, my old elementary school. We’re passing the two streets of houses on the west end of town that end in the scrubby field where the water tower stands, the cross already glowing because it’s getting dark, even
though it’s not yet seven o’clock. I watch it all with a kind of numbness at the impossible way everything keeps on looking like it’s always looked, while my insides are so different.

At the RV-cabin, Phoebe heats up soup and I stay outside, calling for Titus without much hope. I peer into the trees, step out onto the dock, scan again the craggy lines where the water and land meet on either side of the river. All kinds of stuff ends up there—leaves, sticks, sometimes trash. I imagine what Titus would look like, drowned and bloated with water, and I keep my eyes peeled for anything that could be him. A train approaches high above, and I watch the whole thing, forty-two cars, and it sounds heavy and cold.

“No sign?” Phoebe says back inside. She has closed the window over the counter, and I shake my head and open it again.

“We’ll be cold,” she says.

“I don’t care.”

We sit at the fold-out dinette, and when I slurp my soup, which is inelegant, Phoebe just stares into her own bowl like it has the answers to something she wants to know. She says nothing, not even when I tip my soup bowl the wrong way, towards instead of away from my body. Not even when I lift the bowl to my mouth like a big cup. She just says, “I think I need a quick nap, can you rinse the dishes?”

I watch her shuck her work clothes onto the driver’s side seat of the RV and climb the ladder in her bra and loose beige
panties. I rinse out the dishes and in five minutes she is asleep, snoring softly.

I take a gooseneck lamp and crawl into the passenger seat with my homework. I start the homework for each class, but I don’t finish it. It’s not that it’s hard. I listen in class enough to understand. It’s just that finishing it is a tedious job, and my pencil feels heavy in my hand, like it’s dragging my brain behind it. So I switch over to the book I’m rereading, now, A Wrinkle in Time, headed now towards an ending where I know the father comes home and things are going to be okay. This part of the RV-cabin, with its dashboard for a picture window, looks like an aquarium, lit up from within, and I tell myself that the longer I leave the light on the more easily Titus will be able to find his way home. When Phoebe has been asleep for hours, I sneak out the picture of the dead woman on the table, and I look at all the parts of her. The messy heart and the spongy lungs. I look between her legs, and wonder about the feeling I get sometimes when I think about what it would be like to sit on Cecil’s lap. I wonder if it would still be my fault, and the sin of lust, if he made me do it. And now that I’ve stopped praying, I wonder if trying not to sin still makes me a Christian. I stay awake until everything that’s dark outside—the bushes, the grass, the gravel drive, the trees down towards the river bank, the bridge high overhead—takes on the violet light of dawn. I think about Daze and how she must feel trapped, again, inside a body that won’t do what she tells it to on one side. The prayer comes to me and I
don’t shut it down but I don’t try to keep it going, either. I’m a little curious about how long it will go on without my help. When Phoebe wakes and asks me what time it is, I pretend I’ve fallen asleep with the light on and that her voice has woken me up, and I tell her, with my best grogginess, that I don’t know.

“I always wondered what your trailer-cabin looked like on the inside,” says Tracy on the way home from school Wednesday.

“I’m not supposed to have anyone over. I’m supposed to keep the door locked.”

“I can just look in the window. My granny, my dad’s mom, lives in a trailer in West Virginia and everything inside’s real small. Is yours like that?”

“Kind of. There’s a little sink and refrigerator and stove.”

“I could just pop my head in,” says Tracy. “You wouldn’t have to tell your mom. You have your own room in that thing?”

“No.”

“You have to sleep with your mom?”

“No.”

“Well let me see it, then. I watched your dad build some of it, I should get to see it. It took him long enough.”

And suddenly I’m thinking about the times my father went down to the cabin to work on it, and to fast and pray, and that this may be the kind of thing he won’t do anymore. You think that once you know things are different than you can’t get surprised
by it, but when it comes up against the part of you that remembers how it used to be you can forget, for a second, and feel the shock of it all over again.

“What?” Tracy’s saying to me. “You mad? I don’t have to come today.”

“You can come.”

“Really?” It’s one of Ravenna’s days, and Tracy yells up to her. “I’m going home with Charmaine.” The woman meets Tracy’s eyes in the rearview and nods. Tracy falls back against the seat and starts digging at her tennis shoe with a pen, now that it’s settled. Outside, the trees are starting to be tipped with color. My father once explained to me that the reason Maple trees turn red is that the sugar they use as food, glucose, gets trapped in the leaves when the days get shorter. Once I tasted one but it wasn’t sweet. He said the other colors, the yellow and orange, have been in the leaves all along only the chlorophyll from sunlight covers them up all summer. So some things get trapped, in fall, like the red sugar leaves, and some things, things that were there all along, get revealed.

“Are your parents divorced?” I ask Tracy. I keep looking out the window, watching the kids get off at the gas station. I’m wondering what Tracy’s mother will think when she doesn’t get off with them. Beside me, Tracy is still digging into the sole of her shoe with her ball-point pen. She’s concentrating hard, all the weight in her face pulling her full cheeks down around her lips in a troubled pout like a child.
“Did you hear?” I say.

“Yeah,” she says, nodding at her shoe. “I’m writing it.”

She’s making some block letters, and I see an N and a T, and when she pulls back her hand and shows me. The sole of her shoe says, “I don’t know.”

When the doors close behind us and we’re standing there on the gravel shoulder, I ask her how she’s going to get back home.

“Walk,” she says. “Same as you that once.” She follows me across the footpath to the door of the cabin. “Your big tom in there?”

I open the door with my key and hope Titus has come back, and is curled up inside on the passenger seat, but he’s not. “He hasn’t been home in awhile.”

“Whad’you say his name was?”

“Titus.”

She cups her hands around her mouth and hollers, “Titus!” There’s an echo up and down the palisades. “I’ll keep an eye out,” she says.

I’m standing in the door of the cabin, which looks dim and even narrower when it’s light outside. The couch I sleep on has my sheet and pillow and blanket folded up on the end of it, where I left everything this morning. The box of our shoes is under the dinette and I don’t know how weird any of this will seem to someone else. Even with the window open over the sink, I can smell the shoes.
“It’s just like I thought,” Tracy says, nodding. “You got everything you need. Your sink and stove and fridge. And it’s all your size. Can I see the bathroom?” I point to the accordion door on the other side of the dinette and she edges around the table, opens the bathroom door and stretches it closed behind her. “Can I use it?” she says, her voice muffled by the door.

“Sure.” I flip the dining room table top up against the wall so she can see how it makes the middle space bigger. I push the box of shoes up against the wall, too.

“Where’s your TV?” Tracy says when she’s finished.

“We don’t have one.”

“I would die,” Tracy says. “Look at the way the kitchen table pushes up against the wall like that. I never saw that before. It’s just like a regular trailer in here, only it feels more solid. I bet you can even stay during a tornado. The trouble you’d have is a flood. I guess nobody told your dad to build on stilts this close to the river.” She sits down on the sofa. “This where you sleep at?”

“Yes.”

She tries to bounce and makes a face. “Hard. You ever sleep on a waterbed?”

“No.”

“Where does your mother sleep?” I point to the flat cubby above the driver and passenger seats while Tracy lets out a low whistle. “She ever hit her head? Because I would forget not to raise up and hit my head. If I had to go to the bathroom. Plus I
get claustrophobic. That’s when you don’t like small spaces.

What’s her job again?”

“Teacher’s aide.”

“And your dad’s the preacher.”

“Kind of. He gets prophesies from God and writes about them. He did, I mean.”

“Did your mom leave him and take you away to live at the river? Or did he leave her?”

I weigh both possible scenarios and have no idea how to answer. “I don’t know,” I say, and I am horrified to hear myself sound like I might cry, but Tracy doesn’t seem to notice.

“I thought my parents were divorced because momma said they were and daddy was living over in Clay’s Corner. But last year he came home and she decided they were still married and now he goes back and forth. He had a baby with his girlfriend and when he’s here we all pretend we don’t know, but he took me to see her once. My baby sister. Her name’s Tabitha, like on that old show Bewitched? She’s the same age as my niece.”

“It’s in the Bible, too. Tabitha.”

“You read the whole Bible?”

I nod.

“Well, I guess you don’t have TV. What else are you going to do? I can’t believe your mom sleeps up there. Anyone ever up there with her? Your dad ever visit?”
I shake my head, trying to imagine my mother sleeping up there with another person. A man. While I’m down below. We never even spent the night here with my father, all three of us.

“I like it in here,” Tracy says, looking around with approval. “It might be hard with two people, but I can see living in a place like this by myself someday. Just a little cabin out in the woods, but with TV. And a phone. Everything kept neat like this. You got anything to eat?”

I open the small refrigerator. There’s a Tupperware container of powdered milk that needs to be shaken up again and half a loaf of bread. The freezer part holds two boxes of spinach.

“No, you don’t,” Tracy says looking over my shoulder. “No chips or pop or anything.”

“Sorry,” I say.

“Want to walk down to the river and have a smoke?”

“I don’t smoke.”

“Well then want to sit while I do?”

We climb down out of the trailer and cross the lawn, now overgrown, to where the bank falls sharply to the river. It’s slippery, so we make our feet flat and lean back into the hill for the right kind of balance. Today the water is fast and brown from all the rain, and the dock bobs a little, picking up water between the boards. There’s a whiff of skunk in the air, but probably far off. I look up and down the edges of the river, as I always do, now, for signs of Titus. Tracy reaches in her tight
jeans pocket, pulls out a small plastic tampon case and taps out a cigarette.

“Your dad didn’t have a baby with someone else, did he?” she asks me after a time.

“No.”

“Then maybe he’ll come back. You never know. Nothing’s over ‘til it’s over, is what my mother says. When the fat lady sings.”

“Maybe,” I say.

Tracy leans back on the dock, straightening out her body as she exhales. Then she parks the cigarette in the corner of her mouth, reaches into her jeans again and extracts a pocketknife.

“You got cousins?”

“No.”

“None? And no sisters or brothers, either. That you know of.”

“Right.”

“Alright. You know what blood sisters are?” She flips open the tiny blade of the pocket knife and lowers it into the current. “You give yourself a little cut on your finger,” Tracy holds up her finger. “Then the other person does it. Then you take your fingers,” she parks the cigarette again and uses both hands to show me, “and mash the cuts together. You bleed into each other, see? So then my blood is in your blood and yours blood is in mine. And once blood’s inside you it keeps making more blood, so then we’re blood related.”
“Does it hurt?”
“You never cut yourself on nothing before?”
“No, I have.”
“Well, did it hurt?”
“I guess not,” I say. I cut myself on an open can of tuna, once, and felt more outraged by the surprise of it than any pain.

“Things you do to yourself on purpose hurt less than things that people do to you, or things that just happen. You know they’re coming. And if we’re blood kin we’d be sisters forever, and have to help each other out, and you don’t have any real sisters.”

Tracy holds the knife out to me. My father says that sometimes the state sends out a notice that the river’s not fit for full-body contact. But even then, he says, your body has its own army of bacteria that battles other kinds of bacteria and that most of the time people are pretty safe. I take the knife and test the blade against the tip of my index finger.

“It’ll cut,” Tracy says.

I press harder, then I bear down on the knife’s tip right into the soft part of my finger. It hardly hurts at all, and a pearl of blood appears. When I see it, I think maybe it’s a trick Tracy’s pulling just to get me to cut myself, but then she says, “Here,” and takes the knife back and presses the tip into her finger, too. “Squeeze it,” she says, and we both do, blood blooming onto our index fingers and traveling, at the edges, into
the whorl of our fingerprints. It’s thinner than I thought it would be. “Now here,” she says, and holds up her finger. I hold up mine, too, and we move our fingers near, matching them, then touching them, then pressing them together to fully mingle our blood. I’ve never kissed anyone on the lips, with both people meaning to at the same time, but I imagine it might be something like this. “We’re kin, now,” she says, pulling back her finger, and all of a sudden I really, really want this to be true, and I don’t even realize I’m smiling until Tracy says, “Alright, already, now wipe that fool grin off your face.”
Chapter 16

On Thursday I get off the bus in town and find Daze on the third floor of the Custer Peake Memorial Retirement Center, in a room divided by curtains. She’s propped up on pillows in a hospital bed, her soft, white hair down around her shoulders, which is something I’ve never seen before. She’s rubbing one hand with the other, and the lotion is gardenia, a flower that smells sweet and sad at the same time.

“Daze,” I say, and throw myself on her chest to give her a hug. She pats me on the back with one hand.

“Phoebe,” she says, when I draw back and look at her. Then she moves her head to one side and says, “No.”

“Charmaine,” I say, and she nods once. I can see in her eyes that she’s not confused. She just used the wrong name.

“Phoebe,” she says again, narrowing her eyes with concentration. “No.”

“It’s okay,” I say. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine,” she says. It sounds like “Figh.”

“Can you walk?”

She answers me by turning her head to the side again. Half of a “no.” Then she turns her head back. The right side of her mouth droops more than it did with her first stroke.

“Can you still write?”
She lifts her right hand and looks at it as if she wonders. Then she reaches out with her left hand and grasps mine. I’m surprised by the strength of it.

“You’ll be able to talk and write again,” I say. “And walk. Like last time.”

She nods. She makes a noise that sounds like “Sorry,” looking at me and nodding. “Sorry to you.”

“It’s okay,” I say. “I’m fine.”

“Miss you,” she says, which comes out like a croak. She grips my hand harder with her good hand. “Sorry,” she says again. There are tears in her open eyes.

I blink hard. I have never seen Daze cry before.

“David,” she says, “Sorry.” She is clutching my left hand so hard that my fingers are starting to turn purple. “Sorry,” she says again. It sounds like sob.

Paulette, the nurse Daze always talks to in the hallway, pulls back the curtain and sticks her head in. “How’s my favorite patient?”

Daze moves her mouth, but nothing comes out.

“She’s been asking after you,” Paulette says to me. “I can understand her just fine.” She grabs Daze’s foot. “Can’t I, hon. You feel that? Good. She started physical therapy and she’s already making progress.”

Daze rolls her eyes, though only the one rolls, and says something I can’t make out.
“Shush,” says Paulette. Then she tells me to kiss Daze goodbye so I don’t tire her out. I do and I feel it all, her damp, soft skin and the hard bone of skull just beneath it and underneath the skull her tired brain.

Phoebe is off work early, waiting for me in the lobby downstairs. “It’s good she let you see her,” she says. She’s been sitting in a deep cushioned chair, and when she gets to her feet the extra material at the front of her slacks drapes flatly against her stomach. She has grown that thin. We push through the glass doors. “How does she look? She didn’t look so hot in the hospital.”

I think about Daze’s face, with its sunken side, but also about the way her silky, white hair brushed her neck and shoulders, and I don’t know how to answer. We’re walking to where Phoebe’s parked the Buick, in the lot out front. Across the road they’re building a new Church of the Savior, but right now it’s a skeleton of two-by-fours.

“Charmaine?”

“Her hair was down,” I say.

“Then she’s still out of commission,” Phoebe says. “Ever seen your grandmother’s hair anyway but skinned back from her face?”

“It looked soft,” I say. Dry leaves have collected on the windshield and when we get into the car Phoebe flips on the wipers and they scatter to the left and right. “Does Daze know you have the Buick?”
“It’s only until we figure out what’s really wrong with the Pinto,” says Phoebe. Not answering the question.

We pull out onto the county road, but in the direction of Clay’s Corner. “I was thinking we could go to McDonalds. We eat in that same little space every night. It’s getting grim.” She reaches over and pats me on the knee, something else she almost never does.

“Did something happen?”

“Nothing new, exactly,” Phoebe says carefully, “but I can see why you would ask.”

“You went to see Daddy again.”

“Your father is worried about his mother. He feels responsible. This has all be kind of a blow to her. The voice of God and everything. She believed him, you know. For years.”

“Everyone believed him.”

“Not everyone,” Phoebe says, and I don’t like the way she says it, like now her story might be that she didn’t believe him, herself.

“You believed him,” I say.

Phoebe sighs and puts the car in reverse. “I did believe him,” she says, speaking over her shoulder like she’s talking to someone in the back seat. “But I also wanted to believe him, probably, more than I really did. I just didn’t know it at the time. Now that I don’t have to work at believing him anymore I feel kind of relieved, actually. It was a big pill to swallow and a lot to keep up with.” We are trying to pull out onto the
highway. “Am I good?” she says, and even though I don’t want to, I look for her.

“You’re good.”

“You’re good at arguing,” Phoebe says. “Maybe you should think about being a lawyer someday. You could support yourself very well as a lawyer. That’s a good plan. Not like a man. A man is not a plan.”

“Do you still love Daddy?”

“I made a commitment that self-respect demands I keep.”

“Do you still love him?”

“It’s been a long haul,” she says.

“Do you love Dr. Osborne?” I am speaking, breathing through a tight throat, and it’s hard to keep the panic out of my voice. It scares me that Phoebe has decisions to make.

She sighs. “I don’t know Dr. Osborne very well. He is nice to me, but at present I am married. I am nowhere near entertaining suitors. Though come to think of it I feel like I don’t know your father very well right now, either. Dr. Osborne’s been a big help. He takes an interest. He’s helping out with Seth, you know, the way he’s supplementing homeschool with that play. Mr. Catterson is always gone, and boys need their fathers.”

“What about girls?”

“Girls need their mothers,” Phoebe says. “You’ll see.” Which sounds almost like a warning. Then she says, “I can’t believe we’re driving all the way to Clay’s Corner for McDonalds, which we can’t even afford. I must be out of my gourd. Look. I
kind of got into the habit of letting your father run interference with God for me. Because I believed the man should be the head of the home, like Christ is the head of the church, as the Bible says. But the problem comes when something goes wrong with the head, I mean the head of the church or your father’s head, then everyone following along is going to be led down the wrong path.”

“Did Dr. Osborne tell you that?”

“All I’m getting at is that I hope you never have to look back over your life and feel as though you have been talking yourself out of things and into things.”

“That won’t happen to me,” I say.

“I hope not. But it can be hard to tell in the moment.”

Outside the colors of the sky are crashing into themselves, bright pink and orange layers that turn dark at the edges then burst into an illuminated border with the sun.

“Know who I’d like to run a few things by?” says Phoebe.

“Custer Peake. All your father ever heard growing up was Custer Peake this, Custer Peake that. No way he could be a better preacher than Custer Peake. Tried seminary, but your father, he couldn’t stand up in front of people. Not going to be Billy Graham and son, not going to be the one to bring back the great revival.” She moves her hands from the bottom of the steering wheel to the top and frowns. “Do you know it didn’t even cross my mind to pray for myself and see whether or not the Lord was
calling me to get married. Because I’d been chosen by the son of the great Custer Peake.”

We’re pulling into the MacDonald’s parking lot. Kelly-Lynn says this is where the high school kids hang out on Friday and Saturday nights, circumnavigating the building with the drive-thru path and clotting up the playground. We park and walk up to the counter and Phoebe orders two plain hamburgers and one small fries. She informs the girl behind the register that we will both be drinking water.

“I’ll be hungry,” I say, without any hope. She reminds me, as I knew she would, of the apples on the counter in the cabin. If I’m still hungry when we get home, I can have one of them.

“Maybe I’ll get a job at McDonalds,” I say as we sit down. “I could bring home dinner.”

“If you’re looking for something to do,” says Phoebe, “you can learn to plan our meals at home. We’ve got to make some changes if it looks like we’ll be there indefinitely.”

“I mean I could work for money,” I say, as the word “indefinitely” sinks into my stomach. “In addition to bringing home some food.”

“Because here’s what we need to talk about. It looks like your father has decided to move into a halfway house in Lexington instead of coming home. Do you know what a halfway house is?”

It seems like it could not possibly be other than the obvious. A place for people who are ready to leave a hospital but
not ready to come home. Or not ready to go back to the home they had. Or who are not ever coming back and need time to make other plans. “Until when?”

“Until we figure out what comes next. Your father is either not himself right now, or he’s more himself than he’s been in a long time. I don’t know. Either way, he’s not the person we’ve been living with. It might be very difficult, even if he did want to come home.”

I swallow hard and feel the bit of burger go all the way down. “You said he was hard to live with before. So if he’s not that person anymore, wouldn’t that be a good thing? You complained about everything and now everything you complained about is gone.”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full.”

“You’re just letting this happen,” I say. “You’re not making him want to come home. You’re mad. You didn’t even put on lipstick when we visited him. Why would he even want to come home?”

“You think it’s that easy? Why don’t you make him want to come home, yourself? What kind of man has a child, a precious little daughter, and then doesn’t want to come home to her as soon as he can?”

When I try to swallow again it takes three times to get down my tight throat. In the plate glass window, we’re two unhappy people, talking, mirrored back to each other with the dark from outside showing through.
“I mean, seriously, Charmaine. I’m not saying he can help it, I’m just saying don’t blame me. If anyone’s giving up, here, it’s your father.”

I shake my head so hard it’s like the motion causes something in my mind to come loose and shift around.

“Think about Titus, Charmaine. Think what if you were out somewhere with him downtown in some city, and someone asked you to set him down on the sidewalk and just walk away.”

I do think of Titus as she says this. I think of how he likes for me to pick him up and sink my hand into his fat belly, and how afraid I am that he is dead and how much I want him to come back. If someone asked me to leave Titus on the sidewalk somewhere there is no way I would ever, ever do that.

“This doesn’t have anything to do with you,” Phoebe says, scrutinizing my face. “This is all about your father. One hundred percent. Let’s be clear about that. He’s not well.”

But now I am thinking about Tracy’s dog, Corky, and how mean he is, snarling and biting hard enough to hurt. “I wouldn’t leave Titus on the sidewalk,” I say, “but I might leave Corky.”

“Who?”

“No one would leave Titus anywhere. He’s a good kitty.”

“Yes, they would,” Phoebe says, “and that is the point. If they weren’t well. It’s not about the cat. If it’s a good cat or not. This has nothing to do with you. Don’t you dare get melodramatic. Believe it or not, the world doesn’t revolve around you. Truth be told? It has nothing to do with me, either.”
But I’m studying Phoebe’s face, the way her chapped, bare lips form around each word. The way they close over a bite of hamburger, containing it while she chews. I’ve never watched anyone eat this closely before, not even her, though it is something I must have been seeing for years. Suddenly it seems grotesque to me that I can see the shapes of the food and her tongue moving around under her cheek. And after she swallows I can see her tongue running across her teeth, just behind her lips, seeking any leftover food. One of her eyes is smaller than the other, too, and it seems awful the way she eats only an inch of one French fry at a time, dipping each next segment in the soft mound of ketchup. The yellow light from overhead makes her skin look like raw chicken. She reaches out her hand and taps my shoulder with her fingertips.

“What?” I say.

“Are you okay? I just asked you if you were okay.”

“Fine.” But I am not okay. I understand, now, that Phoebe is less appealing than any other person in the universe, and I am just like her, or at least fully one-half of me is just like her. And all the times I feel myself wanting to get away from her, my father must feel the same way, and he must feel that way about me, too, or at least half of me. And now I think that if my father really has been crazy then it’s been because of Phoebe and me, because of how disgusting we are, and if he isn’t coming home it is because the disgustingness is even more obvious now that he’s thinking straight.
“Why are you looking at me like that,” Phoebe says, and I put down half my sandwich. “You better eat some of these fries before I polish them off,” she says with a fry in her hand.

“I’m not hungry.”

“I knew it,” Phoebe says, reaching for the remaining half of my burger. I watch it go. “And you thought we needed to order more food.”
Chapter 17

On Thursday, right before English, twenty-nine days after the first one, my period comes back. In the school bathroom it takes forever to get the belt in order, and the safety pins, and to roll up my hand-me-down Jordache jeans, which are now stained, hide them in the bottom of the butt purse, and then unroll the fake Levis, which I cannot believe I have to wear the rest of the day. I wrap toilet paper around the stained underwear, as I did before, because I don’t have an extra pair and it seems safer than going without, under the circumstances.

“Your jeans,” says Kelly-Lynn when I get to class. “Oh my God.”

These days we’re listening to everyone’s how-to speeches. Since I forgot my first slotted time, on Monday, Mrs. Teaderman gave me an extension, and each day I show up and remember that, unlike homework which I can just not turn in, or turn in only partially completed, this is something I am actually going to have to stand up front and do. Today a girl gives a speech on how to select the proper pet based on the kind of home you have, how often you’re there, and your parents’ level of income and patience. She has moved around so much she has never been able to have her own pet. I nod along with the conclusion that dogs need a stay-at-home mom just like toddlers, while cats are a good choice if your parents have a lot on their plate. Or if you live in town and can keep them inside, I add to myself.
When Mrs. Teaderman calls my name, I say, “What?” and everybody laughs, thinking I’m making a joke. But Mrs. Teaderman gives me a troubled look and I realize that today is the extended day for me, and she is calling on me to stand up in front and deliver a how-to speech that I have not written or even thought about.

“We’re waiting, Miss Peake,” says Mrs. Teaderman in a frosty voice. “We were also waiting on Monday, when you asked for more time, and we are unprepared to wait any longer.”

“You have to,” Kelly-Lynn whispers. She has gotten her speech, on babysitting, over with, earning a solid “B.”

“You have two choices,” says Mrs. Teaderman. “You may stand in front of the class and say something about something you know how to do and receive at least partial credit for this assignment, or you may remain in your seat and accept a zero.”

My face feels so hot it must be swelling, and I pat at it with my hands as I rise to my feet.

“I thought so,” says Mrs. Teaderman, a woman who seems to have lost all patience for me since I have elected not to share my troubles with her. And since I stopped finishing my homework. And stopped participating in free-writing.

I make my way up the row of desks and stand behind the table in front.

“Do you have any props for us?” Mrs. Teaderman asks, and when I shake my head she says, “No props,” in a sorrowful tone.
I drop my hands to my side and look out over the class. Everyone is waiting for what happens next, though a handful of them, even kids I don’t know, have bowed their heads as if they’re embarrassed for me. Kelly-Lynn is biting her fingernails.

When I speak, my voice comes out more loudly than I intended. “My speech,” I say, and heads around the room snap up, “is about,” I say, looking up at the ceiling as if the topic is written on one of the panels, “how to,” I say, and then it comes to me. “Pray. How to Pray.” I blink a few times, for courage. I am probably going straight to hell, now, if I wasn’t already, using prayer this way. Representing something I refuse to do as if I still do it. As hypocritical as a Pharisee, thrown from the temple. But it’s a cleaner feeling than I would have expected, a relief after the muddy confusion in my mind around prayer.

Someone at the back of the room titters, while a boy at the front says, “Dear God, Amen,” and the class cracks up.

“Quiet,” says Mrs. Teaderman.

While I wait for the laughing to die down, I check the time on the clock over the door. It’s ten minutes to noon, and the how-to speeches have to last from between five to seven minutes.

“‘Dear God, Amen,’ is what a lot of people think when they think about prayer,” I say, looking right at the smart alec. He has two large pimples on his chin, and I stare at them for the three seconds it takes him to realize I’m looking at his chin and look away. I have become mean, in this way, with a knack for
making people uncomfortable when I have to. “And that’s a great way to start and a great way to finish. And you can put anything you want in between. Anything about school, or your family. If you have a sister who’s sick you can pray that she gets better; if your dad needs a job you can pray for God to help him find one or just to keep him feeling okay while he looks. If you’re worried about getting an F you can ask God to help you be smarter, or try harder. If you’re worried about getting fat—here I glance over at Kelly-Lynn, whose head is on her desk—“you can ask him to help you not to eat. God will listen to anything.”

I look at the clock again and it says nine minutes before noon. “Plenty of time,” says Mrs. Teaderman from her desk.

“I can’t even begin to list all the things you could pray for,” I say to the class. “There’s no way a five to seven minute speech could cover that.”

“Topic selection is an important part of the speech-making process,” Mrs. Teaderman interjects.

“But prayer doesn’t have to be what you think of as prayer. Some of you might think you have to close your eyes,” I say, and I close my eyes, point to them, then open them again. “Nope.” I shake my head. “Some of you might think you have to get down on your knees,” I say, and drop to my knees. I’m hamming it up a little, which probably is even less respectful to God. Not that it matters much anymore. A few people laugh. While I’m down there, I press my palms together. “Some of you might think you
have to make the praying hands,” I say. Then I get to my feet.
“Well, you don’t.”

“This is a ‘how-not-to’ speech,” says the boy in the front row with the pimples. Kevin, I remember, now, is his name.

“How-to, Charmaine,” says Mrs. Teaderman.

The clock says eight minutes before noon, which means I have at least three minutes to go. “Sometimes you need to pray about something but you forget all about praying,” I say. “The hymn says, ‘oh, what peace we often forfeit, oh what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.’”

“My granny sings that one,” calls out a boy in the second row.

“So I’m going to show you that there’s a way you can pray so that you’re always praying even when you forget. My dad taught me how to do it. It’s from the Bible, and it’s called ‘prayer without ceasing,’ and it’s what Jesus told the disciples they should be doing.” I stop for a breath and scan the class. Two of the girls who sit by the wall, girls I don’t know, are smirking at each other and I don’t even care. In the front row, one quiet girl’s mouth hangs open, making it hard to tell if she’s listening or thinking about anything or just trying to breathe through allergies. Kelly-Lynn has raised both her eyebrows. I haven’t ever told anyone about praying without ceasing. The boys are staring at me like I’ve started talking in Portuguese. The
clock reads seven minutes before noon so I am more than halfway there.

“So here’s what you do,” I say. “First you breathe in as far as you can.” I stop and breathe in and then let it out quietly, so it will seem like I haven’t let it out yet. “So when you breathe in, you think in your head, ‘inhabit me.’” The word, “inhabit” really pushes the smirking girls over the edge into giggles.

“In-what?” says the smart-alec with pimples.

“Girls,” says Mrs. Teaderman. “I’m sorry, Charmaine, but would you mind repeating that?”

“You breathe in and think in your head, ‘inhabit me,” I say. “But it doesn’t have to be that, it can be anything. Like ‘Help me,’ or ‘Abide with me.’ As long as it’s the same every time. Then you breathe out and think in your head, ‘oh, Lord God.’” Only the way I say it comes out like I’m taking the name of the Lord in vain, like I’m saying, “Oh, Lord God” as a general exclamation about something else, which is blasphemy.

The smart aleck with the pimples takes several ragged breaths in and out and tries to speak while breathing. “Inhabit me. Inhabit me!” It feels strange to hear the words of my prayer coming out loud from someone else.

“ Weird,” says one of the giggling girls, and two other boys start in with the exaggerated breathing.

“Class,” says Mrs. Teaderman.
Kelly-Lynn has arranged her face in its finest blankness, as if she exists somewhere beyond everything in the class, my speech, its detractors, and even Mrs. Teaderman herself. It occurs to me, looking at her straight back, that she is capable of a regal bearing, just like Daze.

I have lasted more than five minutes, now, and I figure that’s enough. I move a few steps toward my seat before Mrs. Teadermans says, “I think we’re ready for your conclusion.”

This time when I face the class I manage not to look at anyone in particular. I explain that if they practice saying those phrases to themselves at the same time they breathe, pretty soon the words will go through their heads automatically, even if they’re not thinking them on purpose. “And that means you’re praying without ceasing,” I say, the words coming out like one long word: “andthatmeansthatyou’reprayingwithoutceasing.”

“And so?” asks Mrs. Teaderman from somewhere behind me. “Can you bring us to the final result?”

“The final result is that the Lord is always with you,” I say. It seems obvious, but Mrs. Teaderman is waiting for more. “And then you have to be careful,” I say, filling up space and time with words. “Because He’s a jealous God, and when he’s always with you he knows if anything’s more important to you than he is, and then you’re in for it.” I take another step towards my seat before Mrs. Teaderman, who has returned to her desk and brought both hands to her temples, as though her head aches, reminds me that the conclusion of any successful speech is
followed by a Q and A. “Kevin?” Mrs. Teaderman calls on the
pimple boy in the first row who’s waving his hand. “Make this
appropriate.”

“Are you a Jesus freak?” Kevin asks, and the class cracks
up. This is actually a question everyone in the youth group has
been prepared for by Pastor Chick. We’re all trained to answer
with a proud, humble, ‘yes,’ or a cheerful, ‘yep, that’s me,’ but
I have never before been struck by how perfect the term feels for
exactly what Jesus has turned me into.


“I can’t believe you actually did that,” Kelly-Lynn says
when I get to my seat. She seems half impressed, half dismayed.
The class is still whispering about my speech when the next kid,
this country boy named Brian, shuffles up to the front of the
room with his model car. But his voice is so soft that Mrs.
Teaderman has to ask him to speak up about a million times, and
no one’s looking at me anymore. Then it’s Kevin’s turn, the
pimple boy. All he’s done is imitate Mrs. Teaderman’s peanut-
butter sandwich example but made it about grilled cheese, and all
he’s brought in is bread, and that’s probably from the cafeteria,
not from home. He has to pretend everything else is there and
he’s so nervous that his hands shake and he drops his one prop on
the floor and everyone laughs at him, too. By the end of class
everyone seems to have forgotten about my prayer speech except
Mrs. Teaderman, who hands me the grading sheet as I file out the
door. The speech counts for half my credit for the term, and when

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I unfold the grading sheet in the hallway it has a big A- in red at the top.

I don’t know what to call the clean, empty feeling, but it sticks with me all day. I catch myself laughing out loud about nothing as I walk to the bus, and I don’t even recognize the sound of it. There’s a mean finger of cold in the air and I feel like it’s in my head, too, and my voice.

This is the kind of thing the feeling makes me do. On the bus, when Cecil Grimes shuffles past Tracy and me and tells me it’s my day, the way he always does, instead of letting it go and knowing he’ll pick someone else, I say, “Right,” like I know he doesn’t mean it.

Tracy jabs me hard in the elbow as Cecil stops by our seat, breathing heavily through his nose. “You say something, girl?”

“You always say it’s my day.”

“You asking for it?” His delivery is careful, right down the straight, strong line of his nose.

I shrug.

“Move on by, Cecil,” Tracy says.

“Shut up.”

“You nuts?” Tracy says to me.

“He’s full of talk,” I say.

Behind us, Cecil heaves himself into his seat.

“What,” says Tracy under her breath. “You want to, now?”
I shrug again. I’m stuck between wanting it to happen already, if it’s going to, and the way the clean feeling makes me want it to happen, at least a little, for what I think it might feel like, for what can only be identified as lust.

“Anyway,” Tracy says, punching me. “I’m coming to that church party of yours. Where we ask people for stuff?”

“Okay,” I say, thinking that Operation Outreach is going right on along without me or my prayer life to back it up.

“I’m going to a church party in East Winder,” says Tracy. “God’s own Holy Land. I’m gonna see your fancy church friends.”

I don’t even think of Mary-Kate and Karen anymore as my real friends. Especially since I stopped going to Sunday school and the school prayer assembly.

“My dad’s moving home for the winter,” Tracy says, looking past me out the window as we drive through East Winder. She reaches her arm in front of my face and points to my church, an orange brick building we pass every day before Main Street becomes the river road. The marquee reads “Youth Scavenger Hunt” in its bowed out tin letters.

“Mine’s not,” I say.

“I know where he’s at, your dad,” she says, still looking past me. “My mom heard it.”

“Okay,” I say. She doesn’t sound like she’s going to tell the bus, but the clean feeling makes me wonder if I would even care, anymore, if she did.
“I had a aunt went crazy. Crazy Aunt Patty. Started off eating chalk and ended up chewing off her fingernails and had to be put away for good at Eastern State.”

“My dad has a chemical imbalance in his brain. They fixed it with medicine.”

“How come he’s not coming home, then?”

“He’s going somewhere else,” I say. My voice sounds like a thin transmission in from far away, news from some other world, where you say anything you want and just ride above the words without feeling anything. “He thought he wasn’t crazy his whole life, but now he thinks he was, and so that makes everything he did before maybe crazy, so he’s not doing anything he did before. Like live with us.”

Tracy studies my face like she’s memorizing it. “You get to stay in the cabin, then,” she says. “You get to keep riding this bus.”

“I guess.”

“Them other people still in your house?”

“Yeah. You can see Seth at the party if you want.”

“The one in the play? I think they should do a play with you and me. We could do a play about getting baptized in the river. My granny’s pastor dips people back and holds their heads under until they almost can’t breathe.”

“I’ve never been baptized,” I say.

Tracy stretches her eyes open and exaggerates a gulp of disbelief.
“My mother thought it would mean more if I was old enough to decide for myself. It’s supposed to happen this year.”

“But what about if you died before now?”

“I don’t think I’m ever getting baptized,” I hear myself say.

“Girl, what? I’ll baptize you myself. You can’t let yourself go to hell because you’re mad your daddy’s not coming back. It don’t mean nothing. That’s just how men do.”

“That’s okay,” I say, because I don’t know how men do, but it seems like if my father were like other men then he would have gotten someone pregnant, like Tracy’s dad, or he’d have had a mid-life crisis and gone bankrupt, like Kelly-Lynn’s dad. Or gone to jail like Theresa’s dad. And I wish he’d done any one of those things, or even that he’d gone from not crazy to crazy, because what I never heard of was anyone moving the other direction, coming back from crazy and ruining everything by being normal.

It’s started to rain again. We’ve passed the elementary school and the water tower and crested the hill on the way out of town, and now we’re on the river road, and I’m looking out at the spongy fields. A wet, brown leaf blows against the window and sticks there. Not a maple leaf with a pretty pattern and red color but a plain old oval shaped leaf, and I study its veins and feel how quiet the bus is on rainy afternoons, more like how it is in the morning, and then I realize that Eli is driving and Cecil Grimes is behind me and he hasn’t said anything the whole
ride home, not to me or any other girl, about sitting on his lap.
I peek back at him and he’s staring out at the wet fields, too.

“Feel this hair of mine,” Tracy says, like she always
does on rainy days. “That’s naturally curly hair for you.”
I give her hair a squeeze.
“Feels like wire, don’t it.”
“Kind of like steel wool.”
“Yours is getting longer and mine is getting bigger.”

Tracy puts a hand to it and almost smiles. She has liked me ever
since I said I liked her hair. Maybe she liked me all along and
was waiting for a sign I liked her back.

Then we’re at Cecil Grimes’ stop, and Eli is bending over
to fix the ramp. Before Cecil’s halfway down the aisle I’m on my
feet and pushing past Tracy.

“Where you going?” she says, moving her legs for me to
get by, but I don’t answer her.

“You get off here?” Eli asks me when I reach the front,
but he hardly knows me anyway, and I mumble that I have to see my
granny, scoot on down the ramp after Cecil Grimes, and stand
there in the gravel ditch, feeling like a crazy person, myself,
while the bus drives off. Cecil has heard me and stopped several
yards away. Now he pivots, slowly, on the shorter of his short
legs.

“You lost?”

I look around at the four buildings I’ve only seen as we
drive past. I can’t tell which one he lives in, because they all
look like sheds. There’s a big propane tank in the yard, light blue laced with rust and shaped like a bullet.

“You following me?”

The clean feeling in my head, my lungs, makes me suspect that nothing I do is necessarily happening for real. Like I’ve stepped out of time, somehow, and am observing myself from outer space, from the silent surface of the moon, where, maybe, there is nothing to lose. “Which one you live in?” I hear myself ask, dropping words to sound more like him.

He gestures to the gray-sided shed behind the propane tank, built up against the hillside underneath the place where the limestone starts to go bald. It’s not a shed, after all, but a small mobile home that’s been spray-painted. But he doesn’t move in that direction. Instead he crosses the road to the riverside, where there aren’t any buildings for another mile in either direction.

“Where you going?” I ask him, but he doesn’t answer me. The rain has let up a little. There’s a light on in one of the buildings, but I can’t see inside, and the only car in the yard is an old sedan on cinderblocks instead of tires. I keep a distance between Cecil and me, although his gait is slow and labored enough that I could easily catch up with him. He makes a big stride on his longer leg and then kind of swings the other one up with it, leading with one shoulder, then the other, as if for momentum. He disappears with a dip in the land and when I reach the drop off I find him half-sitting on a large overturned
tree underneath another tree, using the metal claw on his right hand to fish out his cigarette pack from the front pocket of his shirt.

“Make yourself useful,” he says to me without turning around. When I reach him he has the pack open and has dipped his head and found a cigarette with his lips. “There’s a lighter in my left pocket,” he says.

“You want me to get it out?”

“Yeah,” he says. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

I move closer to him and look down at his hair, which is very wavy and thick. He smells like cigarettes already, but also like my dad, which means, I think, that he uses the same shaving cream. I have never touched a boy’s pants before when a boy is in them and it shocks me the way the stitching around the pocket feels stiff and familiar, just like my own jeans. The hand-me-down Jordache jeans, not the ones Phoebe made, which I’m still wearing. Which I may be doomed to wear for eternity if the stain on my hand-me-down jeans doesn’t come out. I find the lighter with my thumb and forefinger and extract it. It’s bright red.

“No hurry,” Cecil Grimes says, and then I abuse my thumb against the lever until a flame finally comes out, which I hold to the end of his cigarette. “You want one?” he says, the cigarette moving up and down.

“No thanks,” I say, feeling absurdly grateful for the offer.

“What’d you get off the bus for, then.”
I peer down at the river far below, then up at the bridge. We are almost exactly halfway between. I can’t say why I’m here, if it’s because of curiosity, or because of lust, or because he’s one of the county people God laid on my heart and that kind of feeling sticks around even after I’m ready to let it go. “God laid you on my heart one time,” is what I hear myself say.

“He what?”

“And you always say it’s my day and then nothing happens, and you have to either stop saying it or do something about it. I can take it. I can take what’s coming.”

“Girl, what are you yammering about?” he says. Like he hasn’t been warning me for weeks.

“Charmaine.”

“I don’t care what your name is,” he says. Then he laughs and spits at the same time, out of the corner of his mouth. “You wanna sit on Cecil’s lap like the big girls do?”

I do kind of want to, but I’m still wondering what that will mean about me. If not for God, then for everyone else. For myself, even.

“You ready for that?” he says, and for the first time I can remember, he smiles. He has very straight, very white teeth. So white and straight they might not be real. Everything about his face and head is square and symmetrical, and if it weren’t for his body you might think he could be in a magazine.

“You’re handsome,” I say, before I can stop myself.
Cecil Grimes throws back his head and laughs. “You sound like my granny,” he says. “You’re handsome,” he mimics me in an old lady voice. He’s not being mean, though. The ash on his cigarette is about an inch long, now, and creeping towards his mouth, and he leans forward and clicks something with his tongue and the ash falls to the wet grass. I look back towards where the buildings are, but we’re over the knoll and out of sight. “What,” he says. “Don’t tell me you want to be my girl.”

I shake my head again. I could not in a million years explain what it is that I want, only that it holds me here, standing in front of this boy with his strange body.

“You could show me your tits,” he says. “I wouldn’t mind that. Want to show Cecil your tits?” I glance again to where the houses lie just out of sight, and when I turn back to him he’s squinting at me. “What,” he says. “You after the flipper?” He dips his head to where his right sleeve is always tied in a knot. “You can see the flipper if you show me your tits. How’s that for a bargain.”

If anyone had asked me what was underneath the tied sleeve, I would have guessed “stump.” Like the smooth, short thigh of Lt. Col. Evans at the Custer Peake Memorial Retirement Center.

“Does it hurt?” I say. “The flipper?”

“What, this?” he says, dipping his head again towards the tied sleeve. “Ain’t nothing but a thing.” He clicks his tongue and taps off the ash of his cigarette again.
“What happened?”

“What’s it to you?”

I give him a careful shrug.

“I just come out this way,” he says, finally. “Maybe Ma got some bad pills at the clinic. That’s what they said at the hospital. Babies coming out this way all over Canada.”

“What kind of pills?”

Cecil sighs and lets his cigarette drop to ground where he grinds it into the wet grass with the bottom of his tennis shoe. “Don’t know. Don’t care. Don’t matter now, and ain’t none of your concern. You’re just a kid.”

“I’m thirteen.”

“That stuff on the bus? Just messing with you. You don’t have to do nothing.”

“I’ll show you,” I say, and as I say it I know that I want to.

“Alright, then,” Cecil says, as if it’s all the same to him. “Light me another smoke.”

I slide a cigarette out from the package he’s set beside him on the tree and place it between his lips. I manage the lighter a little better this time. As I’m unzipping my sweatshirt the overhead branches move a little, in the wind, and water from the leaves hits my head and shoulders. Cecil ducks to keep his cigarette from getting wet, and when he raises his head I’m ready. I peel up my shirt, and when I get to my bra, I hook my fingers under the bottom and peel that up, too, because I don’t
want him to see the tight frayed material that never cleans up white anymore. My breasts don’t hurt, and I realize they haven’t hurt since two days before my period started again.

Cecil takes a long hard look. “You got tits, alright.”

The breeze picks up, and when the rain shatters down from the leaves again it feels gentle on my skin, and not too cold, and I can feel my nipples get tight.

“Hey hey,” Cecil says.

The air feels good. I don’t know if I should be watching him watch me, so I watch the river, instead. Even this high I can see it’s pocked surface, choppy as a plaster ceiling when the rain starts to come down harder. After a few seconds I lower my bra and shirt.

“ Anything of mine you want to see?” asks Cecil. He’s closer in under the tree and it’s catching most of the rain. I step towards him and he nods at his tied right sleeve, then at his crotch where I can see his jeans are bulged out. I’m standing so close to him right now that I can feel his breath, and his eyes on me, and for a moment I am full of him and he is full of me, and neither of us can see anything else. It’s complete. Which is how I always imagined it might be to be, for once, inhabited by God.

Then my hand is moving towards his jeans, and I’m thinking, “that’s my hand, and this is me doing this,” and when I touch him all I can think is how his jeans feel, how familiar it is. Underneath them his penis seems like it might be as big as a
forearm, like maybe that pill made some of his missing parts show up in the wrong places. I’m moving my other hand up to his right shoulder, over the tied sleeve, when a car approaches and slows down.

Cecil jerks his head to the side, listening. “I got to get up,” he says.

Car wheels crunch on the gravel across the road next to where he lives, and I’m about to move my hands, help him up, maybe, when he says, “Get your hands off me,” in a disgusted way that makes me feel suddenly, unbearably, alone.

“Wait,” I say, trying to get back to the closeness I felt just a moment before. I keep both hands where they are.

He brings the claw at the end of his left arm up to my wrist and tries to pinch me, but I just take my hand from his crotch and grab the metal stem right above the claw. I can’t believe how easy it is. I don’t even realize I’m holding him down until he says, “Bitch.” I feel him straining to get up using just his legs, but there’s an unusual equation with his body, and without any leverage from his legs he’s at the wrong angle to get any strength from his torso. The slightest pressure from my hand keeps him right where he is. “Let me up,” he says, and in his eyes is something that’s even more intimate than anything that’s already happened. It’s hate, all mixed in with the way we both know I’m keeping him down. I see it all, and I hold him there another long moment. When I let go, all my clean feeling is gone.
My insides are filling up with black vomiting, and I clap my hands over my mouth.

As he struggles up from the fallen tree, he doesn’t look at me, and I know better than to help. “I didn’t mean to,” I whisper into my hands, and I wish it was true, but it’s not. A car door slams and Cecil starts his labored way up the hill without looking back.
Chapter 18

On Friday, all the way to the Main Event, Phoebe peppers Tracy with questions.

“How long have you lived on river road, Tracy? Where do you and your parents go to church, Tracy? What are your favorite subjects in school, Tracy? How many brothers and sisters do you have, Tracy?”

And Tracy, sitting in the back seat, answers them all like she’s a movie star in the spotlight. She tells Phoebe about her mother, and her granny, and her older sister with a baby.

“Now where do your sister and her husband live now, Tracy?”

“It’s not an inquisition,” I say.

“I’m just trying to get to know your friend.”

“She lives with us,” Tracy says. “You saw,” she says to me, and Phoebe shoots me a look.

“You saw?”

“One time I stopped by Tracy’s to help with her speech,” I say. “Did I tell you I got an A on my speech?”

“She helped me a lot,” says Tracy, catching on.

“You never told me that,” Phoebe says.

“I forgot.”

“Charmaine is very bright,” Phoebe says to Tracy. “She just rarely applies herself. I have a feeling you’re a bright girl, too. Charmaine may have told you that I am a substitute
teacher? And you may be interested to know that most children choose playmates of the same intellectual capacity. That is why I’m always curious about Charmaine’s friends.”

“Playmates?” I say.

“I am learning-disabled,” Tracy says importantly.

“Well that just goes to show,” says Phoebe. “Most learning-disabled children are very bright.”

“Children?” I say.

“It’s hard to say anything right around Charmaine,” says Phoebe. “I am forever using the wrong words.”

“My mother says, one woman to another, her hat’s off to you,” says Tracy. “I told her you were a single, working mother. And I showed her where you-all lived and she said if you-all need anything from the store, like snacks or anything, you should ask her.”

“Well, that’s nice,” Phoebe says, warming a little. “If we need anything we’ll be sure to seek out your mother. In fact, maybe your mother and I should get acquainted, seeing that Charmaine spends some time at your house. I hate for us to impose like that.”

“We got a lot of fall squash you’re welcome to,” Tracy says. “We got more fall squash than we know what to do with. My mother gets real sick of canning.”

“My mother used to can,” says Phoebe. “I’d almost forgotten. Maybe your mother can give me a refresher.”

“Sure she can,” Tracy says. “Get it? She can.”
“Very funny,” says Phoebe.

After Phoebe drops us off at church, though, Tracy gets shy.

“You know some of these kids from school, right?” I say.

“In the hallway,” she says. “That girl”—she points at Karen—“she’s in my math class.”

About forty of us wait on the back steps for Pastor Chick to come out and give us directions. Maybe we’ll sing a little. Some kids are standing and some are sitting. Mary-Kate and Karen say “hey” to me from across the steps then start whispering to each other, eyeing Tracy. Most of the boys are roughhousing and tossing a nerf football around in the paved drive. “See that one with the brown hair?” I say, pointing to Seth. “He’s the one who lives in my house. In my room, actually. My old room.”

Tracy squints in the direction of the boys. “Wonder if he’s messing it up.” Then she turns to a car that’s just pulling up by the church doors. On its hood is painted an enormous golden bird. “That’s a Transam.”

When the passenger door opens Kelly-Lynn steps out, looking like she just landed from another planet in her own ironed Jordache jeans and her pearl earrings and her hair pulled back in a braid and tied with a crisp green bow.

“It’s that girl,” Tracy says. “You invited her too?”

Kelly-Lynn heads toward us, a sea of kids parting on either side to watch her pass.
“I like your car,” says Tracy, when Kelly-Lynn reaches us.

“So does my mom,” says Kelly-Lynn. “Just ask her, she’ll tell you all about it.” Which is exactly the kind of talk Tracy enjoys. We all watch the car round the circular drive, and when it reaches Main Street Kelly-Lynn’s mom gives it the gas and makes the tires squeal. A couple of the boys imitate the sound, sneaking glances at Kelly-Lynn. “Outta sight, outta mind,” Kelly-Lynn says. “We’re not exactly getting along. On top of that, Theresa’s mother called my house last night and told my mother I was not popular with her daughter and her daughter’s friends, and that she didn’t know if my mother knew what kinds of things I was up to, and my mother went through my book bag and found the flyer for this.” She looks at me pointedly. “Wonder how that happened?”

“Sorry,” I say.

Kelly-Lynn shrugs. “Might as well be here as anywhere, I guess.”

Pastor Chick emerges from the door and kids throng around him. Some of the boys punch his arm, and Seth’s friend, Billy, tries to tackle him. “You’re a tough bunch,” he says, laughing. Then he raises his voice. “I have here in my hand,” he says, and everyone quiets down. “People. I have here in my hand, right here”—he brandishes a sheaf of papers—“the lists for our scavenger hunt.” A small cheer goes up, with the boys in the parking lot whooping.
Tracy points at Seth. “That’s the one lives in her house,” she says to Kelly-Lynn.

“But the first thing I’d like for you to do is separate into small groups,” Pastor Chick is saying. “Four or five, people. And you know what? Since it’s getting on seven o’clock and the sun’s setting, let’s make sure there’s at least one Godly young man in each group. We don’t want to send our Godly young ladies out onto the mean streets of East Winder alone.” This time the boys in the back groan. They are totally outnumbered by Godly young women, and will most likely be separated. “In fact,” Pastor Chick says, “why don’t you Godly young ladies get yourselves into groups of three or four and I’ll assign you a Godly young man to keep and protect.” A titter goes up among the Godly young ladies.

“Us three,” Tracy says, and clamps one arm around me and the other one around Kelly-Lynn. “Hope he doesn’t give us that farty guy who lives in your house.” As soon as Tracy says it, I get a bad feeling.

“Seth?” says Kelly-Lynn. “I kind of hope we do get Seth.” She looks at me meaningfully.

Pastor Chick is pointing at us. “You three?” he says, and we all say, “Yes,” at the same time. “Before the evening is over,” Pastor Chick says, “I want to meet your friends, Charmaine Peake.”

“Are we in trouble?” Tracy says, and I tell her no.

I know it in my bones that he’s going to assign us Seth as a Godly man. It’s like God himself reaches down and tells me,
it’s that clear, only why God would bother letting me hear his voice at this point is beyond me. I can’t even pretend to be surprised when it happens and Seth sulks his way over to us.

“Seth!” Kelly-Lynn says. “I’ve heard so much about you!”

“Me, too,” says Tracy.

Seth glowers in my direction.

“Don’t look at me,” I say.

Pastor Chick saunters over to us with his papers in one hand and a box of garbage bags in the other, beaming. “Just look at this extraordinary group,” he says. “With my man, Seth, we have a grand protector. And with my good lady Charmaine we have someone, I’ll wager, who knows the mean streets of East Winder like the back of her hand. Charmaine, how’s your grandmother?”

“A little better.”

Pastor Chick extends his hand first to Tracy, who says, “Tracy,” and then to Kelly-Lynn, who says, “Kelly-Lynn.”

“These two have fine instincts,” Pastor Chick says. “I can just tell by looking at them—and by the company they keep.” He winks at me. “Who’s going to refuse a group of young people this special when they come knocking in the name of the Lord?” He hands Kelly-Lynn a sheet of paper with the list of items, and he hands Tracy the garbage bag. He tells us to stick to houses with the porch light on and to take only one item from each house. And we can’t go to our own houses. He looks from Seth to me then back. “You know what I mean,” he says.
“You mean Charmaine’s house,” Tracy says, and Seth looks at the ground.

We’re supposed to make a note of who we get things from and if it’s anything the people want back. “We don’t want an angry East Winder mob scene,” says Pastor Chick. And we’re supposed to be back by 9:00, and if we win, we get a prize. “Like a Bible, or what?” Tracy says when Pastor Chick moves on to the next group.

“Maybe,” I say. “Or a free youth group retreat. Or else maybe dinner at Pastor Chick’s house with his family.” Tracy looks unimpressed. Seth is pretending to look out over the parking lot while really glancing sidelong at Kelly-Lynn. When he gets back around to her again and finds her looking right at him, he turns bright red.

“Take a picture,” I say. “It’ll last longer.”

“I hear you enjoy photographs,” Kelly-Lynn says sweetly.

“You showed her,” Seth says.

“Showed her what?” Tracy says.

Kelly-Lynn whispers something in Tracy’s ear.

“You don’t even know what those pictures were for.” Seth turns to me. “You didn’t tell them that part, did you.” He sighs, and looks hopelessly from Tracy to Kelly-Lynn.

“What’re they for, then,” says Tracy.

“You look at pictures of things you don’t want to see to get rid of sinful thoughts.”

“Thoughts?” Tracy says. “A thought can be a sin?”
“They do if God knows your heart,” I say.

“But you can look at something that makes you sick to stop thinking stuff you want to stop thinking,” says Seth.

“Why do you think things in the first place if you don’t want to think them?” says Kelly-Lynn.

Seth flushes pink from his collar to his hair. “Forget it,” he says, and stuffs his hands deep into his pocket. “Just give them back.”

“We can’t,” Kelly-Lynn says.

“People,” yells Pastor Chick from the top step of the church. “Have you formulated a strategy?”

“No,” Seth mutters beside me.

“Because in ten seconds I’m setting you scavengers loose on the town. Are you ready?”

The crowd of kids gives off an anemic group “yes.”

“Convince me,” says Pastor Chick.

“Yes,” everyone yells.

“Ten, nine, eight,” Pastor Chick counts.

“Lightbulb’s easy,” says Kelly-Lynn, scanning the list.

“Seven, six, five,” says Pastor Chick.

“So is coaster,” Kelly-Lynn says. “Polaroid picture of us? That might be tough. You know anyone with a Polaroid camera?”

“Dr. Osborne has one,” Seth says.

“Two, one!” Pastor Chick says, and we trail after the kids that throng out of the parking lot in their groups.
Everyone’s moving right down the middle of Main Street, getting in each other’s way. Like lemmings, Phoebe would say. I head in the opposite direction, towards the town’s single stoplight, and my group follows. Beyond the stoplight are the two tree streets, Maple and Elm, with twenty or so houses, including Dr. Osborne’s, before they both dead-end at the hill with the water tower.

At the first house, Mrs. Renfrew, an old friend of Daze’s, comes to the door in a housedress and with her hair in curlers. “Oh, my,” she says, and retrieves a gold button from her sewing box. She gives us all a piece of gum, too, from her purse. The gum is very stale, and we all work our jaws hard until we’re out of sight of Mrs. Renfrew’s house. Then I spit mine in a drain and so does everyone else.

“Think she’s going to want this button back?” Kelly-Lynn asks, making a note on the list.

“You should always return peoples’ property,” says Seth pointedly.

“I’m going to knock your heads together if you don’t stop talking about them pictures,” says Tracy, as we head for the next house with a light on.

A bald man I’ve seen around town answers. “Who is it?” his wife calls from somewhere in the house behind him, and he says, “I don’t know. No, wait. It’s the Peake girl. Do I have that right? How’s your father?”

Everyone looks at me.
“Fine,” I say, training my eyes on the man’s waxy-looking head. I want to tell him that he doesn’t know me well enough to ask about my father, but we need a wooden spoon. And a couple other items.

“You must be looking forward to him coming home.”

“Yes,” I say. “Do you have a wooden spoon?”

“You kids coming from the church tonight?” says his wife, popping her head over the man’s shoulder. “Oh, hi there. Charmaine, right? How’s your father? And Seth Catterson? I don’t know you other two girls. We read about this in the paper. What fun!”

“You got a wooden spoon or not?” says Tracy.

“I have one,” says the woman, drawing in her mouth regretfully, but I’m afraid it was my grandmother’s wooden spoon, if you can believe it. She gave it to my mother. It never leaves my kitchen.”

“How about anything else on this list,” Kelly-Lynn says, and thrusts the list in front of the pair’s faces.

“A bi-centennial quarter? Maybe,” says the man. He jingles some change in his pocket and pulls out a handful, slowly turning over each quarter while we wait. “Nope. Nope. Nope.”

“You have a golf tee, Gerald, somewhere in the garage,” says the woman, helpfully.

“Not if they’re in a hurry,” Gerald says.

“Strawberry?” Tracy says hopefully. “It doesn’t say it has to be real.”
“I don’t think so,” says the woman. “Sorry we’re not more help. I can’t give you a coaster, either. They’re part of a set.”

“Tell you what,” says the man. “I’ll go through my change drawer and look for one of those quarters and you kids stop back by on your way to the church. I know there’s one in there somewhere.”

We thank them and head back down their walk.

“How come you said you’re looking forward to your dad coming home, when he’s not?” Seth says.

“He might come home, yet,” says Tracy. “You don’t know, either.”

“When’s your dad coming home,” I ask Seth.

“When he’s done fundraising.”

“He’s been fundraising a while, now.”

“So what?”

The sky is growing dark, and more and more lights come on as we shuffle down the tree-lined street. It’s a clear night, with a gentle wind that rustles the dry leaves underfoot. It’s chilly enough to keep us moving right along.


“My parents are not getting divorced,” Seth says.

“They’re missionaries.”

“Charmaine’s parents aren’t, either,” Tracy says.

“I never said they were,” says Seth. “But maybe her father has to stay locked up.”

“He’s not locked up,” I say.
“He’s at the funny farm. He’s crazy.”

“What’s crazy is to try and control your thoughts with pictures of dead people,” Kelly-Lynn says to Seth, but she says it pleasantly, like it’s the kind of thing friends might say to one another, and pokes him in the shoulder.

“It’s not crazy.” Seth’s voice strains with trying to convince her. “It’s just a way of not thinking about stuff.”

“I saw *Faces of Death* at my dad’s girlfriend’s house,” Tracy says.

“Did it help you not think about stuff?” Kelly-Lynn says.

“I never even tried not to think about anything. I never thought of just thinking something being bad,” says Tracy.

“That’s what sounds crazy to me.”

“Seth’s talking about lust,” I say. “He lusts after girls, which is a sin. So then he looks at gross pictures, like pictures of abortions, and accidents, and cut-open women to make him stop thinking about the things he wants to do.”

“I do not,” Seth says, but his voice hits a shrill note, and even in the dark I can see him turning red.

“What if it backfires and you start wanting to do stuff to the dead women,” Kelly-Lynn says. “Like to that woman on the table.”

“What table?” says Tracy. “What woman?”

We are now standing in front of Dr. Osborne’s house, where the light is on. He lives in the only Sears and Roebuck bungalow in town, Phoebe has told me, which his father built from
a kit. I love the thought of a whole house coming from a kit, with directions for assembly, complete with a front porch, half-pillars and a swing. We don’t even see him sitting there, on the swing, until he emerges from the shadow to stand at the top of the stairs.

“Dr. Osborne, tell them,” Seth says. “About how looking at pictures to control your thoughts.”

Dr. Osborne places his palms together under his face, resting his chin on his fingertips. “I seem to have come upon a lively debate of aversion therapy. I’ve heard of this. When one starts to associate sinful thoughts with unpleasant images, and then, the theory goes, one is less likely to think the sinful thoughts in the first place.”

“What do you mean you’ve heard of this,” Seth echoes him, frowning.

“Some people think it’s helpful,” says Dr. Osborne.

“Some people,” echoes Seth again, with a hint of outrage. Because, I see now, Dr. Osborne is the one who provided the pictures to Seth in the first place. He’s talking like it’s some distant idea because he doesn’t want the rest of us to know. He looks calm, with his hands out, explaining, his face moving around the words he speaks, so sure we’re all going to believe, believe, believe, everything he says. So sure Seth’s going to get the message to keep it between the two of them. He’s going on about how thinking can be a sin, how efforts to purify one’s thoughts mark one as Godly. Tracy and Kelly-Lynn are listening to
him as attentively as Seth, though Tracy’s narrowing her eyes as though she’s gearing up for a question or an argument. I’m just watching. I’m watching Dr. Osborne so closely that pretty soon he feels it and turns in my direction and winds up whatever he’s blathering on about.

“What kinds of pictures would you use,” I say.

Dr. Osborne looks at me carefully. “I’m not sure what you’re getting at, Charmaine.”

“Dead women?” says Kelly-Lynn, and something in Dr. Osborne’s face closes up.

“I really couldn’t say,” Dr. Osborne says.

“Yes,” Seth says. The truth, when you know it, can be hard not to state. “Like dead women, or baby pieces, or other dead people. You know,” he says to Dr. Osborne. “Tell them.”

Dr. Osborne strokes his chin and closes his eyes. “I suppose those would work,” he says, as if considering it for the first time.

Seth’s bottom lip pulls away from his top lip, but no sound comes out.

Tracy and Kelly-Lynn trade uncertain glances.

Dr. Osborne chuckles into the empty air, but it’s a dead sound.

Seth is shaking his head. He is looking at Dr. Osborne with disbelief and outrage. And something else I can’t identify.

Dr. Osborne shifts his gaze from Seth and smiles at Tracy and Kelly-Lynn in a frozen way. “I don’t believe I caught your
names, girls." When neither of them answer, Dr. Osborne performs
the automated chuckle again, and his eyes flick over all of us
once before settling on Seth. “Whatever you kids are up to
tonight, trick or treat? Trick? I think I’ve had enough. Head
along, now, and I won’t feel like I have to call your parents.”

“And say what?” I say.

“You don’t even know my parents,” says Kelly-Lynn. “You
don’t even know my name.”

“We don’t have a phone,” says Tracy.

“I’m sure your mother would be interested in this little
exchange,” says Dr. Osborne to me. “She’s got enough on her
plate, don’t you think?”

“Let’s just go,” says Kelly-Lynn. She turns and heads
down the walk.

I unzip the butt purse and pull out the picture of the
dead woman on the table. I move into Dr. Osborne’s porch light
and hold it so that he could see, if he’d look, but he won’t.
Because of course he already knows what it is.

“The Peakes have become known for their inventiveness,”
Dr. Osborne says. “Generations back, the name Peake meant
something in this town.”

Closer to me, in the growing dark, Seth is sniffling. I
can’t believe I’m doing it, but I put the picture back in my
purse, take two steps toward Seth, and lay my hand on his
shoulder. He doesn’t resist. Then I grasp his hand, and he lets
me do that, too. It’s sweaty and limp, but I hold it hard and start to pull him down the walk.

“You kids are lucky I have a sense of humor,” Dr. Osborne calls after us. We duck into the shadows between the streetlamps. “Watch yourselves.”

Beside me Seth is still crying. I try to keep hating him, for living in my house, and for all the things he’s said about my father, but I can’t. It’s a much stronger feeling to see him wretched like this and want to fix it.

When we catch up with Tracy and Kelly-Lynn, Kelly-Lynn is peering at her glow-in-the-dark watch. “We’re never going to finish before 9:00,” she says. She takes the list back from me and holds it up to the street lamp, then folds it into quarters so it fits more easily into the pocket of her jeans. “It’s not all that much fun, anyway.”

High above the last house on the street, over the field beyond, the cross on top of the water tower lights up with an electric buzz that hits my ears like something much closer, an insect in my hair. I feel the urge to show these girls, to show Seth, something they won’t forget. To do something I won’t forget, either.

I head into the shadows of the next backyard, and the next, with everyone following me. We move without talking about it, as if we’ve all agreed on where we’re headed. In the last backyard, Seth pins down the top strand of barbed wire for us to climb over. We sway with the fence like bugs in a web. On the
other side, we’re knee deep in weeds, which we wade through as fast as we can towards the shadow underneath the tank. The tower is supported by four posts with crisscrossing diagonal cables between them like scaffolding at a building site, only wider spaced. One of the posts, on the inside, has a series of u-shaped rungs, and I grasp one and haul myself up, climbing before I’ve even made a decision. Below me, Tracy hoists herself onto the lowest bar.

Kelly-Lynn follows, and when there’s room, Seth grabs a rung, too, and soon we’re clumped like monkeys moving up towards the tank that hovers a hundred and fifty feet above the ground. But I’m not thinking about how high up it is. I stop looking down. Even as the space underneath me opens up in a wide coolness and the rungs under my fingers and feet feel thinner and thinner, I keep going. At the top, I give the underside of the tank a few pats like it’s a big, sleeping animal. My hand meets the surface with a solid sound. Nothing hollow about it. There are gallons and gallons of silent water inside, maybe tons. My palm comes away coated with paint dust.

I can hear Tracy breathing beneath me, and from beneath her, somewhat farther, come the voices of Kelly-Lynn and Seth. A breeze lifts my hair. Longer, now, growing all the time. My crown in glory. Or, like Absalom, my vanity. It is hard, sometimes, to make distinctions. The breeze blows through my shirt, too, which has come untucked, and it blows under the hem of my homemade Levis, soft against my ankles. I can see all the way to the First
Community church from here. I can see the First United Methodist, too, and the steeple of the Church of Christ far to the left. If it was light I could see more churches, all of them, maybe. I might even be able to see Tate’s Bridge, hovering over the distant palisades, emerging red and rusty among the turning fall colors like a manmade secret. I think I can make out the street where I used to live, where Seth lives now, and where his window, my window should be. Dr. Osborne’s street stretches out below, and in a little while Police Chief Ezra Burton will park his cruiser there and search for us with his megawatt spotlight.

“We’re in for it now,” Tracy will say, squinting at the light. And she’s right. We’re all in trouble. We’ll be taken to the police station where Police Chief Burton will call Mrs. Catterson and Phoebe, who will promise to inform Tracy’s mother and Kelly-Lynn’s mother, even though she changes her mind about that and never does. He will call Pastor Chick. He will let us know that Dr. Osborne’s is not the first such alert he’s responded to during his tenure on the force. In addition to disobedient, we are also unoriginal, the most recent in a long line of East Winder kids who try to climb into the water tank.

When Phoebe has dropped off my friends, I will wait for her to light into me, and when she doesn’t, I will find myself trying to make it up to her, uncharacteristically filling her silence with details. Daze calling me the wrong name, her name. The futility of ceaseless prayer. Dr. Osborne and the pictures, the dead woman on the table, clamped open, a loose breast under
each arm. I will watch the complicated way her face changes as she makes room for whatever this information could mean.

Even though I feel overcome with the need to share, to hold my mother’s attention close with as many words as I can get out, I keep to myself what happened with Cecil. I also keep to myself Dr. Osborne’s comment on the diminished state of the Peake family. Phoebe is a Peake by marriage only, and not for much longer, but I am a Peake, by blood, for life, and I will find myself guarding against this unbridgeable distance between my mother and me for a long time, wary of the new possibility that one can say no to one’s life this far, and “no more” to the people it’s held.

Not that Phoebe ever does that. What she does, what she will keep doing for the rest of her life, is bring everything that goes wrong back to my father, like a record stuck in a groove. Tonight she will say that worse, really, than any impotent thoughts are the actions, even the best-intended ones, that pull others into themselves. Vortex, is the word she finds. A vortex of selfishness.

But before any of this happens, I am right up under the belly of the water tank, grasping the rungs and edging my feet out onto the diagonal cables. When they touch the narrowest point, where the cables intersect in a huge X, I grab onto the top part of the X with my hands and thread my legs into where the cables meet. Then I let go, holding myself rigid from the knees, and lean backwards out over the deep, deep emptiness between me
and the ground. This is not something I would have said I was capable of, body or soul. I am not a cat, with, I discovered at the library, the ability to orient myself while falling, making a parachute of my chest and belly and taking advantage of terminal velocity. I am not Titus, who will come home one day soon, dragging himself up the riverbank, thin, wet, matted, with two broken legs, but still very much alive.

My stomach contracts with the effort of holding myself parallel to the ground. There is a point beyond my reach where the shadow of the water tank ends, where it gives way to the grainy electric light from the cross on top. It is not a warm light. It is not, especially, illuminating. Part of me knows that if I could reach it, it wouldn’t feel any different on my hands, really, than the shadow does. It’s crazy, then, that I reach for it anyway. I stretch my arms out further and further, every muscle straining. I am deaf to the warnings of my friends below and for some long moments I feel willing to fall, if that’s what it takes. Then close in my ear, closer than any voice of God, is Tracy, who has made it to the top, saying, “Girl, what are you doing?” Her face is clenched with fear, and her knuckles on the rungs of the ladder are as white as anything I’ve ever seen. Still, she begins to edge out onto the cables towards me.

“It’s okay,” I say, “I’m not doing anything.” I roll my body upright, untangle my legs and pick my way back across the cables to the ladder. Under my feet, the ladder’s metal rungs seem flimsier than they did on the way up. It’s hard to trust
that they’re even thick enough to hold my weight as I concentrate
on the process--slower than falling, harder than falling, maybe
even scarier than falling--of making my way down to the ground to
take what’s coming.

THE END