Tollhouse

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TOLLHOUSE

By

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A.B., Harvard College, 1983

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Montana

1995

Approved by

Chair, Board of Examiners

Dean, Graduate School

April 13, 1995
Chapter One

I was the last kid on the route. I lay back on the seat, my legs flopping onto the seat across the aisle, my butt hanging down in between, all of me bouncing lightly along with that old hulk of a bus. My feet were crossed at the ankles, my hands clasped across my bouncing ribcage. I lifted up for a second and adjusted my braid--it was caught under me, pulling--then lay back again.

Old mint-green paint had peeled from the ceiling in patches, revealing lakes of army green metal. Up in front, by his feet, Manny had the heater roaring, but I couldn’t feel it. In fact, my butt, hanging in the air with no seat to warm against, was getting colder by the minute. But I didn’t care. I thought back over my day. World Civ had been interesting. I loved The Odyssey, which we were reading in English. And French class had been fun--we were learning the passé composé tense. Until now, we’d only been able to talk about things in the present. Now, a whole new world was opening up: the past.
I was also glad, though, that the day was over and I was heading home. I liked school. I liked people. But it was easier to be by myself or with my family. School was sort of a strain. Just take the constant decision, for example, of whether to say hi or not to say hi. It was a split-second judgment I had to make a million times a day as faces streamed by in the halls between classes. It wasn’t a problem if a person wasn’t looking at you, or, of course, if you didn’t know them. But if they were and you did, there were all these factors to consider: my mood, if I liked the other person, if I wanted them to like me, if I should say hi to them for some reason, or if they were a jerk or a snob.

Then there was timing and technique. If I held someone’s eyes for too long, or my hi came out as an inaudible croak, I felt a deep burn of shame. This was heightened, of course, when the halls were quiet and just one other person and I were converging. The seconds crawled, and I didn’t know where to put my eyes. When was the exact right moment to lift them? To speak? What witty thing could I say, or should it be something nice, a compliment about their outfit? Sometimes when I finally got to class, my face was tired from smiling so much on the way. Didn’t that mean I was being fake? Could people tell? Sometimes, tired of the whole big deal, I dropped out of it. I would walk through crowded hallways with my face
to the window or the wall, seemingly lost in thought, or fascinated by a crack in the concrete.

Alone on the bus, I cocked my head back. Out the tops of the windows, bare tree branches raked the puffy gray sky. Valentine’s Day 1976 in Meadowbrook, Illinois, a northern suburb of Chicago, had been dull and cold, not what you’d call romantic. Still, the halls and classrooms at school had been full of the red carnations that Teens Against Dystrophy sold for a dollar apiece. You could send as many as you wanted to another student, with a card or anonymously. I had not sent or received any—but that was okay with me.

The bus shivered to a stop—the light, I knew, at Winneokee and Dundee. Idling, it suffered attack after little attack of the rigors. That’s what Mom called it after we ate ice cream and couldn’t stop shivering. I squinted up at a tree that stretched up over me, staring and staring until at last I saw its branches not as branches but as roots, pushing down into, penetrating, the sky. My world was upside down. Then the bus started forward, and my uprooted tree slid into the past.

* * * *

* * * *
When I came in the back door, I saw Mom at the stove, her back to me. She was pushing something around in a frying pan with a spoon, jabbing and chopping. Whatever was in the pan sizzled and spat. She reached up, clicked the fan button on, and pushed some hair out of her face with the back of her hand.

"Hi. How was your day?" she called over the noise of the fan.

"Fine." I went up behind her and peeked around her shoulder. It was ground beef. Even as I watched, parts of it turned from juicy pink to seared gray. "I got an A on that World Civ paper."

"Good!" She flashed me wide eyes and a smile. I had read it aloud to her the week before, right where we stood, while she cooked dinner. She always caught little problems in my sentences that needed smoothing out.

"What are you making?"

"Stroganoff."

"Ummm." It was one of my favorites. I put my arms around her waist, down low so she could still work. I nestled my face into one of the gullies along her spine and stood there like that.

Everyone always said how beautiful my mother was. She kept her glossy dark hair cut always the same way, in a simple, elegant line level with her jawbone. The bones of her face etched themselves delicately, even
sharply, under skin as smooth and richly pale as ivory. She worried that her green-brown eyes looked sunken, but they were just deep-set in her sockets. I told her they made her look wise.

"I have to do this," she said, with a little shake.

"Hmph," I said, hurt. That would be the last time I hugged her--for a while at least.

I went back and hung my coat on a hook. From the family room, straight ahead, came a thumping sound. A graceful curve of black and white fur on the floor, Stella lay propped up on one elbow, her head low, watching me. She kept whacking her tail against the floor at intervals, in little groups of three. "Hi Stell," I said, then made the mistake of sitting down to take my shoes off. It made me accessible, at her level. She couldn’t resist.

"No Stella," I commanded, but it was too late. She had planted her front legs and was hauling herself up. She lurched forward to greet me. Stella was getting old. It was such an effort for her to move around that I hated it when she did it for no good reason. She came over, nudged her face into mine, and began licking. Laughing, I pushed her head away and got up.
Tilting the pan towards herself with one hand, Mom dipped spoonfuls of grease out into an empty orange juice container with the other. Next, I knew, she would sprinkle onion flakes from a box and salt and pepper over the meat. I knew because she had gone through the steps of making stroganoff with me the week before. She was teaching me how to cook.

Tonight, however, she was going through the recipe fast, no pausing for instruction. "Dad called," she said. "He's on his way home from the airport. Will you set the table?"

I got quilted oval placemats out of a drawer and alternated them around the table, red, green, red, green.

"Oh--Lizzie," Mom said. "Tomorrow I'm going to get ingredients for those cookies you like. What are they called?"

"I don't know." I liked most cookies. "Snickerdoodles?" I ran my thumb down the stack of plates in the cupboard and hefted out four.

Mom nodded. "I thought you could bring some to the French woman who moved in down the lane."

I knew Mom had had lunch yesterday with some neighbor women to meet the newcomer. Mrs. Feld had organized it. She lived next to the house the French couple was renting. Such gatherings weren't frequent;
people on the lane stayed pretty much to themselves except for a party or two, usually at Christmas.

"Poor girl, she's lonely and homesick. She's only 25--not much older than you," Mom continued. "Her husband travels a lot for his job. I told her you're taking French. I told her maybe you'd go by sometime and she could help you with your homework."

The plates hit the placemats with a familiar thud. I frowned. "Why? I'm doing okay."

"I know, honey. It isn't so much for you. It's for her."

"What do you mean?"

"She's lonely," Mom repeated. "I thought a visitor, especially a young one, might cheer her up."

I folded paper napkins into triangles. "Is she nice?"

"Very nice. I think you'll like each other."

Napkin to left of plate, secured with fork. Knife and spoon on the other side. Knife blade towards plate. "What's her name?"

"Mrs. Charbonneau."

"Charbonneau," I said, putting more accent into it than Mom had. I shrugged. "Okay." I opened the drawer for trivets.
The back door opened and slammed shut; a ski jacket rustled as it was stripped off and put away. My brother Jack strode into the family room. He stopped at the table and dug deep in a pants pocket. His other arm's sleeve strained upwards, too short, against his wrist; the hand was red and cold-looking. Jack was tall, all leg and arm. His chest and shoulders were broad, but there wasn't much to them. He was handsome, though, and that, I thought, combined with a strong, sort of heedless air, explained why he never lacked for girlfriends. He had inherited our father's height and looks, his black hair and black eyes, but his face was finer than Dad's, almost delicate, like Mom's.

He pulled his keys out of his pocket and dropped them on the table near his plate before going upstairs to change. He nodded to me where I stood.

"Hey."

"Hi."
hung over his eyes, washing, lifting his arms to inspect, washing again, examining, until the shadow of grime was gone.

"Hi Jack," Mom called from the kitchen. "Dad’ll be here soon, then we’ll eat."

Jack poked his head around the corner and looked at me. His bare arms stuck out straight in front of him as he dried them. "Dad’s home?" I nodded. He shook his head and scowled. "I thought it was tomorrow night."

"He came back early."

I looked down, angling heavy green drinking glasses between the edge of the placemats and the tips of the knives. I could tell Dad’s arrival had spoiled some plan of Jack’s, and I didn’t want to hear what it was. I hated the conflicts they had. Dad was terrible: mean, yelling, and scary. But I also didn’t approve of the things Jack did—smoking cigarettes and pot, drinking, hanging out with other older kids who did the same.

Mom appeared at the kitchen door, wiping wet hands with a paper towel. Her eyes, on Jack, were smiling and warm. "How was work?"

"The usual."

"Anyone we know come in?"

"Wendy, with a flat tire."
"Did you fix it for her?"

"I think so." He shook his head. "She sure talks a lot." Wendy was my boss in the bookstore where I worked odd hours each week.

"Well I know she thinks a lot of you," Mom said over her shoulder, disappearing back into the kitchen. I knew she'd said this to make Jack feel good, but it was also true. Wendy liked all four of us Alder children, maybe because she didn't have any kids of her own. My older sisters were at college, but for a couple of years before she left, Sally had worked for Wendy. Then I'd started when I was 12. But Wendy really liked Jack. He was the only boy and was often in trouble. I suspected she felt sorry for him.

"Lizzie," Mom called over her shoulder, "you can put the rolls in the oven for me."

The house shuddered. Just once, a little. It was a solid house, but as my father's limousine swung around the bend in the driveway and accelerated into the long straight last stretch, a wall of air always slammed against the house and shook it. My bedroom was on the front of the house; Jack's on the side, where the limo turned around; so we both felt and heard the limo in the mornings before we woke, and again around
supertime, or, if Dad was coming in from a business trip or Mother and he had gone out, late at night.

My father was the president of a company. This had happened somewhere around the time we moved into this house, when I was in second grade and he was 40 years old. It was a big deal that he was 40--there were articles about him in newspapers and magazines; 40 was supposed to be young for a company president. I didn’t see what the fuss was about--40 seemed pretty old to me--but I took their word for it and was proud. At some point, the company had provided this limousine and driver. Dad said it was so he could get a lot of work done and phone calls made on the way to and from work. If that was so, then why did Oscar take us, Dad’s family, to the Symphony sometimes at night, or to the airport for a trip?

The long black car flashed past the back door, sliding by again a moment later after turning around out back. Without watching, all of us--Jack and I standing idly by the table, Jack cleaning his nails; mother in the kitchen, cooking--all of us knew how Oscar would bring the limo wafting to a halt before the front door, how the big car would settle as if getting its feet back under it, as if coming down to earth.
"I have to ask Oscar something," Jack said. We heard one car door slam, then another. Then it was quiet. In our minds’ eyes we watched Oscar pull luggage from the cavernous trunk, and stand by the purring car while my father made arrangements for the next day. Then, on the other side of the house, the front door hinges squealed, the knocker swung wildly as the door opened. A body fought the storm door, dragging luggage and briefcases through. At the same time, Jack slipped out the back door.

The front hall, with its vaulted, open staircase and glossy dark slate floor, amplified the sound of the closet door closing. Then heavy steps made heavier by the weight of luggage ascended the thickly carpeted front stairs. Undoubtedly my father was taking his suitcase all the way to its ultimate destination, completing the task of getting home before returning downstairs for the reward of dinner.

I sat down on the couch and glanced at the front page of the newspaper. Heavy steps reached the bottom of the front stairs, rang briefly against the front hall slate, then came across the dining room. The dining room was the next room over; we only used it on special occasions. Now its floor shook beneath each step. Then my father came through the door.

"Lizzie!" he exclaimed, putting his arms wide in a gesture of greeting.
He didn't expect me to go to him. We didn't kiss or hug much. He was just in a good mood. I smiled and looked down. "Hi Dad. How was your trip?" I realized I had my feet up on the table in front of the couch. Discreetly, I took them down.

"Good, good," Dad said. He turned towards the kitchen. Mom was coming out, a spoon in her hand. My father was tall, taller than her by a head and a half. He had played basketball in high school, and went to college from his small town in Ohio on a track scholarship. When I was little, his hair was darker than my mother's, true black, but now it was almost completely silver. Extra folds in his eyelids made his eyes look droopy and slightly bloodhoundish, and extra weight pulled down on his jowls. He couldn't lose it. Nor could he seem to control the thickness around his middle. But the coal-black of his eyes still burned lean. It left little doubt in our minds that what people who worked with him said must be true: our father was a legend. They usually chuckled and shook their heads a little, then spoke with respect and admiration. If it was one thing Dad had, Mother often said, it was integrity. The way she said this, it was like she had to keep reminding herself, and us, of good things about Dad.

"Hi there, Dad," Mom said, coming out of the kitchen. She also could tell he was in a good mood. She put her arms around his back and
slid them up around his shoulders, hugging him, the spoon pointing toward the ceiling. She burrowed her face sideways into his chest.

"Now Mom," Dad said, trying to push her away. She clung on.

She made her voice funny, high and pitiful. "Dad, you have to show me a little affection."

"No I don't, Mom. Let go of me." But a smile played around his mouth. He peeled her arms off of him and walked past her into the kitchen. "What's for dinner?" He was talking to himself, to change the subject. "Um. Stroganoff."

Mom stood where he'd left her. I was the audience for her expression--theatrically, that of the cast-off woman. I laughed for her, and she winked at me. Mom never really expected Dad to hug her back, she had told me more than once. He had a hard time expressing his feelings, she said. But she worked on him anyway.

"We can put the food in bowls," she said to me. I got up and followed her into the kitchen. I couldn't help but think it was dumb, the way Mom and Dad called each other Mom and Dad. They weren't each other's parents. They had real names. Why didn't they use them? And the way Mom was with Dad seemed fake to me. Why did she try to get him to be affectionate when she knew he would never respond?
Mom told me which serving bowls to get out. I set them on the counter, emptied rice into one, steaming broccoli into another. "Spoons," Mom said. I slid serving spoons into the bowls and took them to the table. Dad stood by the stove. He'd gotten a spoon and was sampling the stroganoff. "That's your last spoonful," Mom warned him, but her voice was only mock severe. He put the spoon in the sink and came back into the family room.

"Call Jack," Mom told me.

I went out the back door.

It was twilight now, and colder. I pulled my sweater closer around me. Oscar and Jack stood talking by the limo. Oscar had turned the car off and leaned back against it, his long legs crossed at the ankle. His arms, also crossed, rested nonchalantly on his massive chest. Jack was tall, but Oscar was taller, weightier, and as graceful as a cat. He looked down at Jack, his jaws going on a piece of gum. Jack said something and Oscar's lips drew back into a grin. His whole face lit up, his big white teeth, his arching eyebrows, the blue eyes behind elegant wirerims. Oscar was Polish-American, Chicago born and bred. He often reminded us that Chicago was the second largest Polish city in the world, after Warsaw. At home, he and his wife and children still spoke only Polish. Mom said Jack liked talking to
Oscar because he could talk man to man with him. Sometimes, Mom said, she wished she’d married someone like Oscar.

I went over. "Hi."

"How you doing doll?" Oscar’s voice came out lazily from between his clenched teeth, like he was talking to you from a beach towel on a warm beach, not from a suit and polished shoes. But he wasn’t lazy, far from it; he just had a relaxed, easy way with people. I wanted to hear what he and Jack were saying.

"That’s a good price for a ’70," he said.

"Yeah. The muffler’s shot, but I could fix that. The rust’s pretty bad all over."

"Underneath."

"Yeah."

"It might only last you three, four years, but that’s par for the course. You want a car with no rust, you go down South or to California."

"Really?"

"Sure. No salt on the roads. If you stay away from the coast, no salt in the air. The cars last forever. Can you get the price down?"

"He said that was it."

"Well I’d be glad to look the thing over, and see what I can do."
"That’d be great." Jack frowned. "I’m not sure what the old man’s going to say."

"Ha!" Oscar grinned again, his gum pinned for an instant between side molars. "Good luck."

My father opened the back door and stood there in the dark. His voice came casual and polite, but a slightly higher note in it brought us to attention. "Jack, Lizzie. Dinner. Good night, Oscar."

Oscar cleared his throat. "Good night, Mr. Alder," he called.

* * * *

By the time we were done with our first helping, Dad had had two. Even though he was doing most of the talking. He ate fast. Mom said that’s why he never lost weight.

Tonight, our father was full of good feeling, talkative, almost excited; things must have gone well in New York. There was a plan to merge the company he was president of with two European companies, one French, one Belgian. As he recounted the drama of the latest round of meetings, his voice fluctuated between a boom and a whisper. Remembering something funny, he would build up to it in the telling, then explode into hoarse,
helpless laughter, sometimes even before the punchline. He would seek our eyes like a drowning man, content sometimes to hold just Mother’s, which reflected his mirth, but sometimes also turning to draw in Jack or me. I smiled back, glad to see him so happy. A smile crossed Jack’s lips too sometimes, but it didn’t always coincide with the funny parts of Dad’s story. Jack’s eyes focused mostly on the table. They were Dad’s eyes, coal-black, but not as piercing. Maybe it was because of his glasses. Dad, who had perfect vision, could never get over the fact that all four of his children needed glasses.

Suddenly, Dad’s story was finished. "Who wants more stroganoff?" he asked. I held out my plate. Mom sent hers around, saying, "A little." Dad served us, then looked left. "Jack?"

"No thanks," Jack said, staring fixedly at his plate. It was clean, the fork and knife side by side, demurely pointing to the center. Lately Jack was refusing seconds a lot. His look said plainly that he was doing it on principle, that he wasn’t like some people at the table. My father helped himself to a third serving.

Jack cleared his throat and shook the hair out of his eyes. "Dad, I wonder if I could ask you something."

"Go ahead, shoot."
Jack took a deep breath. "A friend of mine's father has a 1970 Olds he wants to sell. I checked it out and it's in good shape. It's not too expensive, and I have most of the money. He said he'd let me pay him the rest over the next couple of months."

My father cocked his head and buttered another roll. "How much?"

"Nine hundred."

He grunted. "Not bad. Is it in good shape?"

"Yeah. But Oscar said he'd look at it to make sure."

Dad speared a couple of broccoli stalks out of the bowl. "What model?" He asked about the color, the seats, rust, and if it had been in any accidents. Mainly, though, it looked to me like he was thinking, formulating.

He was quiet, chewing a bite of roll. Then he spoke carefully. "It sounds like a good deal, Jack, but you know, in the end, a car is not really what you need to be spending money on right now. You've got to think about your future. Mom has the Lincoln to drive, so there's no problem with you using the red car." The "red car" was a Malibu with a black top. Its real name was "Red Rocket," which Jack had spelled out across the back window with store-bought letters. We always snickered when Mom drove
it. "If you get a car, you have to buy insurance, you have to fix it when it breaks, and all that stuff. It's a real expense."

Jack said quietly, "I'm willing to do that."

"Well," Dad said, also quietly, "I'm not sure it's such a great idea. Or if we really have the space around here for another car."

Jack sat, stony-faced. Dad gave his attention to his broccoli. He had a system going. He would pin a stalk with his fork, slice it up quickly with his knife, then feed pieces into his mouth, as he went to work slicing the next stalk. After a moment he turned to me. His voice was light again.

"What happened at school today, Lizzie?"

Jack said, "May I please be excused?"

"Not everyone's finished, Jack. Lizzie?"

* * * *

After dinner, Dad asked me to get him a toothpick, then leaned back in his chair. He crossed his legs lankily, one ankle on the other knee, and folded his hands on his stomach.

"So what'd you do today, Mom?" he asked.
Mom gave a rundown of chores and errands. Lunch with her friend Elaine Walker, whose daughter had gone to school with my oldest sister Margaret, punctuated the middle.

Mom paused. "Elaine has always got to name-drop." She shook her head. Mr. Walker did something for work that brought him into contact with famous people. "The coach of the Chicago Bears and some of the players were over this weekend for dinner. Elaine assured me they were all very nice."

Dad cocked his head at Mom. "If you don't like her, Mom, why do you hang around with her?"

Mother's face turned steely. Dad shrugged. "I mean, you always have something not-so-hot to say about her."

I looked at Dad and narrowed my eyes. Mom just noticed things about people. There wasn't a lot she missed.

But almost reflexively, Mom's face softened. She waved her hand. "It's nothing terrible about her," she said dismissively. "It's just funny. It's the way she is. And I like Elaine Walker--for the most part--thank you very much." She resumed the list of the day's chores, then realized she'd forgotten one.
"And I went by the wallpaper place to see if my paper was in, but it still wasn’t." She was having the downstairs bathroom repapered. "I’m getting really irritated with those people. They always say, 'Next week.' I’ve heard 'Next week' four times now."

"Mom," Dad said, his eyes on the table, his mouth pursed around the toothpick, and yet plainly amused. "Why don’t you call first?"

"I was over that way anyway getting your shirts."

"Well fine. But you could have saved yourself a few minutes, and the aggravation."

Mom shrugged. "It’s no big deal." I liked it when Mom talked like us children. It showed we had some influence on her.

"Mom," Dad said, his voice high again and almost wheedling, "you should think about efficiency."

Mom’s face hardened again, and this time, stayed that way. Her eyes, when she lifted them Dad’s way, were cold. "I am very efficient," she said.

Dad shook his head. "It doesn’t sound like it. To begin with--I’m always telling you this--you should have a list."

"I make lists. I always know generally what I need to do."

"Specific lists."

"May I please be excused?" Jack asked again.
Mom's face changed. I saw in it one focused desire: to feed Jack more, because he was too skinny. "Don't you want dessert?" She said, worry under her light tone.

"What is there?"

"Ice cream."

"I'll have some later."

We all looked at Dad expectantly. "Yes," Dad said, "you may be excused." My brother pushed out his chair and stood up. Dad's voice stopped him again. "Did you thank your mother for the meal?"

Jack turned stiffly to Mom. "Thank you for dinner, Mother."

"You're welcome, darling."

He turned and clumped up the back stairs to his room. I guessed I should say it too. "Thanks, Mom." Then I got up and began clearing the table, because I couldn't stand Dad anymore. In the kitchen, I set what I had gathered down with a vengeance and returned for more. Dad knew Mom's stomach got upset easily. Why was he nasty to her? Why did he have to know everything, laugh at things she said, look down on her? I skirted his chair widely, my eyes drilling downward into the floor. They sat, Dad picking his teeth and studying his loafered foot on his knee, seemingly thinking cheerful thoughts. Mom, her chin burrowed into the
neck of her gray wool turtleneck sweater, staring ahead into the middle of the table, absently rubbing behind her ear, and scowling.

Anger licked out inside of me. I wished sometimes that Mom was stronger with Dad, because he was so strong with her. A fantasy flashed through my head: Mom fixing Dad with a look to kill and screaming, "Go to hell!", flinging an arm out for emphasis. But the fantasy faded quickly. The only person who ever talked to Dad like that was Jack, and when he did, I hated it.

I felt guilty almost immediately for thinking badly of Mom. She always told me the reason Dad was such a creep sometimes was because he was actually quite insecure. It was best, she said, to try and be sweet and understanding with him, and make him feel appreciated and admired. Mom was so great, so perceptive about people and psychology. Curiously, though, on the next trip in and out of the kitchen, I stepped wide around her chair, too.

* * * *
I took Stella out after I finished my homework. It was eleven. Mom was in bed. Even Dad, who often stayed up late at night working, was in bed. As usual, a muted growl of radio came from under Jack’s door.

I put on my coat. Stella got all excited, her tail wagging, her front feet skipping in little hip-hops the way they always did before a walk. I would have thought all that, and walking, would be painful to her, but it was almost as if she didn’t notice what was happening to her body, as if it didn’t compute.

Outside, the night was cold and quiet. The front of the house loomed, paler than the night, but washed in gray. As usual, Stella took off faster than I, going immediately out to sniff around on the lawn. I walked up our driveway. It curved and passed under the huge old willow tree, the branches of which hung down like rain. The branches were bare now, of course, but I stopped to gather some in my arms. The night had been quiet before, but when I stopped to say hello to the willow, I no longer heard the little sounds of myself—the swish of my legs against my coat, tiny dull squeaks from my shoes, my own breathing. I closed my eyes to savor the silence. Then I heard it. Two people, talking low.

Listening harder, I heard what sounded like a giggle. The voices were coming from up around the corner, which was bushy with pines. I looked
at Stella, but she was busy farther away, and hadn’t heard anything yet. One voice seemed to be male, one female. My eyes strained toward the sounds, as if seeing would help me hear more acutely. Then I didn’t have to strain anymore. Two people, gray in the night light, rounded the corner, walking close. I froze, glad for the cover of willow trunk and branches. To my horror, instead of just going around the cul de sac, they entered the driveway. Soon they would walk by, perhaps even into, me.

Then I recognized the male voice as Jack’s. The other one belonged to his girlfriend Cindy. My body relaxed, but I stayed where I was. Soon I was drawing the shallow, excited breaths of a predator.

Stella saw them and ran forward, her tail working away on one side for ballast.

"Hey Stell," my brother greeted her softly, then, "What’s she doing out?"

Passing down the middle of the driveway, they came even with me. I summoned a deep male voice and stepped forward. "Good evening."

Satisfyingly, Cindy screeched, and she and my brother broke apart.

"Shit Lizzie!" Jack said, shushing Cindy. He managed a low laugh.

"That was pretty good, little sister. I just about peed in my pants."
Cindy stepped over and punched my arm. "You douchebag! You creep!" I liked Cindy okay. I probably wouldn't have known her if Jack wasn't going out with her. She'd been part of the cool partying crowd before she graduated last year. Now she worked in a typewriter shop. She had long wispy blond hair, a round face, and a low rumbling laugh that ran fast up the scale into giggles. When she smiled, her cheeks deepened into dimples, and another chin appeared below her main one. But that didn't keep her from being smashingly pretty.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Oh," Jack said. "Well, Cindy was coming over. I knew Mom wouldn't care, but then Dad came home." Jack paused. His voice became meltingly laid back as he revealed his plan, which meant that he actually urgently needed me to go along with it. "So Cindy's parked up the lane, and I went out my window to get her."

I knew the way he'd gone. There was a tall fence next to the garage that you could get your feet on, sitting on the edge of the roof, and then climb down. It was near my bedroom window too; we had climbed up and down plenty of times for the heck of it. "But I think when we go in, we'll just use the door. Mom and Dad are in bed, aren't they?"

I nodded.
"Are you coming?"

"No," I said stiffly. "We were going for a walk."

"Well, see ya." He paused. His voice got even softer, and lilting. "Of course, I'd appreciate it if you didn't say anything about this to the 'rents."

"I won't."

"Thanks Lizzie."

I turned and clucked for Stella.

Shoot! I hated Jack. Why did he have to go and do things like this? If Dad found out, there would be an awful fight. Then Mom would get sick. It upset her stomach when Dad and Jack fought. I'd seen it all too many times. Dad would make up some punishment, like Jack couldn't have Cindy over for two months. Then my brother would go around for days with a look on his face like he was laughing at Dad, like he knew something Dad didn't and Dad was stupid. When we all had to be together, like at dinner, Dad and Jack ignored each other, Dad studiously working on his meal and making conversation, Jack finishing first and sitting back in his chair with his arms folded loosely in his lap. If he had to say something, he spoke to Mom or me. Mom would go along with Dad, participating in his conversation, but you could tell the tension between Jack and Dad was
a strain on her. She was caught in the middle, wanting to agree with Dad and his principles, but also sympathizing with Jack.

And I would do the same, not exactly sympathizing with Jack, but not liking the way Dad was being either. I wanted everything to be peaceful, smooth, for Mom's sake. If the strain continued, she would begin to eat meals that were different from ours, meals that were all the same color on her plate: plain boiled chicken, mashed or baked potato, pale creamed vegetables. Pretty soon she'd have to have tests on her stomach and drink this horrible thick liquid that made her innards glow when they x-rayed her.

Mom and I talked a lot about Jack. She was always worrying about him, and always had. Things weren't easy for him, she said, his being the only boy in the family. There had been another one, before me, but he died the day after he was born. Charles Ray, his name was, after Mom's father. In a way, Charles haunted all of us—at least Mom, Jack, and I. Mom was still sad about him. I'd gone with her a couple of times to visit his grave, which was out west an hour or so in a town Mom and Dad used to live in. The grave was just a little rectangle of stone laid flat in the ground in a cemetery; Mom said that's all they did for babies.
I never said anything to Mom, but I couldn’t feel very sad about the baby dying. I felt bad that I didn’t feel bad, but I really couldn’t understand it. I knew people loved babies, but to me, they all looked the same, had zero personality, and seemed like a lot of trouble. But Mother was so quiet and sad on our trips. I needed to be able to understand what she felt. So I worked on it.

Finally, after one of our trips, I hit on imagining Charles--Charlie?--at 17, the age he’d be now if he’d lived. I pictured him, his hand on his blue-jeaned hip, standing in sunlight in front of the picture window in our family room. He was taller than me but a little shorter than Jack. His body was healthy and strong, and you could tell he had a sunny temperament. Beside him in my picture, Jack looked happier, and his shoulders were stronger and upright. Maybe I would have been closer to Charlie than I was to Jack.

But then, if Charlie had lived, I wouldn’t even be in the picture. Mom told me once that she and Dad weren’t going to have more than four children, and Charles was the fourth. So if he hadn’t died, I wouldn’t have been born. It was him or me. All of this succeeded in making me feel sad. Sad the way a person’s absence hits you after they’re gone; sad that it had
had to be a choice between us--God's, I guessed; and sad because I wasn't the right choice, I wasn't good enough.

Mom was sure being the only boy was part of Jack's problem. Other things must also be part of the problem, but she wasn't sure what they were. Sometimes she said she regretted having been the only child, having no brothers or sisters to watch and know about. Once Wendy sent me home with a book that Mom had special-ordered. It was already hidden within one of the bookstore's printed bags, but I peeked in. It was How to Raise Your Boy, a glossy hardback, with pictures of boys in a variety of poses on the cover, doing different things: boys in boats with dads, fishing; boys smiling big into the camera; boys waiting eagerly for supper. All of the boys seemed to have blonde crewcuts.

The first few days after Mom got it, she went around the house happy; I imagined she was getting good ideas. A few days later, though, Dad had a big scene with Jack when he found him and some friends up in his room with a six-pack. Mom's gloom came back. Months later when I lay on Mom and Dad's bed, talking on the phone with my best friend Rita Ness, I opened the drawer of the bedside table. How to Raise Your Boy was crammed in there upside down, a bookmark not far past the beginning.
After our walk, Stella and I came back in the house and I locked the door behind me. *They* could unlock it when *they* went back out. I gathered my homework up off the table and put it in my bookbag for school in the morning. Then I turned all the lights off. I figured that's how *they* would want it—to seem normal.

I said good night to Stella, hoping she would decide to stay downstairs tonight instead of making all that effort to come and lay at the foot of my bed. Then I started up the steep back stairs.

On the way up the stairs, I heard through the wall a sound like a piece of furniture getting jarred in Jack’s room, and then Cindy’s low laugh. The stairs were built along one wall of Jack’s room and led up into a tiny hallway, with his door on the right and mine on the left. I slowed to listen. The radio was still on, a little louder, but not too much. Mom and Dad’s bedroom was on the other end of the house, but Jack was still being cautious. I didn’t move and breathed shallowly, and was rewarded by the low buzz of Cindy’s voice, this time saying words, though I couldn’t tell what. My brother answered briefly. Then, again, there was nothing but music—the radio was tuned to slinky jazz.

I lay my cheek against the wall. The painted surface felt cool and smooth. I rolled my head around so my ear cupped the wall. I listened and
listened. I didn’t hear anything. I listened some more, my heart kicking slow and hard in the top of my stomach. Finally I quit, and went up the rest of the steps with my body hugging the handrail on the other side of the steps, tiptoeing along their edges so they wouldn’t creak. On the top step I paused, because I saw the keyhole in Jack’s door.

It wasn’t a matter of thinking. If I had thought, I probably wouldn’t have done it. Because I knew what I’d see, and I wouldn’t have been sure that I wanted to. If I had thought, I might have remembered it isn’t right to spy on people. But it wasn’t a matter of thinking. It was one silent step closer to the door, then a fluid contracting of my stomach muscles to bend over, one hand on the wall for support. It was a choice my body made, as my face neared the doorknob, between left eye or right, and then that (left) eye’s negotiation of two thin strong layers of metal and an inch of dead space between. It was a focusing from very near to farther, from dim gray to dim color, from hard, static surfaces to softer ones, that moved.

And then it was a matter of the gradual increase of my heartbeat, from that slow kicking pound to machine gun fire, which flung my torso up straight in the dark still hall. There was an instant of studying the blank wall directly in front of me, though I didn’t really see it, and then two steps, one to cross the hall and one to cross my doorsill.
Inside my room, I shut the door and leaned against it, then put my hands over my ears. The hallway floorboards had sung the same loud, sure song they always did, there in the middle where everyone stepped. I hadn’t remembered to skirt the spot. Now it seemed to me the boards sang still, that they’d never stop, that Jack and Cindy had heard their raucous song, and that it echoed deafeningly through the house.
Chapter Two

The next day, Thursday, I had my piano lesson after school at Wilson, the music school in the next town over. Usually Mom picked me up and took me; sometimes Jack did. That day it was Jack. We met in the parking lot after school.

"Thanks for not saying anything to Mom and Dad, Lou," he said. He called me "Lou" sometimes, short for "Lizzie-Lou." It had another meaning, too, which pleased him: a loo was a bathroom in England.

I just looked out the window. After a while he tried, "Cindy’s thinking of going away to school. Somewhere in Colorado."

No reaction from me. But it’s funny how you can hate someone and ignore them, yet be hanging on their every look or move. From the way Jack was that morning, I could tell that, somehow, incredibly, he didn’t suspect me of hanging around his door last night. He was very normal this morning, and he wasn’t a great actor.
It was a big relief that he didn't know. In another way, though, it was no help at all. I was in a very bad mood. I felt disgusted and upset, even slightly sick to my stomach. I knew people did what I'd seen Jack and Cindy doing. I'd done it myself on a field trip in sixth grade. Well, not exactly--Mark Radkowitz and I had our clothes on, and it was just kissing. But he lay on top of me and stuck his tongue down my throat because, he said, he loved me. Just his saying that was enough to do me in, but then his present of a bouquet of dandelions in front of the whole class clinched it. I avoided him for the rest of the trip, and for good.

I used to have this sick feeling a lot. I'd had it about most of the physical stuff involved in growing up. The appearance of pubic hair back in fifth or sixth grade ("pubic"--a horrible word). Bosoms, and bras. Hair under my arms and on my legs, that I had to shave. And my period, which came in sixth grade; not so much my period itself, but the Kotexes awkwardly pinned to the front and back of my underpants, and the constant fear that their bulk was showing through my clothes. The idea that all the other girls were going through the same thing never penetrated, never even made a dent in my shame.

I had been very religious last year, saying the rosary in novenas at our church, and at home; wearing a scapular under my shirt and a red
ribbon on my coat for the babies murdered in abortions; trying out prayers to different saints, and fasting. For some reason, I hadn't been as religious this year; I felt guilty, but I guessed I was caught up in school. I still believed it was vain to look at myself too much in the mirror, though. No great loss: I never liked what I saw. My body looked and felt fat, clunky. It wouldn't do things like backbends or walkovers or even, very well, cartwheels. Running gave me cramps, and in basketball I prayed that no one would pass to me, because if they did, I'd have to decide what to do, and it had to be the absolute right thing.

Maybe, I thought sometimes, when I looked around at people I knew who were couples; maybe, if it were the right person, the absolutely right person, the idea of sex wouldn't make me feel sick. But until then, I wasn't interested—in guys, in "dating" (another nauseating word), in any of it. In fact, I hardly went out with any people my own age except Rita Ness and a few others. Most of the time, I preferred to be with my family: Mom and Dad, Sally and Margaret, and Jack, before Sally and Margaret went away to college, and when they came home on vacation.

Or I'd rather be by myself. I was happy by myself or with good old Stella. With most people my age, it was nervewracking, all the things I was
supposed to know and have done and be interested in— the person I was
supposed to be, and wasn't.

On the way to my piano lesson, Jack's innocence added to my
general fury. I ended up not speaking to him for three days— though I hid it
when Mother was around (I didn't want to worry or upset her). But I'm
not sure Jack even noticed.

* * * *

Mrs. Charbonneau wouldn't be the first French woman I had ever
met. My piano teacher was French. Her name was Miss Goujaud. That's
"Gou" as in "Goo Goo Cluster," and "jaud" like "Joe"— but "Joe" not the way
we say it, but how Greta Garbo would whisper it during a passionate
embrace with a leading man: "Zhoe! oh Zhoe!" Miss Goujaud's first name
was Genevieve, but I never used it, of course. At first I thought it would be
neat to try out my French with her, but pretty soon I got the strong feeling
she didn't like extra attention paid to her nationality. She had an accent,
but her English was flawless. So, soon, it was easy to forget that she was
French, except when it was convenient not to.
The only language Miss Goujaud really cared about was music. Because that’s what music was, she said, a language. Some languages were spoken and some weren’t, but they were all governed by rules. Music was a spoken language, though spoken in a different way. It was also a written language you could read.

That’s what Miss Goujaud always had me do right after I came in for my lesson: sightread a page of music. She always had me take a moment to read it over with my eyes before I read it out loud with my fingers.

"Shoot," I invariably yelped soon after I started to play, the first wrong note zapping my spine like an electric cattle prod. I’d go on.

"Shoot!" I’d yelp again, getting flustered, my blood pressure on the rise.

"Don’t worry," Miss Goujaud would say, her voice even, emotionless, soft-edged. "Slow down. It’s not a race."

Once, after I’d taken from her for about two months, I turned to her after a particularly painful page. "Tell me again: why do I have to do this?"

"Sightread? Because when you work on pieces week after week, you can stop seeing the music. This is to always remind you of the freshness of the language. Don’t worry about the little errors, Lizzie. Even the greatest pianists make them, you can hear it on all their records, and certainly in
concerts. Perfection is not what we play for. Good. So, what have you got for me this week?"

Miss Goujaud explained things better than any piano teacher I'd ever had. At first I thought this must be because she was French, and French people know everything about music, art, and love. But after I'd had her a while, if someone had asked me why she was such a good teacher, I would have said, she just is.

I'd had three teachers before her. The first, Mrs. Ottoway, was when I was in kindergarten, but those were just baby lessons. When I was old enough for real lessons at Wilson, I took from Mr. Ribboch. We all had him, Margaret, Sally, Jack, and I. After a while, though, my mother grew alarmed at my questions when she came to pick us up. After one lesson: "Mom, what's a birthday suit?" I'd thought I knew, but Mr. Ribboch had talked about it so strangely--about how he'd gone around the house with it on, and it was covered with kisses. He would always threaten, if I made a mistake, to kiss me. I knew that he was just kidding, that he knew I was a tomboy and so a kiss was the worst threat there was. But I still hated it and half-feared he might do it. The time I got in the car and asked what falsies were, that was the last straw. We were whisked away from Mr. Ribboch and switched to Mrs. Todd.
Mrs. Todd taught in her house, in the living room. She had very black hair that she wore around her head like a turban. My sisters said it was a wig, but I didn’t believe them. We’d sit on Mrs. Todd’s long couch, reading, doing homework, while one of us "went." Us girls, that is. Jack refused to take piano anymore. But Mom and Dad found another teacher for him, a jazz teacher. Jazz would appeal more to him, they reasoned, since he was a boy.

It was humiliating taking my lesson with my sisters in the same room, who played beautiful real music like Bach and Beethoven, pieces with numbers instead of words for titles, compared to my assignments, pieces with names like "Chinese Lanterns" or "In the Gloaming." Mrs. Todd said I played very well, but the music I made sounded weak to me, and I felt awkward and clumsy.

And sometime after I started with Mrs. Todd, my perception was proven fact. One Sunday, out of the blue, Dad announced a piano competition. The whole family was marched into the living room and took various seats. Dad placed four stacks of pennies in a row, from tall to short, on the Chinese lacquer table. Whichever child played the best, he said, would win the highest stack; second-best, the next highest; and so on down the line.
I stood listening. I knew exactly what was going to happen. "No," I said flatly.

"Come on, Lizzie," Dad said. "Don’t be a spoilsport."

"No. I don’t want to."

"Now, honey," he said. His voice got high. "Just do your best. Margaret and Sally and Jack are doing it." I glanced at my sisters. Margaret and Sally, dark and light heads together, were talking excitedly about something else. They had nothing to worry about. I looked at Jack. His mouth was a barely visible line in his face and he was looking down. He seemed to feel like I did.

"No," I said again. But my courage was short-lived. I started to cry.

We played in order of age; I went last. When I took the seat and started playing, I gave free rein to every flustered, wild impulse I had and rejoiced in the resulting jarring, ugly notes. Everyone clapped politely when I was done. Then Dad made a little speech about how we were coming along, but we all had to work harder. He said "all," but it seemed to me that he meant me, and possibly Jack. Then he announced the winners, sliding our prizes towards us like stacks of poker chips when we came up to receive them. As I’d predicted, we won in the order of our ages. I accepted
the shortest stack and left the room without a word, holding myself stiff, frozen with rage.

That's how piano lessons were for me, then, and practicing, and playing: they were a performance I didn’t do well. Once a year, Mrs. Todd had a recital with all her students. The only good thing about the recitals was the gummy candies shaped and colored like slices of lemon, orange, and lime, soft on the inside and crusty with sugar on the outside, in a little glass dish on the table.

Sometimes, daydreaming, before Miss Goujaud came into my life, I would think back to when piano was fun. That first teacher, young willowy Mrs. Ottoway, the volunteer, had come to Middle Creek School twice a week and spent 15 minutes with each child who wanted to learn about the piano. We’d go one at a time and sit with her in a small room, almost a closet, that they’d stuffed an old upright piano into. First Mrs. Ottoway introduced us to the notes as if they were people, telling us about them, what they were like. I remembered sliding my hand up to the black keys. Mrs. Ottoway said they were sadder. As I caught on, we played a game where Mrs. Ottoway strung notes together and I would mimic them in a lower octave. It was hard to believe that at one time, based on what Mrs.
Ottoway said, my mother and father thought I was the most musically gifted one in the family, that I might even be a musician one day.

These earliest memories were definitely the best. Sometimes when a sister or brother was practicing, I would crawl stealthily into the room and lay under the trembling whale-like instrument. I’d stare up at its underbelly or, on my stomach, at my sibling’s twitching feet, until the timer that chained them to the bench went off. Then I could climb up on the seat next to her or him and make my own "music." It sounded no different to me than theirs; it had big sound and little sound, fast notes and slow played clearly, jumbled up, or (with their help) blurred by pedals.

The piano’s voice sounded just as big, deep, and soaked with knowledge as my father’s. In fact, if I banged hard enough, I could make it bigger and deeper than his, a voice as toweringly powerful as the skyscraping, thick-trunked willow in our front yard, whose leaves I could see out the window if I turned around on the bench. Or, I could make it as light and feather-soft as those leaves, and secret, like my bedroom door being pushed open at night, and hushed footsteps, and my mother’s voice whispering good night.

* * * *
Though I liked Miss Goujaud better than any other piano teacher I'd had, I still couldn't help but try to waste some time at the beginning of a lesson. It was just a habit I'd built up over the years. At this moment I was trying to explain to her why Americans, myself included, were so hepped up about the Bicentennial. There were all kinds of neat events already in the works for the coming summer, to celebrate the Fourth of July.

Miss Goujaud, however, in a chair to my right, didn't seem very excited by what I was saying. She just regarded me with her pale green eyes. It was plain she was waiting for me to stop talking so we could begin. At first those eyes had scared me, especially since she didn't blink a lot. Being pale, they'd seemed cold. But now I knew better. At the time of day I had my lessons, intense sun streamed in from the west through the bank of windows at my back. It struck the side of her face as she talked to me, turning her skin a golden olive, and entered her eyes, revealing flecks of other colors—brown, yellow, blue, black.

It was at times like this that Miss Goujaud's nationality could be handy. I cleared my throat. "So," I said, "what do you think of our inner cities? Do they have the same kinds of problems in France?"

The corners of her mouth, which naturally turned down very slightly, twitched. "That's an interesting question, Lizzie. But," she turned a delicate
watch on her wrist towards her, "our time is ticking away. Shall we get started?"

It had been worth a try. I shrugged, turned to the piano, and played my scales for her. She adjusted the arch of my hands and fingers, and I played them again. No other teacher I'd had had made me think about the position of my hands when I played. Now I wondered why not, because it was important.

"Good," she said when I finished. "Next week, A-flat minor. Let's look at the signature."

She took my notebook and a pencil and drew the treble clef at left on a staff. Her pencil scratched as she drew flats and sharps. Other than that, the room was silent. Or was it? I listened.

There are times, say, after running the 50-yard dash, or if you're scared, when you can "hear" your heart beat; but it's actually a combination of hearing and feeling. I had noticed that with my kneecap, too; sometimes, swinging my lower leg back and forth, I could hear my kneecap squeaking and creaking. But was I hearing it or feeling it?

It was the same conundrum in this building. All around me through the cement block walls I could hear, as if very far away, the up and down of scales, fragments of pieces and of muffled conversations. But I wasn't
sure if I was hearing them or feeling them. I felt like one of those little fluorescent particles—a cell or part of a cell—that, in biology movies, jiggles in place while the rest of the body's juices pulse and roar around it.

The scratch of Miss Goujaud's pencil was careful, precise. Miss Goujaud herself was tiny, shorter than me, and wiry, though with a woman's shape. I didn't have that yet. I was shaped more like a fleshy blob on long legs. With a horse face: long and freckled, between two long hanks of brown hair. In photographs, I was always smiling with my top gums instead of my teeth, which had braces on them anyway; and my jaw would be off-kilter, so I looked like some cousin of Mr. Ed's.

Miss Goujaud's hair was straight and glossy, a kind of dark streaky blond, bowl-cut in a perfect line around her face and head. Her face tended toward round, but delicate cheekbones poked out under her wirerims. Just now she was a quiet, concentrated island in the room, in the midst of the pulse and roar.

She pushed the notebook toward me. "Okay, what are they?" I read through the sharps and flats. Next, I sightread my page of music. "So," she said then. "What have you got for me?"

I pulled out my Chopin waltz. In little italics under the title, the waltz was dedicated to someone named Madame d'Ivry. Just the name
Madame d'Ivry, along with what I'd heard about Chopin, was enough to get me into the mood. I played it through, sometimes not even aware of Miss Goujaud beside me and of what she might be thinking.

The piece had a number of different parts. Sometimes I played one part after the next, just the way it looked on the page, so it was smooth sailing. Other times, little signs in the piece told me to double back and repeat a part I'd already played. I say parts, but they weren't marked one, two, or three; it was more that they sounded different from each other, talked about different things.

In my mind, the whole piece was about how the person speaking felt about Madame d'Ivry. I pictured a young guy with wild hair and an old-fashioned necktie and coat, going over and over his love for this beautiful, kind of distant and impossible-to-have woman. He was standing in some wind, which blew his coat back, but he didn't even notice; he walked a lot because of all his feelings. He had to; he had to do something. He talked all the time. If there was no one there to talk to, he talked to himself.

The waltz was his talking; the different parts of it were the different aspects of his love that he touched on as he talked. In one part, for example, he told how loving this woman was like this low-grade fever or illness or pain in his breast—"breast" meaning "chest," that's the way they
talked back then. In the next part, he was all smiles, thinking of the last
time he was with her and how they’d laughed and teased. It really was like
he had a fever, because as he talked, his eyes were so bright. It was like
that, he was swept with moods as he talked, so that sometimes his voice
broke or just trailed off hopelessly.

Thinking about a piece of music this way, as if someone were
speaking, helped me a lot. Sometimes when I saw how notes look on a
page, or thought about music as a system, music seemed closer to math:
cold, angular, abstract. But if I could find a speaker and story in it, it was
as if that cold line of musical notes melted and spread out into space. I
pictured this space as wide-open land with gentle hills. This setting was the
soul of the one who was speaking, where the things he was saying could
take whatever shapes they wanted and dance around on the hills. So even
though the guy and his story in my waltz were tragic, and he was nearly
out of his mind, he had all this space and expression for his feelings, so I
knew, at least, he wouldn’t kill himself.

"Very good," Miss Goujaud said, and she paused, considering where
to begin working on the piece.

An impulse seized me, to take the pause and fill it with things I was
thinking; to tell Miss Goujaud about the necktie guy, his tumult and
despair. I felt sorry for him, deeply, because sometimes I felt the same way he did. Well not exactly--not in love with some impossible-to-get woman--but despairing, hopeless, and I didn't know what else. Sometimes I felt like I didn't deserve life or all the things I had. Sometimes I was sure that I was bad, and that it was just a matter of time before I was found out.

But the impulse passed. Miss Goujaud turned back a few pages, pointed to a place, and asked to hear it again. I placed my fingers on the keys.

* * * *

The next day, after school, Mom met me at the back door with a plate.

"Do I have to go now?"

"If you have the time. I just thought it would be dark soon."

I went inside and plucked a few snickerdoodles from the rows cooling on the counter. I crunched each one hungrily to powder, rolling the fragrant mass around on my tongue and trying once again to figure out what made them so good. Cinnamon? The hint of salt with the sugar? I took the plate and headed out the door.
Under its bubble of plastic wrap, the plate was still warm, which was good since I'd forgotten my mittens. Patches of snow and ice, like little floes, dotted a sea of asphalt and tired-looking grass. The sky was at that point where you can tell the day has stretched as far as it's going to, and dusk is a good idea just occurring to it.

Willow Lane was long, and halfway down from the main road, Dell Ridge, it forked at a huge old oak. Our house was at the end of the right fork. The left fork deadended in the Felds' driveway. Between the houses on our lane and between our lane and the ones around it, there were lots of trees and woods. Some trees towered above the rest: oaks, with their intricate gnarled-up networks of branches so black against the sky; locusts; and others I didn't know the names of. Spindly trees crowded in under the tall ones, and thickets of weeds and bramble filled in beneath them. The colors in the fall were yellow, orange, green, and brown.

An older couple down that left fork had moved away and began renting out their house. Last year, a family had come and gone before we even learned their name. It was this house that the Charbonneaus now lived in. The house was next to the Felds', and since we were both at the end of the forks, we could see it through the winter woods when the trees were bare, like now. When I took Stella out for walks, sometimes we went down
that other fork. But rarely at night. I didn't know it as well; it felt different, creepy.

Why should the left fork of the lane feel creepy to me? I looked around as I walked down it now. Trees crowded thick, right up against the road. They lifted branches into the chilly air, but I imagined their real selves must be hunkered down somewhere deep within layers of bark and pulp. Their stillness felt like concentration. That's how they must make it through the winter, I thought: sheer concentration, on enduring, on life.

None of the people who lived on this fork had any children. Only adults, their faces as gray as the winter sky, came and went closed up in their cars, among the trees, under the lifted branches. And I didn't see them come or go that often. For all I knew, the big houses I was walking by could be empty.

I turned left down a long driveway. The French people's house wasn't as big as some in the neighborhood, but it was pretty old, from maybe the 30s or 40s. It had touches that were supposed to make it look like an English or French country house: three finials of some dark metal, like lead, at prominent points along the roofline; windows edged in the same metal, that opened out among the ivy covering the walls. The house was dark, its wooden siding a brown so intense it swallowed light and gave
The bricks in the house’s base were also flecked with a dark earth color.

I liked our house better. It was tall and graceful and painted a cheerful airy yellow. It looked like a farmhouse, with clapboard and shutters and a porch, only it was higher than a farmer would have built it and more solid, with a bigger girth and length. Some wealthy people had built it to look like a farmhouse on what was mostly dairy land back in the 20s or 30s. To the south and west of the house, they’d laid out gardens, including a pond. The ancient willow in front was one of the tallest trees in the neighborhood. In summer, green leaves cascaded down, gently stirring with breeze; in winter, the tree was a mane of golden switches.

It was from behind this curtain of leaves that, according to family legend, our house had revealed itself one summer to our mother. Out riding bikes with us children, she went down this lane, and then this fork, by chance. The mother in the legend was one I couldn’t remember but had seen in pictures: slim like a girl, out riding bikes. I knew how she must have ridden into the cul de sac—to the right first; everyone did. So she would have been riding straight toward the willow, and then the road curved left. That’s when the big yellow house must have stepped out from behind the curtain, and my mother fell in love.
I walked up to the Charbonneaus' front door, made of thick wood with fancy metal hinges. A doorbell glowed orange under brittle ivy leaves to the left. I rang. Nothing happened. I rang again, then looked to my right.

A woman was standing at a full-length window in a ground-floor bay. Motion still in her wool skirt told me she had just walked there. Dark hair reached to her shoulders and coiled there, its wavy lines melding with the ribbing of her slate-colored turtleneck. The ribs ran down her torso, clung to a body that was thin but also rounded, with strong big bones in wide shoulders and long arms. The ribs dipped deep into the hollows under her collar bones, ran closer together over the flat plain above the waist of her skirt, and turned her arms into skinny tubes.

Between the curtains of dark hair, her face looked pale, long, and narrow. Her arms were clamped against her front, one hand cradling her chin, the other cupping an elbow. From under eyebrows arched in thought, her eyes looked steadily out, at me. But her face registered nothing. She just looked at me, the way water pulls along steadily in a stream. Then her arms came down to her sides, and she turned and disappeared. I stood there at a loss, because I was sure that, while she had looked right at me, she hadn't really seen me.
But the door rumbled and opened, and she was on the other side of the storm door, smiling brightly and fumbling with the catch. "Hi," she said. "Come in. You must be Mrs. Alder's daughter--Lizzie? Yes, yes, she said you might come. Please don't call me Mrs. Charbonneau, it makes me feel old. My name is Rosy." She accepted the cookies. "How sweet of you. They look very good. Shall we have some? Will you have some tea?"

Her way of speaking was quick, light, though her French accent was strong. She said "Rosy" the way my French teacher would say it, only better, the "R" scraping against her throat on the way out. I followed her straight ahead into the kitchen, glancing at the rest of the house as I went by. I didn't see much, just rooms that were dim, even dark with shadow. In the kitchen, she flipped on a light; she filled a kettle with water, lit a burner and put the kettle over it, then, in one swift motion, turned to me and leaned back against the counter. She looked me up and down intently, with a little smile on her face.

"You are in what level at school?"

"Freshman. First year."

"But perhaps we should talk in French? I should help you."

I smiled. "Actually, I'd rather not. I'm not that good yet."
"I understand. It’s hard, learning a new language. But sometime we will talk only in French. It’s the best way to learn."

"Okay."

"Which school do you go to?"

I told her that, and more. As I talked, part of me listened and said, You’re babbling. It was true that I felt a little flustered. Maybe it was because she was looking at me so intently, nodding sometimes to show she understood, her brow knit like my words were somehow important. But all I was saying were things like Creston High was big compared to my old grade school up on the corner, which she must have passed on her way into town.

"I don’t drive," Rosy answered, "so I don’t get out very much; but I think I’ve seen it." The water was ready. She put things on a tray. "Let’s go in here," she said. I followed her out a different door, on the other side of the refrigerator, into the dining room. I’d passed this room on the way in; it was one of the ones full of shadow. At least I assumed it was the dining room, because a chandelier hung from the middle of the ceiling, and the floors were bare dark hardwood. I saw the bay window through which I’d first glimpsed Rosy at the far end of the room. The room was completely empty.
Rosy's clicking heels echoed in the bare room. "We have no table," she explained, "and we probably won't get one. We are only here one year. In fact I would like if we didn't have such a big house for this time, because it will only be empty. But the company chose it for us. I guess they thought we should be in a nice town." I followed her through a door in the back corner of the room, down a few steps, across some flagstones, and into a room of light.

It was a sunroom, a bubble of glass built onto a back corner of the house. Glass rose before me on two sides, in strips between supports, and curved over my head to form the ceiling. The floor was made of hexagonal clay-colored tiles. It was a small room. A little island of furniture was pushed against the back brick wall: a couch with a coffee table in front of it, both nondescript, and a floor lamp by one side, all on an oval rug of braided gold and orange. Some kind of fur was flung across the couch.

"Sheepskin," Rosy said, setting the tray down and following my glance. "You need something to keep you warm out here. When the sun is not out, the heat, well, it's not so great. I read and knit out here, I come out here a lot. It's my favorite room."

I nodded. I could see why.
"So," she said, sitting down. "What are your favorite classes?" She tucked her hair behind one ear with a finger, then poured tea into cups.

I listed them: English, World Civilization, Gym, Acting, Art, French.

"Not maths?" Her "th" was hard, but a little slurred, so that if you used your imagination it sounded like how we said it. I wasn't surprised by the "s." For some reason, "math" was plural in French. Actually, it thrilled me a little to hear her say it. Every now and then, studying this language out of a textbook and hearing no one around but my teacher really speak it, it was hard not to suspect that the whole thing wasn't just made up. Rosy's unsolicited "maths" helped me believe French really existed.

"I take Algebra." I wrinkled my nose. "I don't really like it."

"I never did too." She sipped her tea, then looked at me slyly, teasingly. "And what about boys? Are they nice? Any boyfriend?"

"No," I shook my head. My eyes sorted through the tea things. "Not yet." I felt fine about not going out with anyone until somebody asked me about it. Then I felt abnormal.

"Of course," she said quickly. "You're too young."

There was a pause. The sun was getting low. It combed through the trees in the woods around Rosy's house and came slanting into the
sunroom in bars of honey-colored light. Squares of it lay on the couch, among the tea things, and even on Rosy's face.

"I can see why you like this room," I said, to fill the gap. I looked more fully at her. She was in a reverie, gazing out the window. Her eyes looked black. On their glossy round surfaces, or maybe down inside them, a patch of orangey light trapped in the window in front of her glowed double and in miniature. Then her eyelids came down and extinguished the light.

"This room," she murmured, "is my salvation."

Salvation? I wasn't sure I'd heard right. I looked at her again. The light infused her skin with a warm flush, but also revealed large pores and pits in her nose, cheeks, and forehead. Her nose was long and straight for a while, then the tip got pudgy and turned up a little, and the wings of her nostrils spread out generously. Her mouth was wide, wider than most women's, I thought, and her lips curved strongly and were fleshy, not delicate. The shape of her face matched her body: long and lean, with the same sense of big sculpted bones.

Her eyes opened. She shrugged. "My husband goes away often. They are training him in American business. I didn't know it would be this way when we came over. I don't like being alone so much in this house. But this
room—the windows, the light, the woods . . . it's open. It makes me feel better."

She reached forward, her more cheerful self again, and took the plastic wrap off the cookies. "Mrs. Feld was so nice to invite those ladies yesterday," she said, "And your mother! So beautiful! So kind."

"Yes," I said. "How do you say--'Gentille'?"

Rosy nodded. "Très gentille. It will help make me not so lonely."

"Good."

A movement outside caught my eye. About eight feet from where we sat, a squirrel picked through a pile of ocher leaves. It seemed to be looking for something. The leaves had blown against a border of plants separating the lawn from the woods. I knew that in summer, those plants had arcing grass-blade leaves streaked with white and green; but now they looked like soggy straw wigs some clown had flung to the ground, one after the other, in a fit of rage.

I pointed the squirrel out to Rosy. "I know," she said. "Isn't he magnificent?" I blinked and looked again. His tail bobbed nervously in time with his digging and picking. I supposed he was pretty—the nut-brown of his fur, with its peppering of black hairs, and then the ginger color, even
softer looking, underneath. He was fat; the winter didn’t seem to have been too hard on him.

"I watch them," Rosy said. "You get to know them after a while, you know? Who’s with who—or is it whom? When it’s play time; where they live. See the nest? Up there."

I craned my neck to see where she was pointing, and finally located a messy ball of leaves in a tree. "How do you say squirrel in French?" I asked.

"Écureuil."

"Écureuil."

"Yes," she said. Her face lit up, broadened into a big smile. "You have a very good accent. I can hear." She had big strong teeth, crooked in places, but very white. Suddenly I remembered what Mom had said, and could see how young she was. I noticed she wore lipstick, a pretty soft russet color like a cashmere sweater I’d gotten at a yard sale and loved. My mother only used lipstick when she was going to a party. Rosy, it seemed, wore it every day, even alone in her house. That struck me as very French. So did everything about her. Poor Rosy. She was unhappy. Suddenly I was very glad for my good accent, glad I’d caused that bright smile. I vowed to cause it again, as often as I could.
"In France," Rosy said, "I'ecureuil is very important. He is--how do you say--on the sign of one of the largest banks."

"You mean like, the logo?"

She shrugged. She didn’t know that word. "He is on all the signs," she said again, "sitting up. Like that!" Her face and eyes lit up again: the squirrel had sat up on its haunches as if on cue, forelegs frozen in the air. Then Rosy’s eyes dropped to her tea, and her shoulders sank. She stirred absentmindedly. "My husband worked for that bank. So did I. Boff, it was very boring. I’m glad I don’t work there anymore. But at least I met Claude."

She sighed and looked out the window. The squirrel was gone.

"Sometimes, of course, I think it would be better if we never met." Her voice had become low again, dreamy. It made me wonder if she remembered I was there. "I think to myself, I should never have left home. But I thought the city would be exciting."

She turned her glance on me. I was glad not to have been forgotten after all. She broke into the same wide, brilliant smile as before. But it was different somehow. It felt too taut, like it might break apart any second.

"And now look at me," she said, "all the way over here in the United States!" I saw cracks in her lipstick. The color had drained from her narrow
face so that it was luminously pale, even ghostly. Then I realized that that was because the light outside was gone.

"I have to get home," I said.

"But you haven’t had a cookie!"

"I had some before I came. Those are for you."

We headed for the door, Rosy clicking lights on as we went. I blinked as we passed through the dining room; searing white light bounced crazily among the crystal pebbles and teardrops of the chandelier. It seemed to burn more brightly than if there had been things below for it to shine onto; it hung there alone in its brilliant nest, in the dark, empty room.

* * * *

Dad came home late that night, and was still up when I took Stella out. It was cold out, and velvety blue-black. By the house, warm light spilled out of windows onto the ground. One patch came from my father’s study, on the front of the house, next to the kitchen. Framed squarely in the wide bay window, my father sat at his desk, his back to me. His back was broad and seemed to sprout up out of his desk chair, where it was solidly rooted. Mellow light reflected off walls covered with gold paper and
streamed out onto the driveway. I put my toes at the edge of the light, but stayed in the shadows.

The radio must be on in there, I thought, tuned to the classical music station. It always was. Even though he kept it pretty soft, I could hear it sometimes when I went to bed and he stayed up working: an occasional thumping timpani or sweet, piercing clarinet rising like perfume as I fell asleep.

As I stood behind him watching, my father scribbled something on a piece of paper and shifted it to a different pile, then lifted another before him to read. The desk he sat at stretched out far on either side like wings. He’d bought it at some auction in New York; it was English or French, what they called a campaign desk. That meant it had been carried in war campaigns from battle to battle so the leader could sit there, in his tent, and make decisions.

In my father’s office, neat pile after pile of paper blanketed the desk. My father read with a pen in his hand. It was the one from a desk set someone had given him. People were always giving him presents because he was the president of his company. Mom said that’s what businessmen did. I knew how that pen in my father’s hand felt, because I used it too when I sat there. His desk was my favorite place to do homework and write papers
when he wasn’t around, and that was fairly often. The pen was metal, and
tapered down to a tiny roundness at both ends. It lay perfectly balanced in
your hand, a weighty shaft.

I shifted my weight to my other foot and willed my father to turn
around, pricked by eyes, but he didn’t. His back was a wall, solid, self-
contained, self-assured. I turned away to walk down the driveway. My
father wasn’t like me. Some weekend nights when my brother and parents
went out and I was alone in the house, I felt eyes out in the darkness so
acutely, that, swallowing hard, I got down on my hands and knees and
crawled below window level to get to another room.

I stepped into the pool of light and walked across it, my father’s
shadow a dark place in the middle. I clicked my tongue for Stella, who had
stood patiently while I watched Dad. She lowered her head and set her legs
in motion.

We walked together down the driveway, through the willow
branches, around the curve to the cul de sac circle. A few lights burned
familiarly in the darkness: our lamppost and the Pettersons’; beyond them,
lights in Mrs. Feld’s kitchen and family room.

I realized a light glowing through the woods beyond the Felds was
Rosy’s. It was good to think of Rosy, still up like me, enjoying the night,
probably doing something French like painting her nails, or stretched out on her sheepskin reading a novel—Balzac or Colette. I hadn’t read them myself, but I knew about them from the bookstore.

Rounding the first bend past the circle, I headed into darkness; the second bend blocked out the lights. Now all was dark, except for the moon. It glinted bluely off a neighbor’s car back among trees, off a mailbox and patches of ice and snow. Stella and I walked apart, she by the side of the road investigating smells, I in the middle, but we kept a similar pace.

Night made the familiar surroundings around me eerie. That was part of the thrill of walking at night. As I looked around, I swore I could feel my pupils dilate, as if they were turning inside out; as if, in the dark, they transformed into hands in soft black gloves which reached out and ran fingers over things when I looked at them, translating feel into sight. I felt close, kin, to Stella; two night beasts, we were, out feeling our way along, reveling in the moonlight.

I stuffed my hands in my coat pockets and concentrated on walking Indian style, heel-toe. I was doing pretty well, so that, except for the occasional homely scrape of Stella’s nails against the pavement, there was nothing but quiet. We wouldn’t go far, just up to the oak tree and back.
I thought back to my father’s desk. It was so stately that, secretly, I believed the man it had originally belonged to must have been Napoleon. I’d read a book about Napoleon last summer—well, not about him, but about a young woman who grew up with him and loved and understood him, but then he threw her over for slinky, sophisticated Josephine. It turns out okay because the woman—Désirée—meets this wonderful guy, one of Napoleon’s best, most trusted generals, and they get married. Even their marriage is very romantic. The husband becomes King of Sweden and ends up fighting his old friend Napoleon, who’s become crazy and corrupt. The husband wins, but it’s a sad victory since he and Désirée both once loved Napoleon.

I wondered if Rosy had read it or would like to. I thought that her relationship with her husband, though modern-day, must also be very romantic. Mom said the husband was older than Rosy. Maybe he had been married before, I thought. Maybe he’d lost his first, beloved, wife to cancer, and had thought he would never love again. Or maybe he had never been married, had been a quirky old bachelor, but Rosy had drawn him out of his shell.
Chapter Three

I went back to see Rosy early the next week, right after school one day. The day had been beautiful, with a cloudless blue sky full of sun. Light rested, glistening, on the thin red and purple limbs of the trees I passed; I sensed them stretching up and out to soak it in.

Rosy looked much happier than the last time I'd seen her. Before she opened the door wide for me to come in, she looked around the corner at the box on the wall to see if they'd gotten mail.

"Zut," she said, delighting me, because that's what they said in my textbook. There was nothing in the box.

"I never get letters," she said, shaking her head on the way to the kitchen. "No one writes. That's no good!" But then she laughed as she put the kettle on. "Of course, that may be because I write to no one."

"You don't?" I asked, surprised. I wrote my sisters at college, and my grandparents. I liked to write letters, plus what Rosy said was true, if you wrote them, you got them.
Rosy frowned. "I have a hard time with a paper and a pen. I just sit there and look at the paper, and I can’t think of any words. Nothing but all those sentences we learned in school for letters; very pretty but, boof, they don’t say a thing." She shrugged and turned toward the kettle. "I guess I just think about people. People far away. And hope that they know it."

We went in the sunroom. "So is your husband away?" I asked.

Rosy rolled her eyes. "Always."

"Where is he now?"

"Some place in the South. Atlanta?" I nodded. "I think the state is Georgia," she continued. "I don’t know. He’s just away."

"Will you ever get to go with him?"

"I asked him this question, and he doesn’t think so, at least not now. When he goes, he works very hard. He learns a lot, but he is very--" She bunched her shoulders up around her neck, blew out her cheeks, and looked at me hard, then began something between a bounce and a rock-forward there on the edge of her seat.

"Tense?" I couldn’t keep from laughing.

"Yes. Very go go go." She laughed, but turned serious. "He wants very much to make a good impression, you know. Claude isn’t a young man. When he left the bank, he wanted to change his life, his type of work. Not
many people do that at his age. So he's very glad for this job, and he's working very hard. I don't want to get in the way. It's just as well I don't go with him," she said airily, waving towards the sky, "he wouldn't be any fun on those trips. And on a day like this, I didn't miss him."

For some reason, I wasn't sure if I should ask what I was about to. Her husband always used the car, she had said last time, but even if he didn't, she didn't have a driver's license. I never saw her out walking. I paused. "So what did you do?"

"Today?"

"Yes. Today. Any day."

She looked up at the ceiling. "I woke up, and it was sunny. Such a beautiful day! I had coffee. I got dressed. It was cold, but because of the sun, the birds were singing much more stronger than they have in a long time, as if their throats had been frozen. Did you hear?" I shook my head. "The sun comes in the different rooms. all day. In the morning it's in our bedroom. Then it goes more into another room, which is empty, and then another, which is also empty, where it rests for a long time."

She looked at me. My face must have had some pointed, waiting expression, because she straightened and got sort of businesslike. "I decide what to cook, and call the grocery. There is a woman there I like. She's the
boss of deliveries, she tells the others where to go, but sometimes she brings them out herself. Carolyn. I like her. She has been to France, so we talk about that, and we talk about her garden. She likes to think about it in the winter, and decide what to plant.

"But she didn’t come today. Today it was Ralph." She wrinkled her nose. I laughed. "He seems about your age, Lizzie, but so serious! I think no one taught him how to smile. I think I need to teach him. So I try, but he’s too young. He just thinks I’m crazy. Do you know him?"

"I don’t think so."

"There is also an older man. He’s ok, but Carolyn is my favorite. So. I have a little to eat. Maybe I cook, if there’s something to prepare for dinner. Or I go outside. But it isn’t very far to walk here. I mean, everywhere, there is a road. There’s no ocean, no beach, no fields. Everywhere are houses."

I nodded and looked out the window. Of course, Rosy wouldn’t know that paths ran through all these woods, along fences and over and under them, beside streams and ditches, even right through people’s yards. The paths were secret highways, connecting all the houses and neighborhoods. You could walk far, for hours, on them. My best friend Rita Ness and I did that a lot when we were younger, before her parents
got divorced and she moved across town with her mother. We’d even pack some food and have a picnic somewhere.

Even from where I sat I could see the opening to one of the paths that led out of Rosy’s backyard. I knew where it ended: in the Nagels’ backyard over on Middle Creek. But I had to admit, even if Rosy knew about the paths, she was probably too old to use them. Most of the time, now, I felt too old myself. As a kid, when I took paths through people’s backyards, I just kept my eyes down--half in respect of their privacy, half to pretend the house wasn’t really there. I felt completely ok about it then. But I was a kid, and somehow, kids have a right.

Rosy shrugged. "But still, I might walk. Just on the lane--not too far--or just here in the yard. I visit the squirrels. Clean up a little. Sit for a moment. Over there." She pointed at a tree stump, sawed off smooth a foot above the ground, in a corner of the yard.

"And then my day is over, and night is here. Unless someone calls. Mrs. Feld. Another friend, the wife of a man who works with Claude. She’s from Belgium. Or you come," she reached over and squeezed my hand briefly. "Then Claude comes home, and my evening is with him. Or he doesn’t come home. And my evening. . . ." She lifted her shoulders and one hand in a slow-motion shrug.
Had Claude been home the night I noticed her light through the woods? "Do you like to read?" I asked.

"Sometimes."

"Colette? Balzac?"

She smiled. "We read one of Colette's books in school one time. It was kind of strange. I guess I liked it. We read Balzac too. It was boring. No, not books like those. Just stories. A friend sends them to me from France sometimes after she finishes them. But I don't always read them. There are . . . too many other things to do."

"Like what?"

She looked at her hands. "Oh, I knit, and . . ." She looked at me. "And I think. There is all that thinking to do. About people far away. Hoping that they will know it."

* * * *

Pretty soon I was going to Rosy's maybe twice, even three times a week, often straight down that fork of the lane after the bus let me off. It was true, what Mother had said: it seemed I really did cheer her up, most of the time. I would bring my homework; if conversation lagged, we
looked at it. But conversation seldom lagged. Rosy was a good talker, and I was a good listener. And I wanted to hear everything about her life.

We always sat in the sunroom. We always had tea. Once, too, not long after I started going there, she baked a cake, a golden round of just one layer, with no frosting, and crisscrossing designs etched in the glazed, crusty top. It tasted like a Salerno butter cookie, only richer, thicker, better. She said it was a special Breton cake, from Brittany, where she was from.

"What's Brittany like?"

"Rocks," she answered immediately, golden crumbs spangling one corner of her mouth. "You've seen it on the map, right? It sticks out into the ocean, on the west of France. It's a very rocky coast--at least, on the north, on the Côte Sauvage. You see? They call it the savage coast, wild coast. The sea is wild there too. But where I live, on the southern coast, it's not so much. It is more protégé. . . ."

"Protected?" Sometimes I could understand her words from their context.

"Yes. More sand than rocks." She paused, wiping distractedly at her mouth with a napkin. She missed the crumbs. "Bretons are sailors. Many people live by fishing. Not so much in my part of Brittany. More people
there are farmers. But we still know how to sail. I love to sail. And we have our own language. It's more like . . . l'Irlandais. . . ."

"Irish."

"Yes, more like Irish than French. My father spoke Breton with his mother and father when he was a child. I can speak a little. Bretons have their own customs, their own dress. Really, we are like a different country. When I was little they were making bombs, blowing up things, to separate from France. But that is too much, I think." She straightened. "We are Breton, but we are also French."

She took a sip of tea. "There is a certain picture of Bretons. For one thing that we are dumb. I think that's because we didn't like the French and didn't speak their language, so they said these things about us, that we are stupid; and, how do you say . . . lots of stories about dead people, and people in the sea--"

I was puzzled. She tried again. "Stories, and things people do because they are afraid. Things they believe they must do."

"Superstitious?" I guessed. She frowned and shrugged her shoulders. "Superstitious," I said again.

"Thank you. Also that we don't talk very much. Don't smile very much. Gray like the weather--it rains a lot in Brittany. Hard like the rock.
That’s how my father is. Not stupid—he’s very smart. I mean hard. His face, it never change. He doesn’t say a lot. My mother and father, they have old beliefs. They’re very traditional."

She glanced at me quickly, as if she wasn’t sure whether to say what was in her mind. I just sat, ready to listen. "When my father eats, he just use a knife and his hands. His favorite shoes are wood ones. The cow lives on the other side of the kitchen. Do you see what I mean?"

She paused. "But my parents, they have a TV, too, and he is very smart about," she searched for the English and gave up, "insémination artificielle." She peered at me to see if I knew the words. I had no idea what she was talking about. "For his cows. You know, the male cow . . . they send it in the mail. To make the females pregnant." She shrugged. "He learned it from some American scientists in the state of Wisconsin. So you see? My parents, they are a mix of new and old. I wish more new, but. . . ."

She sighed a big sigh and folded her arms across her chest.

I didn’t know people ate with just knives anywhere, at least not anywhere in France, or wore wooden shoes, except in Holland. But Rosy could have been saying anything. I was fascinated just watching her. So many feelings passed through her face as she talked. She might be looking gloomily out the window one moment, and clapping her hands in delight
the next. A look of disgust about something—something someone had said or done—replaced in an instant by a look of contentment, like a cat in the sun, or by a look of calm acceptance, which reminded me that she was older. There was no holding back with Rosy, whether she was happy or sad. I had never seen anything like it.

"Claude isn't from Brittany," she said, biting her lip. "His parents are from the center of the country. People have everything there. So he doesn't understand."

"But he lived in Brittany?" She seemed to be going towards gloom; I hoped to steer her back.

She nodded. "He went to the university. Then he stayed for his job. He says Bretons aren't friendly. But it isn't true. Not at all. You'll have to come and visit, Lizzie, and see."

"I'd love to."

"Good! You can visit us, and my family. I will show you great places. You'll have a wonderful time."

I found out Rosy was from a family of girls, with one older sister, Laurence, and two younger, named Hélène and, of all things, Betty.

"That's an American name," I objected.

"Oh no. It's very popular in France."
I could tell Laurence, the oldest, was Rosy’s favorite. I had never heard of a female person named Laurence. I only knew one Lawrence, and that was Lawrence Welk, whom my grandmother loved and I couldn’t stand. Lawrence Welk was ridiculous to me; therefore, so was his name. In French, though, Laurence sounded smooth and elegant. I decided it was okay for a girl. Laurence was married to a truck driver and had two kids. She was 27. Betty, "the baby," was 18, Jack’s age.

Rosy spoke of her sisters often. When she did, remembering their life on her parents’ farm, her eyes seemed to turn a lighter shade of brown and crinkled at the corners; her lips pursed in amusement. But sometimes after she finished a story, the smile pinched even tighter, and she would look away. She might even get up and walk back and forth in front of the wall of window, looking out. I would sit quietly and look out too, or, if it was dusk or even dark, I’d watch our reflections in the glass. She’d turn back toward me after a while, smile almost apologetically, and come over, smoothing her skirt and taking a deep breath as she sat.

Once, after a story about the sisters picking apples, and Hélène falling out of the tree and getting the wind knocked out of her, so that she couldn’t speak for three days, I asked Rosy if she ever called her sisters in France on the phone and talked to them.
The glow in her skin died away. Her face became white and sharp and narrow, the way it had become that first time I met her. She drew up straighter. I feared I shouldn't have asked.

She only said, "It's terribly expensive to call."

* * * *

There was a big old television in the sunroom, in a corner. I had never seen it turned on. I asked Rosy about it one day.

"It's just noise. People told me it's a good way to learn English, but I can't bear it. Sometimes the quiet I can't bear either. But the loud American talking makes me feel even worse."

She blinked. "Excuse me, Lizzie. I like Americans. I just mean, it's not French they're speaking--and things are different here. They are all the time laughing on TV, even on the news. They make these jokes. Everyone is happy, even when they are talking about terrible things."

One time, after I hadn't been there for a few days, a sewing machine appeared in the sunroom. It sat on a little table pushed against the other brick wall. Next to it a plain cardboard box served as a side table and held scissors, boxes of thread, a pile of folded fabrics, and other sewing things.
Rosy's face brightened when I asked her about it. "My machine à coudre. I was sad without it, I missed it so much, so I had a friend find it in my things and send it to me, all the way from France. I like to make clothes. See this skirt?" It was soft gray wool, perfectly pleated all around, with three striking bands of navy, forest green, and crimson in the middle. "I made it. I make all of my clothes. I design them, I sew them. I love to sew."

"Sew," I said. She pronounced it "sue."

"Yes. Do you sew?"

"Sew," I said again. "No. I hate to sew." My grandma, my mother's mom, had tried to teach me to sew, though neither she nor my mother really liked it either. Sewing was too fussy for me. The thread was little and fine and got into knots if you even breathed on it. Needles were even smaller, and seemed magnetically drawn to carpet. And needles' eyes were the tiniest things around. But little needles could make a big sensation--of pain. I was always jabbing myself. All in all, sewing made me feel like a big clumsy idiot.

"On a machine?"

"I've never tried it." I remembered a time when Mom made some outfits for us girls on a machine. I was in second grade. I guess she got it
out of her system because, as far as I could remember, she never made anything on that machine again.

"We'll have to sew something. Something pretty for you. Would you like that?"

"Uh, yes. I think so."

"Come upstairs. I'll show you some of the things I've made."

I'd never been upstairs. At the top of the stairs there was an open space, a kind of central hallway with a light in the ceiling and slate blue carpet and four or five doorways leading off of it.

Rosy led me into her room, bending just inside to scoop a heaped nightgown off the floor. She went over to a closet and slid open the door.

I looked around. The nightgown was part of a trail, I saw, which ended—or began?—with a robe flung across one corner of the bed. The bed was unmade, the sheets scrunched down at the bottom of mainly one side, hers, I guessed. The bedspread, covered in a light yellow shimmery material, peeled back off the bed and was angling towards the floor. On the wall above the head of the bed, two fans had been opened out and tacked, their edges artfully overlapping. One was a wash of blues and greens, the other, white with a colorful border. Other than that, the room's walls were bare.
Pillows lay this way and that on the bed, as if there’d been a pillow fight, but I knew Claude had been out of town last night. So maybe Rosy was a thrasher. That’s what my mother called my brother when he was little, because he thrashed around when he slept. Mom made her bed every morning. She said if she didn’t, she was bound to have a bad day. Maybe that was part of why Rosy was unhappy. Maybe, when I got to know her better, I would mention this to her.

A chest against a wall was a checkerboard of closed and open drawers. Sweaters flung their arms out of the drawer closest to the bottom. A few necklaces hung around one post of the mirror. The top of the dresser, though, was surprisingly clear of things. Rosy had a little mat or piece of fabric on it, white, old-looking material with a lace edge. On one corner of this lay a pair of socks, dark, the kind my father wore, wrapped in a neat ball. But in the middle there was a bouquet of dried flowers, tied with satin ribbon. Or more like a sheaf, because the flowers were spiky, like wheat, only shorter.

Rosy stepped up behind me. "Lavender," she said as she whisked the socks off the chest top and stuck them in a drawer. "It grows where I come from. Smell." I bent and inhaled. At first it just smelled musty, but then a dull-edged, strong spicy scent kicked in. It punched me low in the stomach.
I thought of the word "pungent," and that maybe that’s where it came from, from the word "punch."

Rosy leaned forward and also inhaled. "I do this—ahhhhh!—when I want to think of home." She picked up the bouquet, riffled through the flowers with one finger, then placed it carefully back. She plucked at my arm. "Come see."

I turned and drew a sharp breath. The bed was covered with colors. Yellow, orange, purple, blue. Silky, nubby, gauzy, fuzzy.

She had pulled out clothes from her closet. "I love color," she said, staring musingly down at them. "Here I haven’t worn these bright colors very much. But I love them, especially to sew." She had returned to her own pronunciation of the word. She reached her hands down and stirred.

* * * *

One afternoon after school, when I had hardly any homework, I took Stella out exploring in the field. Growing up, Rita and I had played Indians there, galloping our horses at full speed after buffalo, picking berries to mash into pemmican to pretend to eat, and carrying out other aspects of Indian life. Our favorite tribe were the Sioux.
The field had grown up a lot since then. As I tromped around in it, I felt how it was no longer the magical place it had been for me. I didn’t know it as well anymore. I didn’t spend much time there; I’d gotten busier, into other things. My route to school, via the bus, took me the opposite direction, and Rita no longer lived through the woods that bordered it. Now the field had become a forgotten corner, no longer a living thoroughfare; more a plain old overgrown lot than an intimate friend. Still, I returned to it every now and then, tending it for old times’ sake, collecting discarded bottles and cans as I had when I was little, and cursing the litterers.

But the sun got lower and my ears started to throb with wind and cold, so I went in. Mom wasn’t around; she’d left a note, she was at a meeting and would be home later. Jack was still at work.

I wondered what to do. I thought of Rosy. How she didn’t get any mail.

Not too long ago, maybe in the fall, Mom hadn’t been feeling well. Jack and Dad must have been in some tense standoff and I was worried about her. I know I wanted to cheer her up. At any rate, I’d collected cast-off paper from my father’s trashcan and crafted a letter to her, a made-up letter from a made-up person, sure to make her laugh. When I was done, I
folded and taped an envelope together and wrote her address on it. I drew the outline of a box in the upper right-hand corner, and authenticated it with a picture, the kind of thing the post office always had on stamps: in this instance, I drew a crude upside-down hook of a bird with two long legs, and some wavy lines for water. "Roseate Spoonbill," I wrote in tiny letters below the bird's feet.

It succeeded in amusing Mom. Now I went again to Dad's trashcan and scrounged some clean scrap paper. I sat at his desk, took the metal pen out of its holder, and wrote a letter in English. When I got to it, the final letter would be in French.

Dear Rosy,

I never really thanked you for that beautiful cake you baked me. It was delicious! I've never tasted such a delicious cake. I've also enjoyed talking with you about Brittany, your home country. I'd really like to come see it one day, so maybe I will visit you there and meet your sisters and parents!

Love,

Lizzie
I read it over, trying to figure out the translation as I went. Zut, I thought finally, just do it. I got my letter paper ready and began, as neatly as possible, adding lots of stylish flourishes to my handwriting.

Chère Rosy,

Je n’ai pas dit actuellement "merci" à vous pour le gâteau que vous avez fait pour moi. Il a été délicieux! Je n’ai pas gouté un délicieux gateau comme ça, jamais.

The passé composé. I’d had to get up and refer to my textbook already, but it felt very elegant, this past tense. But French was hard. I’d had to decide whether to address Rosy as "vous," formal, or "tu," informal. It would be embarrassing if I offended her. I went with the formal, just in case. Also, I knew the verb for "to thank," but I wasn’t sure about its past tense form, so I had to say what I wanted in a very roundabout way.

Aussi, j’ai aimé beaucoup parler avec vous sur

I crossed that out. There went neatness. But "parler" sounded so dry and businesslike. "Talking" was ok in English, but I didn’t like it in French.
Rosy’s stories about Brittany had been more than just talking. They had been . . . well, stories.

Aussi, j’ai aimé beaucoup des histoires que vous avez dit à moi sur la Bretagne, votre

"Home country"? "Pays" was "country," but I thought that really meant "nation." I racked my brain for synonyms in English--"land," "home," "favorite place"--and then for the corresponding words in French. My French-English dictionary was in my locker at school. I wasn’t sure of any of the words, except one--"chez." Chez meant home. But it seemed I’d only heard it in terms of an actual house, and with the vous after it--"chez vous"--not in front and possessive. But I’d already written the "votre," and no more cross-outs were allowed. It would just have to do.

votre chez. J’aime beaucoup penser de voyager là un jour pour la voir. Peut-être je peux venir chez vous

That time, at least, I knew "chez" was right.
et visiter vous et vos soeurs et votre maman et papa. Je suis très heureuse.

I hesitated, chewing the black rubber tip of the pen. I hadn’t planned to write this part, but now I’d started. It hit me that it was what I’d wanted to say all along.

que vous habitez ici maintenant, et que je vous connais.

Merci!

Lizzie

I didn’t know how to say "Love," yet in French.

As long as I’d started, I decided to pour out my heart all the way.

Winging it, I added,

P.S. (Est-ce que vous dites "P.S." en Français?) Je suis triste que votre mari voyage beaucoup, et que vous manque votre famille. Je me regrette! J’espère que bientôt votre mari finit être étudiant pour sa
compagnie et reste plus de temps avec vous, et vous pouvez vivre encore près à votre famille.

P.S. (Do you say P.S. in French?) I'm sorry your husband travels so much, and that you miss your family. I hope that he will finish his training soon and then stay home more, and also that you can live near your family again.

There. I had to admit it: my letter looked pretty good. Writing it hadn't been so hard after all, once I got going. The language had flowed in a way that made me think I had a knack for it. It felt close to how a French person would really talk--close to perfect. I fashioned another piece of paper into an envelope and slipped the letter inside, then addressed it.

Mme Rosy Charbonneau
Route des Willows
Meadowbrook, Illinois
États-Unis de l'Amérique PAR AVION

Next, I drew outlines for four stamps. Overseas mail always took more. I pondered, then sketched, in the first box, a low three-wheeled bicycle.

"Invention of the Tricycle," I wrote, "1788." The writing spilled out of the
box. Oh well. In the vertical box next to it I drew a tree. "Elm," I wrote at
the top, and "State Tree" at the bottom. There was no room to say which
state's tree it was, even if I'd known.

I chewed the pen for a minute, then drew a face in each of the
remaining boxes. I framed each face with long dark hair. At the top of one
I wrote "R. Charbonneau" in tiny letters (they snaked down around the
woman's head to fit in the box); at the top of the other I wrote "Liz Alder."
I chewed the pen again, then wrote under my picture, "Pianiste
Américaine."

you say "Sewer"--"Seamstress"--in French? Costume Designer? None of these
titles seemed right. She wasn't just one thing, she was many. More than
anything, though, she was Rosy. I raised my pen, wrote, "Belle Française,"
and was done with it.

As I taped the envelope shut, it struck me that half the stamps were
in English and half in French. I shrugged. In my postal system, everyone
got a little cut.

I'd have to wait until dark to deliver my letter. That wouldn't be
great. Maybe I could go just after dark, and bend down low in front of the
windows. She was never in the front of the house anyway. But what if her
husband drove up while I was there? My adrenalin started pumping simply at the thought of it. But the delivery later that night, aided by Stella, went smoothly despite a wind that whipped through the trees all around me as I walked, so that their branches clacked spookily together.

The next time I went to see Rosy, she met me with a "you shouldn't have" look. "Thank you for your letter. Lizzie, that was so sweet!" In the sunroom, she said, "You know, I am 'tu' to you, just like you are to me."

"Oh, okay." Was this just fact, or did she mean something special by it? "Thanks."

"And another thing." She'd been pouring tea; she set the teapot down. "I don't want you to feel terrible for me--because Claude works so much, because I am over here in America, even if sometimes I am lonely and not happy. You don't have to be sorry. It's nothing you did! It's nothing you can do anything about."

I looked up at her. "Yes I can."

"What can you do?"

I swallowed. "I can visit you and cheer you up."

She laughed. "Yes, you can visit me. And you do cheer me up. But I don't want you to visit me just for that. I want you to come here because you like to. Because you want to!"
"I do want to."

Rosy peered out the window. She was hunched forward on the sofa, her elbows on her knees, her hands clasped together up near her mouth. She nibbled on them for a moment, then said, "It's okay not to be happy. You know? I mean, how could I be happy right now? It's not possible, for a few reasons. But that's okay. That's just how it is. For now. Not forever. I think." She smiled wanly. "But whether I am happy or not, cherie, it is not of your affairs."

I wanted to change the subject. I also wanted confirmation of something. "How was my French in the letter?"

She looked at me gravely. "Your French . . . it was super." She said that the French way. "Yes. Very good. It was just like getting a letter from France. From mon chez. Chez moi." She bit her bottom lip. "Oh, and I liked your stamps. It's not a great pianist you will be, it's a great artist. I mean, "la belle Française," c'était moi. But tell me. Do you study piano? I didn't know."

So we talked of other things, including Miss Goujaud.
I met Rosy's husband, Claude, one Saturday morning. Mom and I were talking about all the things Rosy couldn't do without a car, and Mom realized that, since most French people are Catholic, going to mass might be one of them. She sent me over to ask Rosy if she wanted to go with us the next morning.

It was 11:30, almost lunchtime; I hurried over so I could get back and eat. In fact I even took a shortcut path across the Petersons' front yard, through the bushes, and across the Felds' backyard, which emptied out at Rosy's right there by the sunroom. I didn't think Mrs. Feld would mind.

Rosy was in her bathrobe when she answered the door. The robe was white and short, of thick terry cloth, and her hair was wet, though finely combed and straight. "Come in, come in!" Obviously glad to see me, she looked the happiest and most relaxed I'd ever seen her. She took a step back to make room for me to come in. As she did, she took both ends of her luxuriously thick belt and tugged them to draw the robe tighter. Still, the neckline was a deep V. I stared at the floor. She started towards the
kitchen, chattering lightly as she went. "It's a nice day, unh? No school. No work."

At the door to the kitchen she stopped and motioned me past her. As I went by, she put her hands on my shoulders, then pushed me along from behind.

The little round table by the sliding glass door was set for breakfast, a vase of red and yellow tulips at the center. Behind it, a newspaper was spread out on the table, and a man sat reading it, staring down.

Rosy stopped me where he could see us. He didn't look up. She cleared her throat. Again, he didn't look up.

"Claude!" she said. His head snapped up.

He wasn't old. Not like I'd pictured him. He seemed younger than my father. His hair, a mixture of black and gray, was thick and wavy. His face was big and round, with a little pointed chin, and his eyes bugged out like he was constantly excited. Later, when he stood up, I would see that he was shorter than Rosy, and that his stomach had the same tight, hearty roundness as his face. At the sight of me, all of his face--mouth, cheeks, eyebrows--pulled up into a quizzical smile.

"Lizzie, this Claude. Claude, this is Lizzie," Rosy said. "My young friend."
He nodded towards me. "Of course. It is a pleasure to meet you."
"Remember, she speaks French."
Claude held out his hand. "Enchanté."
I walked forward to grasp it, and he gave one somber shake. Then Rosy steered me to a chair at her husband's left. "Sit down! Claude brought real croissants from Houston. He found a good bakery there. Would you like one? With some coffee?" I shook my head. Why was she offering me coffee? Kids weren't supposed to drink it. Besides, I'd tasted Dad's, and it was horrible. "Well then, juice?"
"Yes please."
The chairs were modern and plain, with shorter backs than usual. I sat with my hands wedged under my thighs; the seats of woven sisal bit into my palms. I looked the table over. They had already eaten. Two cloth napkins were bunched up and randomly abandoned. Small octagonal dishes of pale green glass were smeared with jam and showered with crumbs, and one held a chewed-on remnant of croissant. Crumbs were everywhere, they trailed over forest green placemats, and even, I saw, into Claude's lap.
He'd gone back to reading his paper. Unlike Rosy, he was dressed for the day, in pants and a blue shirt. It was the kind of shirt that went with a suit, but he wore it by itself, open at the throat--unbuttoned, in fact, about
as deeply as Rosy's bathrobe went. Dad never wore his shirts like that, it
would never cross his mind, and I was glad of it. Men who did, I thought,
looked hokey, like they still thought they were in the 60s. Claude was
French, though, and that's how French men still wore shirts. I had noticed
this in the pictures in our textbook. I decided I could get used to it--on
Claude.

"So what's been going on?" Rosy said from over by the sink. I had
taught her that, "what's going on," and also, "what's happening." She wiped
her hands on a dishcloth. "How's your family?"

"Fine. Mom sent me over to see if you wanted a ride to church
tomorrow. We go to 9:30 mass."

Claude looked up from his paper in Rosy's direction and laughed. It
was a single bark, brought up from his gut, like a seal's.

Rosy's dark eyebrows drew together severely. "S'il te plaît," she said
to him. Then softening, to me, "That's very nice, Lizzie. Please thank your
mother." She carried juice and a croissant to the table while she thought.
"But, here in America, I don't really feel like going. I don't think I'd
understand the English very well."

Claude, reading his paper again, snorted. Rosy's eyes flew angrily to
his face, then down into her coffee cup. It was the largest cup I had ever
seen and, slumping back into her chair, Rosy held it languorously balanced between the tips of her fingers. One side of her robe in front flipped back, showing more of her thigh. I quickly moved my eyes to her face and nodded.

They were making me nervous. I seldom saw my mother get angry at my father. Well, that wasn't true. I saw her get angry at him a lot. In fact, she seemed angry at him all the time. But she was quiet about it. She kept it inside. Well, actually, it was all over her face sometimes, how mad she was, loud and clear. And if I could see it, Dad must be able to too. But then he could always just not look. In other words, things were quiet between Mom and Dad. Almost as if nothing was happening. Almost. Not like this.

I took a bite of my croissant. To prevent further conflict, I tried to change the subject with "Umm, delicious."

"They're good, aren't they?" said Rosy.

"Yes. What makes them that way?"

"French bakers," Claude mumbled, without looking up.

"Oh, écoute, tais-toi!" Rosy said, slapping the table. Her "oh" was deep and rich with disgust, and she shook her head emphatically like a horse rattling its bridle. I didn't understand what she said, but from the
way she said it, it sounded like "shut up, you." I couldn’t imagine my mother ever saying that to my father.

For some reason, even though Rosy and Claude seemed serious, I wanted to laugh. Maybe it was nerves. Part of me wanted to escape their sparring, to get out of there quick. But part of me was fascinated.

"I think it’s butter," Rosy said, her voice quiet and instructive, to me, while she cut Claude a dark look. He just read. "Butter, and the way they work the . . . the . . . pâte. . . ."

"Batter," Claude said.

"Batter. To tell you the truth, I don’t know. I’ve never cooked them."

"But I wasn’t joking," Claude said abruptly, looking up at last, staring at Rosy. Even though they were both sitting at the table, the way he looked at her was as if he were standing over her looking down. It may have been because his eyelids were slightly lowered and his chin stuck out. "They are French in that bakery, and French bakers know how to make croissants."

"Yes, yes," Rosy said, her face calmer now that he at least looked at her, "but that doesn’t help the child very much, does it? It wasn’t what she asked. And you know, French people are not the only ones who can make good croissants."

Claude sighed and lowered his face to his paper.
Rosy shrugged and drank again. She looked up at me, her face suddenly cheerful again.

"Claude stays this week till Thursday. I'm so happy."

Where had the storm gone? Suddenly it was nowhere to be seen, as if it had never happened, as if the rain had scrubbed the sky.

"That's great."

"He's taking me to the city tonight. A colleague told him of a good restaurant, and we will walk along the lake." She set her cup down, coffee sloshing, and jumped up. She slipped behind Claude's chair and put her arms around him, her upper body against his back, one cheek against his shoulder. She smiled dreamily at me.

"He's really very good to me, even if he is never home and when he is, he is so chauvin for France, like your word chauvinist."

So the conflict wasn't completely gone. But suddenly it didn't matter anymore. I smiled. Bright noon light poured in around Rosy, gilding her and the tulips and their leaves.

Claude raised his head and looked like he was waiting.

"He's so good, and sweet, and all those things. I'm so happy he is home."

"Okay, Rosy," Claude said, staring straight ahead.
"And he tells me that on Wednesday I go down on the train--Mrs. Feld will take me to the station--and we are going to a museum, and dinner again. Isn't that marvelous?"

It was marvelous. I could just imagine her, in one of the beautiful swirling dresses she had shown me upstairs. It was what Rosy was meant to do, every night. She turned her face into Claude's back and kissed it.

"Rosy," he said again. When she didn't move, he threw his shoulders back as if to shake her off.

She stood up straight and glared at him. "What!?" A chill came back strong between them. Even I shivered.

"Nothing," he said. "Nothing." He smoothed the newspaper before him. "I just want to read my paper."

* * * *

The end of February and beginning of March, we had freakishly warm, balmy weather. On my way up the lane one morning to catch the bus, with soft light spreading up into the sky behind me, I heard back off to my left the chortling, rangy cry of a red-winged blackbird. No matter where I was, that cry always made me think of the marshy back corner of
the pond behind our house, where young willows rooted deep and drank, and where the blackbirds clung to molting cattails. That call meant spring.

It was the first time I'd heard a red-wing that year. I stopped and scanned the nearby trees and bushes. It struck me that red-wings were probably my favorite birds because—I laughed—because of one that I used to hate. It was back when Rita Ness still lived through the woods and we walked to grade school together. Every morning she and I met in the back dead-end circle of Devon Lane. A path through somebody's backyard on Devon led to a gap in the fence, and to the vast playing field and school buildings beyond. There in the gap, before we started across, we felt like explorers on the edge of the world.

One spring, a red-winged blackbird built her nest near the gap. She gave a sharp warning cry as Rita and I approached, but we didn’t notice it, and we didn’t notice the black shape hovering high over our heads. Then the air right above us exploded with beating wings and sharp-edged clucks. Arms over our heads and faces, we ran, catching glimpses of coal-black feet and wingtips, glinting beak and eyes, a flash of red. From then on, the mother bird launched herself to meet us as we walked to and from school. We made it through the gap at full speed, yelling curses to keep our courage up, our eyes tracking her by her shadow on the ground.
Now, school was farther away, so I no longer walked. I thought I had hated those encounters with the red-winged blackbird, but suddenly I missed them fiercely, as fiercely almost as that bird had sailed out to defend her turf.

Continuing up the lane, I saw that some of the trees had what looked like buds on the ends of their branches, definite quickenings. In the wet black earth under the Zahnisers’ hedge, fragile new leaves pushed up. I shook my head. Much as this weather and the red-winged blackbird’s cry thrilled me, it was all a mistake. The weather wasn’t going to last. It was pitiful, but those buds and new shoots would probably die in a coming cold snap. They had said so on the news, Mother and I had seen it.

I could see figures at the top of the lane, neighbor kids already there waiting. Nancy Gernazian, kicking a stone, looked up, saw me and waved. I waved back. Then she waved again with a beckoning motion. I began to run. I wondered if the blackbird I’d heard would be deceived by the false spring, if it would suffer when the weather turned cold again. I wondered where it had come from and where it would go.

* * * *

* * *
During lunch, Jane, Rita, and I lounged on the grass outside the cafeteria. Just about everyone else with lunch that period was outside too. Two different frisbees flashed through the air, one fluorescent pink, one black. The players, mostly guys but a few girls too, managed to send them sailing skillfully around people in the crowd.

We’d found our own patch near an evergreen, half in, half out of the sun. The sky arched infinite and blue above bare reaching trees. Sitting in the sun was actually hot, but a mild breeze wafted every now and then through the courtyard. Rita lay on her side, fingering grass as we talked. Her pink gypsy shirt set off her ruddy brown skin. One of the tallest girls in school, she looked regal and she knew it. Her nose was stronger than most girls’, and straight, which, with her long straight dark hair and dark eyes, made her seem American Indian.

Jane had stripped down to a red t-shirt and lay on her back full-face to the sun, eyes closed, hands folded across her stomach. Jane was more Rita’s friend than mine. Secretly, I found her too sarcastic and negative. You’d never know it from looking at her; she said the meanest things with a big happy grin on her pale, pimply face. I had to put up with her, though, since we both hung around Rita.
Lazily, I watched the frisbees make their rounds. It occurred to me that what all of us out here were infected with was spring fever. Every now and then I wiped at the film of sweat between my lip and my nose. The weather was wonderful, but it wasn’t going to last, and therefore, I refused to take my sweater off. Plus there was a cool edge to the breeze. It was just the kind of weather Mom always said would slip up on you and give you a cold, and Mom was right about most everything.

A guy I liked, Ron, from Algebra, was one of the frisbee players. Legs apart, arms dangling at his thighs, he stood waiting for another guy to throw. He was about my height—on the tall side—and lean. He ran track, I’d heard him say. As I watched, the guy threw the frisbee his way, and Ron’s eyes, brown in a dark face, snapped into focus. Then he was off and running, and lifted off in a big leap for the pink frisbee. His shirt was off and his torso arched. It looked like he had a little potbelly, but it was just the way his stomach curved into his pants.

His timing was off and the frisbee sailed over him. He walked slowly to retrieve it. Two girls who were playing stood with their hands on their hips, talking, laughing. A guy came over and gently collared one, pulling her back against him for a second. She laughed and squirmed. Ron
came back, frisbee in hand. The guy let the girl go and jogged back into position.

I looked at Rita Ness. Jane was getting ready to go, stuffing empty baggies into her lunch bag.

"It might be nice to have a boyfriend, hunh Rita?" I was dumb enough to say out loud.

Jane stuffed the last baggy into the bag, her stringy blond hair swinging. When her face came up she was smiling broadly. "Oh-oh," she said, and in some kind of put-on Southern accent, "I do believe Lizzie Alder's horny."

I couldn't believe my ears. It was like being slapped. I looked at Rita in outrage, but her eyelids were lowered a fraction, making her almond-shaped eyes sly and mysterious, and a little smile pricked her mouth.

"Horny" had to be one of the grossest words in the English language. It always gave me the shivers when I heard it, made me think of people with horns erupting out of their skin like really bad pimples, in places they had no control over. That word, "erupt," always went with pimples, doctors said it, or maybe it was just doctor-voices on TV commercials. It was another word that made me shiver. But "horny" was especially bad. It made me think of panting. It gave me the same feeling I'd had when I was little
and a dog wrapped its front paws around my leg. I couldn’t pry it off; it hung there straining and thrusting, frantic and dumb. As I watched, its penis peeled back and this red part came out that looked like raw meat, only it was pointed and rolled up tight like a bud on the end of a branch. Then somehow, it disappeared.

I never could figure that out. What was that thing? How could it be there sometimes and not others? What made it appear or disappear? I’d be living along and every now and then--I don’t know, every three or four months--the thought would cross my mind that I still didn’t understand that dog penis thing. I’d think, I need to look that up in an encyclopedia, or ask someone. But I wasn’t sure what to look under, or who to ask, and, once again, I wouldn’t get around to it.

I wouldn’t have admitted it for the world, because I was supposed to know these things by now, but human sex was also a mystery to me. I’d had the basics in a film in fourth grade, and I’d heard that we went over them again next year, in Biology. I’d had that roll on the ground with Mark Radkowitz, and Kenny Beck had put his arm around me at a movie last fall. (I scooched up forward in my seat until he took it away. Shorter than me and a big brain in my classes, he was always so hyper his lips quivered. Why had I agreed to go out with him? His arm touching my back
gave me that sick feeling again.) But there were still lots of things I was
vague about when it came to sex. Peeking through my brother’s keyhole
had been . . . interesting, but I hadn’t seen things clearly enough to have
gotten enlightened.

How much of what was true for dogs was true for humans? Male
dogs wanted to have sex with female dogs during their periods. Was that
also when human females got pregnant? And I wasn’t much clearer about
human penises than I was about dog ones. Did something appear, then
disappear? Some other piece slide out? I’d seen the little blip between men’s
legs on statues downtown in the museum. So why all the big-penis jokes?
"Penis" was another of the grossest words in the English language.

Sometimes I got clues about how sex worked from things people
said, but mostly I didn’t hear much about it. My mother had never talked
to us about sex, and my father certainly hadn’t. Maybe he’d talked to Jack,
but somehow I doubted it. Nor had Margaret or Sally ever talked about it
when I was around, and somehow I’d bet money that they didn’t even
when I wasn’t. School friends talked about it, but mostly in jokes. When
they did, I put knowing looks on my face and was sure to laugh at the
punchlines.
But mostly, sex was this dumpy, dirty little cloud that never went away. It was always hovering there in view. Not right up front and center, but off in a back corner, where I didn’t look at it but I always saw it.

On the other hand, I felt no urgent need or desire to know. That was where Jane, who looked like my ideas of horny, eruption, and penis all rolled up together, was wrong. And Rita Ness, who sat there saying nothing to defend me. They were like the rest of the people we went to school with: obsessed with sex. Whereas I was just talking about sitting with someone on green grass on a beautiful day. I was talking about throwing frisbees. They didn’t understand at all.

"I am not horny, Jane Mason." I gathered my garbage up and walked in the opposite direction.

* * * *

The cold came back. It snowed and froze. Some growing things were hurt, though it wasn’t as bad as people had predicted. Soon it was hard to remember the spell of false spring at the beginning of the month.

"I loved that soft weather," Rosy said when the cold snap hit. "I kept the door open," she nodded to the door in the corner of the sunroom. "I
could hear the birds. They were so happy! The wind--how do you say, the breeze," she said "breeze" in a deeper voice, sweeping one hand in front of her and obviously enjoying the word, "it was delicious. It came in and walked around the room. Next, I thought, will come the flowers. But winter came back. I couldn’t believe it."

"Spring shouldn’t have come so soon," I said. "It was a mistake. But it’ll come again."

"You promise?" Her mouth twitched and I realized she was teasing: of course she knew it would come. I smiled, embarrassed at having been stupid. But she continued to gaze at me with just a speck of a question in her eyes, as if part of her really waited for an answer, or was afraid of what it might be.

So I meant it when I said it. "Yes. I promise." She nodded once, gravely, and turned her head to look out the window.

* * * *

I loved riding the bus. It surprised me, because I’d hated the idea of it at the beginning of the year. Jack was going to drive to school every day;
why couldn’t he take me? But Mom didn’t make him. She said it was his
senior year, plus the bus would be a sure thing, reliable.

Taking the bus struck me as dorky, babyish. No matter how old they
were, kids getting off a school bus looked like they were in second grade,
trooping around the bus and crossing the street with their heads hanging
down. Yet really, secretly, I was scared. I’d never ridden a school bus
before. Would there be cliques? Would it matter where I sat? Would I have
to talk to people, be clever all the time? What if I did or said something
wrong?

It was hard to remember those fears. Now, riding the bus was a part
of my day I looked forward to. In the morning there was the challenge of
getting there before it came; in the afternoon, it felt great, being carried
home. It wasn’t at all like I’d thought, as far as having to do certain things
and do them right. In fact, it felt freer than most of my day. I chatted,
often with someone I wouldn’t normally hang out with at school, which
was nice, or I read or just looked out the window. Coming home, my stop
was usually the last one, and on the later buses for kids that did
extracurricular stuff, there were even fewer people. So sooner or later, I
had the whole bus to myself.
The route took almost an hour, but since sitting on the bus was so inherently useful—I needed to do it, to get home—I felt fine about doing whatever I wanted during that time. It might be homework, or preparing for a test. But it might just be sitting and looking out the window. Looking out the window was, in fact, one of my favorite things to do. We always passed the same things, nothing particularly interesting or beautiful: houses, streets, the forest preserve, a golf course, the expressway. But there were always new things to see: mallards on the creek, intense light firing a tree, people coming home and walking out to get their mail, cows in the muddy pasture of one of the last farms in the area.

In fact, the bus had even, in some strange way, become a comfort. I liked its lurching barebonedness, the rows of straight-backed double seats covered in cracking burgundy vinyl. I liked its cavernous arching hollowness and the way it creaked and groaned like a huge beast. When I stretched out on my back, the whining of the gears warned me when my street was coming up and I should sit up and watch.

The walk down the lane to home was also part of why I liked riding the bus. It only took about five minutes, but I liked it, liked doing it every day. Impressions of each neighbor family floated through my mind as, passing, I ran my eyes over the familiar lines of their houses. My favorite,
besides ours, was the Cleghorns’, snug in a curve of the road and made of white-painted brick. At Christmas, they put lights shaped like candles in every front window, making the house a solemn lit-up prayer.

Four tall evergreens in the Cleghorns’ side yard served as kind of a beacon during the first third of my way down the lane. They looked old and were so massed and dark that, in some light, they seemed more black than green. Their heavy boughs arced groundward, the shoots on either side of the branches hanging straight down in symmetrical pairs. I didn’t know what kind of tree they really were, but my name for them was the candlestick trees: the hanging shoots looked like pairs of long dark candles joined at the wick and slung over the branches to dry.

I turned a corner at my second beacon, the oak at the fork. The sound of traffic on Dell Ridge grew distant, absorbed by the thickening blanket of trees. Here, greater amounts of land separated the houses, and driveways grew longer, so that trees, plants, animals, the sky, and the road were what were there to look at. I knew the surface of the road well, I had it memorized: the place where it tilted, rough and discolored from puddles; further on, the familiar hand-shaped stain, one finger pointing.

Around the final curve, if it was dark and I looked at just the right moment through the trees, I might see all nine Blisses through the back bay
window of their house, gathered around the table having dinner. Then I met and entered the boomerang curve of our driveway. Or maybe I cut across the lawn. Either way, I passed under the huge willow and its cascade of trailing branches. I’d stick out an arm to give them something to yield to as I passed.

On a Friday evening at the beginning of March, I was the only one left on the bus except for one guy at the back I didn’t recognize. I lifted my head from my World Civ book just in time to see York Lane’s sign flash by on the left. York was the lane before mine. By the time I slipped my journal into my bookbag, capped my pen and put it in my purse, the bus was jolting as it geared down. I stood as the bucking got more gradual and began walking down the aisle.

That was another thing I loved about riding the bus: walking while it was still moving. I loved motion, and this motion was unpredictable, requiring alertness and sensitivity. It made me feel like a bronc rider. I always kept one hand on something steady, the backs of seats, as I walked, and bent my knees a little so I’d be ready if the bus pitched in any direction.

At the front I stood by Manny’s shoulder, hanging onto the steel bar above my head. "So what’s for dinner?" I asked. Manny had been the
janitor in my grade school. I'd always liked him. He was bald, and the shiness of his head was tripled by his smile and friendly eyes behind big black-rimmed glasses. I knew him better now, because when the bus cleared out and I felt like it, I sat up here and chatted with him. One of our favorite topics was the German food his wife cooked, which he loved.

"Hasenpfeffer."

"Oh."

"You know what that is?"

"No."

"You won't believe it when I tell you."

Lights at the back of the bus activated, clicking rhythmically on and off. The bus crested to stillness; Manny slapped the lever over to open the door. I heard the little stop sign flap out on the side of the bus. "Tell me," I said, starting down the steps.

"Rabbit," he said.

"Rabbit?" I said. I stopped on the last step and turned. "That's horr--!"

The boy from the back of the bus was right behind me, in midstep. One of his hands shot toward the handle by the door to keep from falling; the other reached for my shoulder, and for an instant, he leaned on me. I
guess I was still enough in bronc rider mode not to be thrown off, to stay steady under his weight. Then he got his feet under him and lifted his hand from my shoulder. We stood there looking at each other, catching our breath.

"Excuse me," he said, passing his hand over his mouth. When it came away, he was smiling a little, embarrassed. I noticed his ski jacket was smooth and thin, not puffed out in tiers like the Michelin tire man. It seemed to me it wouldn’t keep him very warm.

"I'm sorry, it was my fault," I told him, "I didn’t know you were there."

"No no," he said. He looked like he was going to say something else, but then he just shrugged. "It’s okay." His speech sounded a little funny, but I couldn’t tell if it was an impediment or what.

Manny yelled at us to cross the road. I turned away from the boy and walked in front of the bus's roaring grille and into my lane. The bus roared off, grinding gears. It was cold and gray out, "dismal," my grandmother would call it, and I pulled my chin and neck down into my scarf and coat like a turtle. Then I thought about the boy, and looked back to see which way he had gone.

He was right behind me, about fifteen or twenty feet.
I would have been creeped out if he looked scary, but he didn’t. He looked normal. He was even cute. Who was he? Maybe he lived in a nearby neighborhood and felt like walking home a different way. I did that sometimes, getting off the bus over at Middle Creek Lane or at the top of Devon, because I felt like it. Or maybe his family had just moved, and he was new. If I had known he was walking down Willow Lane, I might have stayed back and talked to him. But then again, you didn’t just go around chatting with people, at least not guys your own age. It wasn’t cool. You should act like you didn’t notice them, like they didn’t exist.

So that’s what I did. I looked up and let the candlestick trees draw me down the lane. I looked at houses and hedges. But behind me, the boy was a distracting presence.

When I turned the corner at the oak, his steps, which had been quiet, became even quieter. I turned my head slightly and pushed my eyes as far to the left as they would go. I saw him, across the Shoemakers’ front yard, walking down the other fork of the lane with his head down and his hands in his pockets. He clamped a notebook up under one armpit, against his body. He didn’t look back.

* * * *
I took Stella with me to see Rosy the next day. Sometimes Rosy let her come in the house.

Rosy answered the door. She was wearing a red sweater that buttoned along the ridge of one shoulder, and a blue pleated skirt. Her arms were crossed in front of her, hugging herself, the way they had been the first time I ever saw her. She looked tense, worried. She invited me in.

"Is Claude away?" I asked, guessing at the problem.

"Columbus, Ohio," Rosy said, leading me straight to the sunroom. Usually we went to the kitchen first to boil water.

"Will you talk to him tonight?"

"He gets home tonight."

"That’s good! How long has he been gone?"

"Since last night."

I wondered at the small stretch of her endurance. I had thought Rosy was getting more used to being on her own, but I guessed I was wrong.

"Well, he’ll be home soon, then," I said, trying to emphasize the positive, "and that will be good."

But Rosy jumped up nervously as if she hadn’t heard me, and said, with a clap of her hands, "I forgot! Some tea! Stay here. I’ll be back."
Stella stood by the outside sunroom door, gazing steadily in.
Occasionally she waved the flag of her tail at me weakly, a pathetic plea.

I had confessed to Rosy once that, when I was younger, I was disappointed with Stella. It was because of those Albert Payson Terhune books about collies that I'd read and loved: *Lad, a Dog; Bob, Son of Battle; A Highland Collie*. In all of them, the collies saved people and fought renegade strays to the death. Stella never did any of those things. She didn't seem particularly smart.

Rosy had shaken her head while she stroked Stella’s nose and looked into her brown eyes, which fluttered between the floor and, adoringly, her. "She is a good companion," Rosy said, in Stella’s defense. "What a good dog you are." If she forgot the stroking, if her hand stilled for a moment while we talked, Stella pried it up with her nose, nudged it violently back into action. At some point, Stella would get her fill, back away from Rosy and the sofa’s edge, turn three times at the end of the rug, and sink into a ball with a groan. The mass of fine hair in her back end stuck out like old-fashioned crimped underskirts.

Now, outside the door, Stella waved her tail again pleadingly. I got up and went to the kitchen. "Can Stella come in?"
Rosy was leaning back against the counter, her arms crossed as before. She took a dish rag, turned, and scrubbed at the spotless counter.

"No, Lizzie, I'm sorry. I don't think I can manage today. Those long hairs of hers..."

I felt embarrassed. "No, no, I'm sorry, that's fine, of course." I went out of the kitchen with a pang. All those other times Rosy had let her in, had she really wanted to? Had she just pretended to like Stella?

I was passing through the dining room, my hand trailing along the wall, when I saw that, for once, the room wasn't completely empty. In the bay window, on the ledge, lay a book. Rosy was still occupied in the kitchen. I crossed the room, bending under the chandelier, and entered the area of natural light.

It wasn't a book. It was a notebook, stamped with the Creston High insignia. I reached out wonderingly and flipped it open. On the first page, there was nothing but a date--yesterday's--and one sentence, in French. I pulled the notebook closer. I had never seen Rosy's handwriting before. It was surprisingly bad, messy, the one short sentence in pencil spotted with dark erasure clouds. It looked like she had tried the sentence first in English, then given up.
I shouldn’t have—it was none of my business—but I read what she had written, to see if I could understand. "Merde de connerie," it said, "ce prof est beau comme un singe."

I didn’t understand the first part, or, in the last part, what a "singe" was. The rest referred to a teacher, about how he was handsome. As handsome as . . . an angel? The word for angel, I thought, was "singe."

Had Rosy signed up for a class at my school? There were adult community classes there at night; maybe she was working on her English. Good for her! But maybe that’s what was eating her, making her nervous. At any rate, it seemed like she liked her teacher—well, at least his looks.

I heard the bottoms of things resound against a metal tray in the kitchen. I shut the notebook, straightened, and was looking out the window as Rosy entered the room.

"Oh. You’re in here?"

"Yes. I was just looking out the window."

"Well let’s go back in the sunroom."

"Okay."

She poured the tea and, with a sigh, settled back in the sofa.

There was new fabric at the sewing machine. "What are you making?"

"An evening dress. Very stylish. Très à la mode."
"It's gorgeous material." Glittery gold thread was somehow woven in with black.

"I know," she said, and winked. "It will be very sexy. You know, it's a real challenge to sew in a house without a table to lay the fabric out on and cut."

"So what do you do?"

"I'll tell you." She laughed. "I come in here, clean the floor very well--get down on my knees and scrub it! Then I can lay the fabric out and cut it. I walk around with no shoes, for no dirt. It's not the greatest, but it's the only idea I have."

"It's very American to walk around without shoes."

"I have noticed. What's the word again?"

"Barefoot."

"Right."

Stella, front paws on the step outside the sunroom door, looked in, whined, and stirred the air with her tail. The sound through the glass was distant, but Rosy heard and looked over. "Oh," she said, "let her in. It isn't fair. She's such a good dog."

"You're sure?"

"Yes yes."
I sprang up and let Stell in. Soon Rosy was stroking the dog’s throat and leaning close to her face to look into her eyes. Stella panted.

"Her breath is really bad," Rosy said.

"I know. It’s awful."

"Oh well. When we are old and wise like her, our breath will stink too."

There was movement in the doorway from the dining room. It was slight, like a flutter; I realized later that when I looked up, I thought I would see a bird that had gotten trapped in the house. But it was a guy. The guy from the bus.

Rosy said, "Hello Christian."

"Hello," he said, his eyes flickering also to me.

"Christian, this is Lizzie, she lives on our street. Christian is living with us. He is going to your school, Creston."

"I know, I saw you when we got-off the bus," I said.

"Yes, that’s right," he said. His head bobbed up and down, and kept bobbing. His shaggy hair was black, darker than Rosy’s, and there was black stubble around the lower part of his face. His gaze drifted toward the ceiling.
"Did you want something, Christian?" Rosy asked. She sounded slightly irritated.

"J'cherche mon cahier," the boy said. His voice, speaking French, was quick and sing-song, with a husky burr at the edges.

"We have a guest, Christian," Rosy said. "We should speak in English." Her tone was severe. I looked at her. She looked tense again.

The boy nodded. His skin was ivory pale like Rosy's. He looked down at the floor, then up to try again. "I look for my cahier--I have forgotten the word in English. Tu ne l'as pas vu?"

Rosy frowned. I could tell she thought he was being stubborn. She had stopped petting Stella, so of course Stella pushed her nose into Rosy's lap and nudged at her arm. Rosy pushed Stella's head away impatiently. She began to say something to Christian, but Stella nudged her again.

"Go!" Rosy said to her, jerking her arm up. "Go away! Lizzie, can you take her outside?"

I jumped up and grabbed Stella's collar, but she dug her feet into the rug and went heavy. "Stella! Come on!" She wouldn't move. I felt embarrassed, sick.

"Come on!" I pulled again. Stella wouldn't budge. My shame grew as I felt Rosy and the boy looking. I raised my hand above my shoulder and
brought it down hard on Stella's rear end. And again. Through the padding of hair on her rump, I could feel her bony jutting hips. There was no resilience, just dead impact, a further sag towards the ground.

My hand started swelling immediately. Stella still wouldn't move. I took her collar, dragged her to the door, and pushed her out.

I stood for a moment, watching her through the glass. She looked up at me once, reproachfully, I thought, but soon made a circle on the brown grass and lay heavily down. I rubbed my hand, then turned around. Rosy and Christian were looking at me. I dropped my eyes in a scowl.

"Alors," Christian resumed, "tu ne l'as pas vu?"

"No, I haven't seen it." Rosy sounded tired, tired of the question, tired of his talking in French.


"Thank you!" He gave me a funny mixture of a wave and a bow; a stand-in, I felt, for words that were so easy for me, that were even easy for Rosy now, mindless things like See you later, See you on the bus, Nice meeting you, We'll talk again soon. But for him, such phrases were elusive,
or maybe he wasn’t feeling brave enough yet to try them. He went out of
the room.

I looked at Rosy after he’d gone, but I didn’t have to ask.

"He is Claude’s son. From his first marriage." She drained her tea,
then shook her head. "He has been here three days and already he
complains all the time. He doesn’t like the bus. He doesn’t like school.
American kids are noisy and act like children. The teachers are stupid.
Phoo!" It sounded like a small whale spouting.

"And Claude, he goes off on his trips to other cities. He goes off and
here I am, alone with this boy, his son, who does nothing but complain and
act like a child himself. Et cette barbe!" She rubbed her chin. "It has to go. I
will not have a man around my house who looks like an alcoholic,
especially when he is only 17. Claude has got to speak with him."

Seated once again, I rubbed my index finger around and around the
rim of my teacup. If you did this with wine glasses, it made a mesmerizing
sound. "How long is he staying?"

"The year. That’s the plan, anyway." She clasped her hands in her
lap.

"Why did he come?"
"To see America, of course!" Then she added, almost reluctantly,
"And also, to spend time with his father. He hasn’t in a long time. And his
mother and sister were fighting. That isn’t very pleasant. The sister moved
out. I think the mother wanted time for herself."

I nodded at the floor, as if none of this surprised me. But all of it
did. A son. A first wife, still alive. Rosy’s irritation. But one thing surprised
me most of all. "Why didn’t you tell me he was coming?"

"Hmm," she mused. "Didn’t I? Maybe not. I don’t know why I didn’t.
I guess I didn’t think of it."

On the road home, Stell humped along, hunched up like a bear, one
back foot sometimes dragging. I felt terrible about hitting her, but I
couldn’t stop myself. Why had I done it?

It was dark. As usual, I’d stayed longer than I meant to. I hadn’t seen
Christian again. I had a lot of homework to do; I would get to it even later
what with dinner and the dishes.

What else doesn’t Rosy think to tell me, I wondered as we turned the
corner at the oak. I believed Rosy when she said she just hadn’t thought of
telling me about Christian, a whole new person coming into their lives. I
didn’t understand it, but I believed it. She was just like that: very occupied
with some thoughts, and not at all with others. It was a little disturbing; in
a way, it meant I couldn’t count on her. Count on her for what? I asked myself. I didn’t answer my own question, and soon I was running to get home.