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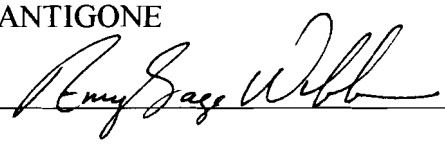
Abstract approved: 

In this thesis I present selections from my novel Annie Rose, along with a critical introduction discussing my borrowing, refashioning, and sometimes returning to Sophocles' *Antigone* as an inspiration for the novel . The original vision of the novel was one in which an Antigone character would be rescued from the cave. Although originally determined to give the myth a feminist slant, I found that neither the character nor the story lend themselves to such a viewpoint as easily as they might first seem to do, nor do feminist scholars necessarily consider any patriarchal myth rewritten a feminist work. Finally, the demands of a novel took over as characters inspired by the play took on new, modern forms, and these characters pushed the story in its own direction.

Yet the structure of the Sophocles play always cast a shadow, and often the greatest alterations in my novel were exact inversions of key factors in the original drama. For instance, one of the most significant alterations was that the Ismene character, here transformed from a sister into a friend. Although the ending did lean towards the more life-affirming direction I'd originally planned, disastrous events, brought on by stubborn

and polarized characters, took place in the community created in Annie Rose, just as they did in Sophocles' play. The selections from the novel include chapters and summaries of them describing how I have borrowed and refashioned character and plot from Sophocles' *Antigone*.

REFASHIONING ANTIGONE

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by

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Refashioning Antigone

Sophocles' play *Antigone* provides a barely noticeable but time-tested, ancient framework for my novel Annie Rose. Yet the novel is neither an updated nor novelized version of the play. While Sophocles' vexing work has tempted many writers to update, alter, or correct Antigone's character, that temptation can be unreliable. As compelling as the original is even two thousand years after its debut, even for the writer who upon viewing the play would like to present the story as he or she thinks it "should be," a simple renaming of touchstones will not land a modern Antigone in the desired place. For one thing, Sophocles' play--with its engaged cousins, family dynasty, and unburied body--does not easily adapt to a modern setting. For another, the political finalities one might try to impose serve little use to the novelist. In this case, a wish to ensure that Antigone's story has a feminist outcome will only take the story so far. One cannot, as feminist scholar Diane Purkiss argues, simply borrow from mythology, replace the hero with a heroine, and call it a feminist writing (441-42). Thus, while Sophocles' play inspires much of Annie Rose, the story necessarily takes its own path, dictated not by Sophocles' work, nor by feminist criticism, though both influence the novel.

The plot of the original is at once simple and many-layered: Antigone's brothers Eteocles (current ruler of Thebes) and Polynices (occasional ruler of Thebes) have just killed each other in battle. Antigone defies--seemingly without any deliberation--the decree of her uncle (and recently crowned king) Creon: She performs a funeral ritual over

her brother Polynices' body. Not only does she do so against Creon's public decree, but she does so against the advice of her more mild-mannered (and possibly indecisive) sister Ismene. As a result of this action, Creon banishes Antigone to a cave. She is thus offstage during most of the performance of the play as Creon agonizes over his decision with Tireslas, his advisor, and Haemon, his son and Antigone's fiancé. By the time Creon relents and agrees to release Antigone, he discovers that she has hanged herself; then Haemon in response kills himself, and in turn Haemon's mother, Creon's wife, kills herself, leaving Creon without family, a guilt-ridden and weakened king.

Annie Rose does not follow this course. However, it does borrow, in the title character, the defiance of a youthful, willful Antigone, and in Annie's uncle Will, the tyranny of Creon. Certain scenes and turning points echo the play intentionally, and a few more do through accident. Although the public and private values that clash in *Antigone* are not discussed at length, they blur and conflict in Annie Rose.[1]

The original play is powerful, yet doesn't yield easily to modern adaptations. Before one even addresses modern political visions, a writer interested in borrowing from *Antigone* must deal with certain defining aspects of the original politics and family dynamics that are particular to ancient times--aspects that, for all of the play's universality, would be impossible to include without glaring anachronistic distractions. At the heart of the story is a warring family dynasty. Although such scenarios continue to make up even popular fictions, and although families play roles in politics and corporations in the U.S., family lineage rarely plays the pivotal role today that it does in the myth.

The arguments within the play revolve around the burial of Polynices. Creon orders that Polynices' body be "left to be devoured / By dogs and fowls of the air" (9). To replicate the factors exactly in a modern setting unfortunately would be to make the choice easy for a modern audience; no ambiguities would exist about whether or not the Antigone character should bury the body, if for health reasons alone. While the Creon character could disallow the participation in the *ritual* surrounding the burial (as happens in Annie Rose), the Antigone character's absence from a funeral is not the dramatic equivalent of the offstage exposed corpse.

The deed in question, the burial of Polynices, is so morally and politically ambiguous, that it is hard to replicate as a twenty-first-century event in the West. One would have to find a quick, public act that does indeed threaten the stability of the state that at the same time would be expected of a family member regardless of the circumstances. Public grieving is not a threat to the contemporary state. Today even criminals' families are allowed to grieve publicly, and the families of traitors are no exception to this. Further, Polynices was not a traitor to a long-standing state; audience members would not necessarily have expected him to show allegiance to Creon, who had just risen to power. By some accounts, Polynices was the ruler of Thebes every other year until his brother Eteocles decided to end this policy. As the play begins, Creon's is a newly minted regime, and he needs to establish his reign, not protect an established government, however much he argues for state stability in the play. Though neither Antigone's or Creon's characters make much of it in the play, audiences would have been aware of the fresh power shift from Antigone's brothers to Creon's family line. Contemporary readers must not assume an ancient audience's loyalties would lie fully

with Creon simply because he was the king. The central act of the original play, therefore, could have been easily viewed as acceptable or unacceptable, even to an audience member who understood that Creon's priority must be to stabilize the state.

To complicate matters, in the myth Sophocles used, Antigone is engaged to her cousin, Haemon, who is also Creon's son. This sets up a most compelling triangle in the play, pulling all of the elements of the family and political conflicts into one chaotic tangle. Antigone feels no allegiance to be kind to Creon just because he will soon be her father-in-law, and interestingly, Haemon never appears to campaign on his father's behalf to his fiancé Antigone. But the engagement sets up the eventual inner conflict that will lead to outward devastation for Creon. He is not sympathetic to Antigone, but he is sympathetic to his own son, his own heir; and, his son, to Creon's consternation, is sympathetic to Antigone. Thus, through his son, Creon is pulled two ways: towards Antigone's punishment and towards his son, who defends her. Creon's conflict costs him the people's confidence in his authority, including his interest in his kingship, and his family. Combine all of the political, religious, and family implications of this fascinating triangle and one has enough complications for a much lengthier work than my project Annie Rose.

Removing the central actions and the central relationships would seem to leave little in the play to emulate, and yet plenty of intrigue remains. In fact, in much of the criticism of the play, these factors are only incidental. What remains are the characters and the conflicting values they represent. A man who is older, in formal power, clashes with a young woman willing to risk her life to do what she believes is right. Creon claims to be keeping the peace of the state, and yet he also appears to be attempting to

prove that Creon cannot be bested. Antigone claims to be acting for the gods, and yet in parts, "Antigone sings of Antigone," as George Steiner writes in his encyclopedic Antigones (96). To no avail, Creon and Ismene remind Antigone that, as a female, she cannot challenge the patriarchy. The laws of the state and the laws of the gods have, in this situation, collided, and neither the gods nor the state legislators seem to have taken such a scenario into account. What should be done then? Humanity still struggles with these ideas, or the play would be interesting only for its history or its poetry. The critical issues continue to arise in civic life in different forms.

A crucial goal of my project was to reflect the play's lasting and compelling attention to gender roles in politics and community. A primary appeal of Antigone is her conviction, and her willingness in the face of the state power to sacrifice her life for it. She is willing to speak when others refuse. This aspect of her character, viewed now within a world where scholars and activists discuss the *voice* of women (and other "silenced" groups) , invites an interesting question: If a woman claiming her voice is truly a strength, might Antigone's cave death not be inevitable? What if an Antigone *survived* rather than died? What if her voice saved rather than doomed her?

The prospect of refashioning an ancient, vocal-and-then-silenced, female character into a modern teenaged girl to show how her story might turn from tragedy to something more life-affirming, would seem to be, if not simple, at least possible. But Antigone makes things no more simple for the modern writer than she does for audiences or her nemesis Creon. To begin with, the character and her story always almost fit comfortably alongside feminist theory and then seem to defy its conventions, too.

Throughout the play, much is made of gender. Notably, from the very first moments of the play to Antigone's last lines, she and the characters who surround her repeatedly refer to her status as a woman (Antigone will often mention that she will die childless and marriageless [30, 32-33]), and others remind her that her verbalization of dissent is out of order. Her sister Ismene reminds her of this: "We must remember we are women born, / Unapt to cope with men; and, being ruled / By mightier than ourselves, we have to hear / These things--and worse" [3]. Antigone's antagonist Creon also says upon first hearing of her deed that if she is allowed to go unpunished, she is a man and he a woman (18) and later says "No woman, while I live, shall order me" (20).

Moreover, Antigone's rationale for her act is suspect because she is a woman--not just within the play to other characters as they confront her and discuss her, but, one might argue to this day, in critical evaluations of the play. When Creon says he must stabilize the state, his words are taken at face value; Antigone's motives, however, are never so clear to critics. After all, Antigone claims to be acting for the family and for the gods, and yet as critics often mention that she manages to distance herself from her living family members, particularly the one closest to her, her sister Ismene (Steiner 278; Knox 103-14). Once Ismene refuses to help bury their brother, Antigone is more than unkind to her, to the point of disavowing their kinship. Antigone also expresses doubts towards the end of the play that the gods will save her, although she has claimed this as a primary motivation all along. She says that she will go marriageless and childless to her grave, and critics such as Knox and Steiner suggest her resignation to this consequence does not support notions of the family. (The implication is that if Antigone were truly pro-family

she would get married and have children before dying.) Surely, critics suggest, these attitudes and actions all call into question her stated commitment to the family. [2]

Beyond the language--the constant reminders from the characters that Antigone is a woman--certain images and narrative patterns familiar to feminist theorists appear in *Antigone*. Foremost, perhaps, is the cave, but all involve her voice and the silencing of it. During much of the last half of Sophocles' *Antigone*, Antigone is actually offstage, awaiting her death in the cave. The audience assumes she is still alive, and towards the end, Creon, convinced by his advisor Tiresias, changes his mind and orders that she be removed from the cave. By this time, of course, Antigone has hanged herself, never knowing that she might be pardoned. Scholars and some theater critics make much of how, despite the play's title, Creon leads the last half of the play[3]; some havea gone so far as to suggest that the play should have been titled "Creon." But Sophocles made no mistake: Her cave may be offstage, but Antigone remains a powerful force onstage. Despite her absence, despite her silence, Antigone has thrown the government into turmoil, and the dramatic tension derives in part from the audience's concern for Antigone. The effect of this offstage situation--her silence while she is confined, the information of her hanging--is powerful. The audience knows as Creon discusses his action with others that her life is in the balance, intensifying all that is said, and the sense that she *might* have been saved adds to the final tragedy.

The progression of Antigone from outspokenness and defiant action to first confinement and then death can be more than tragic: The progression can be threatening and then familiar, at least to the feminist reader, viewed in the context of other works both about and by women in which women are silenced.[4] The history of literature about

women and by women would reflect a preoccupation with this very progression, particularly if one includes a sense of confinement in the home. A long history of entrapment images appears in literature by and about women, as Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert point out in their influential The Madwoman and the Attic, and not simply in Jane Eyre's attic, which they reference in their title. They write, in a section entitled "The Parables of the Cave," of the "womb-shaped enclosure": "In this prison the slave is immured, the virgin sacrificed, the priestess abandoned" (93). Antigone, of course--in prison, a virgin, abandoned after claiming to obey the gods' wishes--speaks to all three of Gubar and Gilbert's depictions of the female-in-the-cave theme. Gilbert and Gubar point out that the same motif appears in works by Mary Shelley, Simone de Beauvoir, Christinia Rossetti, Emily Dickinson, Willa Cather, and Sylvia Plath among others (93-104). The prolonged, alive-but-silent punishment of the cave is historically common in literature concerning women; Antigone was one of the first.

Despite markers such as this cave image, the recurring mention of Antigone's lack of entitlement to a public voice in Sophocles' play, and the recurring references that Antigone must be a male since she challenges authority, even feminist scholars do not universally embrace her as a proper heroine of myth.[5] Feminist critic Judith Butler, for example, recently wrote in her book Antigone's Claim of Butler's hope and then disillusionment with Antigone as a feminist heroine; feminist drama scholar Zelenak devoted an entire essay to proving her lack of worthiness as a feminist heroine. This poses a problem for refashioning an Antigone into someone modern, vocal, and surviving. With such a large volume of scholarship that would seem to counter any notions of Antigone as a feminist heroine, how could one release Antigone from her cave

without first considering that she might lack the virtues that would make the act meaningful? It was important to look at some of the arguments against Antigone's feminist heroism.[6]

Butler writes:

> It seemed to me that Antigone might work as a counterfigure to the trend championed by recent feminists to seek the backing and authority of the state to implement feminist policy aims. The legacy of Antigone's defiance appeared to be lost in the contemporary efforts to recast political opposition as legal plaint and to seek the legitimacy of the state in the espousal of feminist claims. (2)

But Butler does not find the Antigone she seeks.

> [S]he hardly represents the normative principles of kinship, steeped as she is in incestuous legacies that confound her position within kinship. And she hardly represents a feminism that might in any way be unimplicated in the very process that it opposes . (2)

Butler finds Antigone too much a part of the state she defies, a state that can not be of use to women because of its inherent patriarchal bias. Any participation with a patriarchal state, in Butler's view, results in more patriarchy. Thus, Antigone's very vocal defiance of the state, however anarchist or feminist the defiance is in nature, becomes just one more patriarchal act to Butler.

Butler also finds that incest issues are prominent in the character of Antigone and too overwhelming to reconcile with Antigone's claims to family. Butler says that as a daughter of Oedipus, and as a woman willing to die to bury her brother--a sibling love Butler considers incestuous--Antigone can not actually argue for the family. However,

Butler might be overemphasizing the incest issues to diminish Antigone's family argument. While it is true that Antigone refers to the curse upon her family, and references her mother Jocasta (Oedipus' mother and wife), as well as Jocasta's marriage to Antigone's father/brother Oedipus, Sophocles does not emphasize Antigone's family-of-origin dynamics in this play. Family history in the Sophoclean play serves more to point to the cursed inevitability of Antigone's misery than to supply a modern, Freudian explanation for it, and while Sophocles makes clear in Oedipus that the relationship between Oedipus and his mother/wife is wrong, the author never implies that Antigone's relationship with her brother or her cousin is wrong. Butler is not the first to suggest the relationship between Antigone and her brother is incestuous. Steiner mentions the issue (158-65); a very recent farcical rewrite of the play in Los Angeles made that a central issue.

But not all readers or play audiences accept that this is an underlying motive for her actions. A nonspousal, nonparental, yet still familial bond strong enough to inspire sacrifice may in fact signify a great capacity for love, given the lack of erotic, economic, and social factors one would expect in the spousal or parental relationships. Knowing that women have relied on husbands and fathers for economic means and social status until very recently, a reader of any work written more than twenty-five years ago might assume an Antigone character defiantly burying a husband might be distraught in losing her economic or social status by his death. Such losses usually weren't so likely when brothers died. Thus Antigone's stated motives--the gods' wishes and family ties--might be even more convincing.

Butler goes further in her argument that Antigone is not a feminist figure. She refuses to accept her, in fact, as truly female. Butler (like Creon) begins to consider Antigone male: "The insistence on public grieving is what moves her away from feminine gender into hubris, into that distinctively manly excess that makes the guards, the chorus, and Creon wonder: Who is the man here?" (80) Butler implies that only men can fall prey to hubris; once a woman enters the public sphere with emotion and political ambition, she, too, becomes a male. (Nevermind that public grieving was in ancient Greece a particular role of women.)

In the end, none of the anti-Antigone arguments suggested a misreading of the character, requiring that I either change my character or dispense with the project altogether. Antigone does not have to be entirely right in her political arguments to be a feminist heroine. It is enough that she speaks up despite her society's rules against her doing so.

Antigone is not simply a victimized male; she is a person who takes what appears to be little power in the community, challenges the state, and achieves in some way what even a powerful male might not be able to achieve. (After all, although she has died, she has contributed to the bringing down of a king.) This ability of a single powerless individual to challenge the state was not just the logic of a playwright, but of a culture, and audience members recognize it to this day. In The True History of the Novel, Margaret Doody refers to the author of Freedom, Orlando Patterson, who "believes that the development of an idea of personal freedom in the Greek-speaking world came largely from the women. "Patterson, Doody says, believes women's "experience and their responses" themselves were the influences for the Greek tragedies (41). Perhaps an

argument survives for Antigone--however full of hubris--to be as "heroic" as any of Sophocles' heroic characters and still female.

While these are interesting ideas to consider in light of the *Antigone* text, Sophocles did not have to be what would contemporarily be considered a feminist, nor did he need to be making an intentional statement about the silencing of women, to write a play that showed the inequities and strengths of women during his own time. Even if Sophocles did employ a female character to signify a male with little power, his Antigone was a female character that reflected the status of women at the time, and as such reflected what women likely faced if they challenged the state.

In either case, Antigone's gender is critical to her motive for disobeying Creon. Scholars know little about how ancient Greek women lived, but they do agree that burial rites were women's duties, and Orrieux and Pantel expand on that.[7] Countering dismissal of Antigone's act as suicidal or vainglorious, Orrieux and Pantel's text also reinforces the importance of the burial rites, not just as a critical duty for women that the gods required, but also as a task significantly affecting men and women in the community: The *oikos*, or household, had "ritual obligations, such as keeping alive the memory of the dead. An *oikos* would die when there was nobody left in it to perform the rituals in honour of the dead" (103). Antigone and Ismene are the last of the Laius line, now that both parents and both brothers have died. If no one can bury one of the brothers, then the cursed house of Laius has without question come to an end, and essentially Antigone and Ismene with it. Rather than her act being a suicidal one, it could be an act of preservation, a desperate attempt to maintain the household.

Enough evidence within the text supports my initial perception of Antigone as a headstrong female character--perhaps doomed, perhaps with mixed motives. And so, after study, she remains a character true to the original question: What if instead of dooming her, her voice saves her?

Moreover the play is a part of Western culture. As such, it has formed our perceptions of ourselves, be they positive or negative. And as such, it is subject to the myth-borrowing female writers increasingly engage in that Alicia Ostriker discusses in her book Stealing Language: The Emergence of Women Poets in America. Ostriker says that women borrow the myths first because of the authority myth gives their writing, but that they alter the myths in important ways:

> Whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible. [. . .] [I]n them the old stories are changed,changed utterly, by female knowledge of female experience, so that they can no longer stand as foundations of collective male fantasy or as the pillars sustaining phallocentric 'high' culture. Instead, they are corrections; they are representations of what women find divine and demonic in themselves; they are retrieved images of what women have collectively and historically suffered; in some cases they are instructions for survival. (212-15)

The word *survival* returns in Ostriker's text when she quotes poet Adrienne Rich on her view of the necessity of reviewing the texts of our heritage: "Re-vision--the act of

looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction--is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival" (Rich qtd. in Ostriker 235).

Some feminists are wary of the myth-revisionist process, however. Purkiss finds a variety of myth-revision strategies suspect. One strategy that women writers may employ is to revise simply by inversion, Purkiss writes,

> for example, by changing the focus of the narrative from a male character to a female character, or by shifting the terms of the myth so that what was a "negative" female role-model becomes a positive one [. . .]. There are many problems with this critical strategy: its insistence that 'positive' images of women are somehow timeless, its refusal to recognize the literariness of literature. Most importantly, attempts to produce positive role models and tell feminist stories will repeatedly founder if we assume that stories can be excised from text, culture and institution, that their meanings are not circumscribed by their histories. (441-42)

Purkiss and some other feminists believe the language shaped in patriarchy holds no opportunities for women, much the way Butler believes any participation with the patriarchal state would have been a patriarchal act for Antigone. Purkiss says that she sees no way to actually rewrite myth to establish a "revolutionary break with discourse" (455). Perhaps this is so, but this project does not have to be a "revolutionary break" to be a feminist undertaking. Patriarchal or not, Sophocles' play offers much to the culture, and had something to offer my project.

So, borrowing from a structure impossible to replicate, and writing towards a feminist ending without a definitive feminist heroine, I found my Antigone character,

Annie Rose, becoming a refashioning of the character rather than anything resembling a revision of the original play. The novel Annie Rose is far different from the first refashionings of the play. Over the years, hundreds of writers have translated, revised, and reformulated Sophocles' play. George Eliot is known to have had a fascination with the play, and characters in three of her novels are said to be versions of Antigone (Gilbert and Guber 494; Byatt 36-38).

Sophocles' play inspires Annie Rose, yet the story necessarily takes a unique path, dictated neither by Sophocles' work nor by feminist criticism, though both influence the novel. Annie Rose features an outspoken, contemporary young woman whose rebellion saves rather than dooms her. Twenty-five hundred years have passed since the character Antigone first appeared on stage, but the character Annie Rose lives in a world where women, especially young women, still enter the public sphere with little power, even if today no one would actually say aloud that Annie should not be speaking because of her gender. Unlike Antigone's antagonists, those who surround Annie may not overtly remind her that she has no voice, but in the novel some of the political imbalances, though mildly corrected since Sophocles' day, remain. The character brings with her from the original play both the obsession for connection and family, and the last vestiges of a fragmented family.

The consistent underlying effort of my novel is to present the Antigone character Annie as both silenced and transcending that silence. Two examples of silences, one quite literal and one metaphorical, appear in Annie Rose. One is that, in response to a direct disobedience, her uncle denies Annie, a passionate musician, access to music, whether her own creations or musical recordings. With careless talk, her uncle has

already given community members reasons they should not take what Annie says seriously; now he prevents the community from hearing her gift, and he attempts to take away her development of her gift. She never openly disobeys this edict, never flaunts her defiance. However, when out of the presence of her uncle, she ignores the restriction, asking people to turn up the music in stores she visits and where she works, singing whenever she wants. She will not be silenced.

Annie Rose is never literally in a cave, but throughout the novel she is in a sort of exile, as her mother has sent her to live in Prairie Valley as punishment, and there she stays in a cousin's room, often isolated from her aunt and uncle. Annie Rose's sense of exile gives her power; it shields her against caring about the community's expectations for her behavior. Yet, just as we know Antigone's power is only transitory and will end in death, Annie Rose's exile cannot be an end itself; such an exile would have no power.

The room once belonged to her cousin, a girl who has grown and left the father, and this room represents little of Annie's character. After Annie's boyfriend dies, she will retreat to this room, numbing herself on prescription drugs and ignoring school and entreaties to return to the community. Her uncle has not banished her to this room, but her friends are no less concerned than if he had insisted she stay there. To them, her withdrawal is worrisome.

"A cave is a mysterious place, frightening even when it is the desired place of refuge," Doody writes. "It may bear the meaning of 'tomb' [. . .]. Yet a cave or cavernous place, even when it is a prison, seems to serve as a fostering place of transition. [. . .] [It] may announce itself as uncomfortably free of the customary attributes of the domestic" (343).

Eventually, her grief subsides, and friends coax her back into the world. Her ordeals are not over, but changed. No longer in direct opposition to her uncle, she has a new concern she can not yet deal with: Annie is pregnant. She does not welcome this new life at first. However, the grieving during her retreat from the world has sobered her and in a small way prepared her.

Another instance of a cave-related image occurs earlier, in a scene originally built for other purposes, which became a variation on the "cave parable" Gilbert and Gubar describe. Rather than a cave, a Labyrinth is the setting. Doody calls the Labyrinth a "related" trope in literature:

> The Labyrinth appears everywhere in novelistic fiction, for it is deeply novelistic, though its particular applications may widely differ. In [George Eliot's] Middlemarch, Will Ladislaw [. . .] exclaims, "You have been brought up in some of those horrible notions that choose the sweetest women to devour--like Minotaurs. And now you will go and be shut up in that stone prison at Lowick: You will be buried alive [. . .]. (347)

One day, a church group, with Annie along for the ride, visits a corn maze grown in the shape of Jonah's whale. In the maze, Annie becomes disoriented, having taken the path ahead of the others without a map. She finds herself lost and frightened. Annie does not come out with a renewed sense of power; she is critical of others she claims abandoned her. She has actually just begun the journey to empowerment. While she does sing her way out of the maze, she returns to the world subdued and very frightened by her quest. The character reveals a vulnerability unseen until this point, but a vulnerability she must eventually confront--adjusting her armor of indifference--to

survive. The vulnerability will not save her, but her acknowledgement of her vulnerability, in conjunction with her unwillingness to conform, will.

Doody describes the fear the Labyrinth produces:

> The Labyrinth is a frightening place. A Labyrinth may take the place of pit or rocky tomb, and perhaps it always has some of the characteristics of those two other important *topoi*. But a Labyrinth is always something more. In its intricacy is power, and to move rightly through that intricacy and out again is to assume that power. [. . .] It stands for that where nothing is, where the self is constrained and pressed in gigantic emptiness. Or it is the place where too much is, a pressure of confusion of objects demanding the strained attention of the self. (348-351)

The Labyrinth within Annie Rose marks her move from a falsely self-sufficient individual to a stronger one empowered by her friendships and love. It is an early but significant alteration that assures that this young woman survives--outgrows rather than outlives her oppressor. Elaine Showalter, in her seminal work "Toward a Feminist Poetics," writes of twentieth-century fictions by women that describe a self-destructiveness in women: "But women's literature must go beyond these scenarios of compromise, madness, and death. Although the reclamation of suffering is the beginning, its purpose is to discover the new world" (1381) . Annie is only able to move beyond death by admitting that she needs others, even if at that point in the novel she does not admit this aloud but allows them to lead her out while she scolds them.

The novel originated with a desire to alter the political outcome of an age-old story, but a novelist must also follow the laws governing novel-writing, and these laws include a consideration that novels are not polemical tracts that adhere to the latest

political theories. Annie Rose may with help leave the cave, but that action must fit within the logic of the newly created fictional world. This logic demanded that Annie not be entirely aware of her political situation nor right about each statement she made. Annie, created to show the legitimacy of the alternative voice in the community, in this case a female's, would in some ways be no closer to being an easy heroine than Antigone.

One writer who knows a great deal about mixing politics and writing, Milan Kundera, writes in The Art of the Novel:

> The world of one single Truth and the relative, ambiguous world of the novel are molded of entirely different substances. Totalitarian Truth excludes relativity, doubt, questioning; it can never accommodate what I would call the *spirit of the novel* [. . .](14). The novel's spirit is the spirit of complexity. Every novel says to the reader: "Things are not as simple as you think." That is the novel's eternal truth, but it grows steadily harder to hear amid the din of easy, quick answers that come faster than the question and block it off [. . .] (18). The novelist is neither historian nor prophet: he is an explorer of existence. (44)

A good novelist must present full, well-realized characters, not representatives of what the author sees as a single Truth. In his discussion of "round" versus "flat" characters, E. M. Forster, in his book Aspects of the Novel, quotes a letter from Norman Douglas to D. H. Lawrence in which Douglas says that novelists may have a

> failure to realize the complexities of the ordinary human mind; it selects for literary purposes two or three facets of a man or woman, generally the most spectacular, and therefore useful ingredients of their character and disregards all

the others. Whatever fails to fit in with these specially chosen traits is eliminated--must be eliminated, for otherwise the description would not hold water. (70)

Annie was to have several appealing facets, including righteous action and uninhibited speech. Such slight defining characteristics did not approach the complexity of an ordinary person. The characters of Annie and Will and Honor could not be all good or all bad, however much it would serve my purposes.

Even assuming she has a right to speak up, the Annie character needs significant flaws; no one will believe that a teenager consistently knows all the right things to say, and she will not be very interesting if she does. Her uncle Will has to be more than a family tyrant; Annie would never visit him if she knew him in that way. Further, he would not have garnered the community's acceptance if dictatorial behavior were all he showed of himself. But perhaps most critical to the success of the novel, the uncle must only gradually reveal himself as a man of hubris.

Not all of the questions of how Annie and her voice would survive--and more importantly, how Annie's voice would survive--were answered in the plotting of the novel. Many more questions arose--and occasionally some answers--as the story developed from its point of inspiration. For instance, for the purposes of creating a believable situation similar to that of the original *Antigone*, Annie mourns a lover rather than a brother. No fitting situation in which a sister would not be allowed to grieve a brother came to mind; however, in a climate of occasional violence and racial divisions, it might be likely that an adult would prevent a young woman from going to a potentially dangerous social event. A consequence of this alteration is that this sibling love that is so compelling in the original play is lost.

Also, although the Antigone-Haemon-Creon triangle is not duplicated exactly, some of that triangle is represented in Annie Rose when Annie's uncle pushes her towards turning over her child-to-be to her cousin, Will's son. Once Will believes that she will follow this advice, Will has more stake in the birth of Annie's child. He even has reason to believe his family line will continue. This creates a situation in which he presumes to make choices in the name of the family, as well as the community, that are her choices to make.

An early, first-person version of the novel, with Annie as the narrator, frustrated readers. Not only did readers not know whether to trust the narrator or not, but because Annie couldn't see (or ignored) signs of disapproval from community members, readers never sensed tension between Annie and those around her. Thus another character came into being to help frame Annie and help show how incongruous her actions were with the community's expectations. As this other young woman, Honor, developed as a character, she began to resemble an Ismene, who was quieter, less controversial than Antigone, and yet sympathetic to her cause. Honor understood without knowing the consequences of ignoring the cultural norm, but still considered the options, even if she took her time doing so. She became, significantly, a friend who, when asked to help, said "Yes," when Ismene said "No."

Honor, too, must appear as a real person, not simply a braver Ismene, and thus her virtues often become her flaws: Her patient silence becomes the silence of indecision and passivity. Her move towards speaking up in the community will mean nothing if it is not a step in a progression. Her goodness masks her tendency to live vicariously through others who are not "good" as the community perceives good, without her ever taking the

responsibility of risk. Any plans truly to refashion Antigone in a novel would be impossible without the convincing effects of these in-depth characterizations.

An element originally introduced as a means of solving structural problems in the novel contributed to the inclusion of an element feminists frequently find in women's writing. Women must support each other; they must hear each other's stories for survival. Carolyn Heilbrun says,

> As long as women are isolated one from the other, not allowed to offer other women the most personal accounts of their lives, they will not be part of any narrative of their own. Like Penelope awaiting Ulysses, weaving and unweaving, women will be staving off destiny and not inviting or inventing or controlling it . [. . .] Even in more recent literature, we see how alone women are, how without close women friends are Jane Austen's heroines, and Charlotte Bronte's, and George Eliot's. [. . .] There will be narratives of female lives only when women no longer live their lives isolated in the houses and the stories of men. (47)

Heilbrun also notes that "Female friendship has been given its first and most compelling text by black women writers of this generation. Toni Morrison has said: 'Friendship between women is special, different, and has never been depicted as the major focus of a novel before *Sula*'" (Morrison qtd. in Heilbrun 118).

The critical alteration that allows Annie to leave her isolation, her own cave, is that women begin to reach out to her. Honor says yes when Annie asks her to go with her to her lover's funeral; gone is Ismene's fear and indecisiveness. Similarly, further along in the novel Annie takes steps with the help of community, especially women in her community. Honor is a constant friend. Her aunt Deirdre (Will's wife) grudgingly and in

her own distanced fashion begins to provide a kind of support for Annie. A teacher visits to insist she leave the "cave" of grief she has created in her room. Peripherally, Honor's mother passes along a support for Annie, both through Honor and, when a crisis occurs, slightly more directly. Sometimes Annie asks for help, but towards the end, women around her give her help because they determine she needs it.

Heilbrun is not the only one to note this particular answer of community in women's narratives. In Contemporary American Women Writers: Narrative Strategies, Linda Wagner writes of Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon, "Morrison's narrative manner--her inclusion of the details of the community, treated almost as an individual, and of each member of the Dead family--signals the reader that Milkman is not an isolate and that withdrawal from community, in a Morrison novel, is never positive" (201). In the beginning, Annie shares the isolation of Antigone, but loses it as the novel progresses. In Sophocles' play, Antigone is last seen talking to herself and, with doubt as to their existence, to the gods as she faces death. By the end of the novel Annie Rose, Annie is interacting with a baby and facing a future she assumes will be glorious.

Annie's voice, in the end, survives. Yet Annie does not turn out to be the heroine, as first imagined--a better, improved Antigone--except in the way she does overcome her disconnectedness. If anyone becomes a true heroine, by confronting obstacles and issues, it is Honor. She stands up both to Annie and to her community by the end. The original intent of the novel--to pull Antigone from the cave and let her speak--remains intact, but almost incidentally; in the process, Honor becomes a heroine who not only learns from her angrier predecessors, but who also transcends the voice of anger and defiance.

Just as Annie is not a virtuous saint, her uncle Will is not a tyrannical fool. He has earned the respect and gratitude of his community; he also has several moments in which, acting in his professional context as a physician, he can show a certain tenderness. Still, he is no friend, no substitute father, no leader of community by the time the novel is over, and yet once he suffers the consequences of his own hubris, the reader might recognize all that he has lost: credibility, family, and even power. Both Annie's and Will's "roundness," originally conceived as a means of convincing the reader, in turn helps balance the two characters Honor watches. Nonetheless, despite the novel's determination to alter the twenty-five-hundred-year-old script, the twentieth-century advice from Forster and Kundera and countless others leads back to the intricate balances of Sophocles' play. While a very modern, specific "point of view" starts and ends the novel, a reader still might be able to argue that both Will and Annie act from reasonable motivations in ways too extreme for the preservation of community.

Although the character Will and the community undergo the trials that lead to tragedy, the young women characters survive and are transformed. This raises the concern of whether a triumph over circumstances will, in the end, be less dramatic, and without the same resonance of a tragedy such as Antigone. But maybe there is something beyond tragedy or comedy or strictly happy endings. Doody says that "By focusing on Tragedy as the highest literary form, perhaps Western civilization has made itself grandiose and cruel. [. . .] [P]erhaps it has ignored other possibilities" (354). This novel is not entirely successful. But it is another attempt to explore those other possibilities--one more vine, I hope, along a new and flourishing garden path.

Notes

[1] Steiner claims that Hegel was one of the first to write about the play's use of two values in opposition:

> [B]y1801 [. . .] Hegel had come to identify the highest human freedom with the most comprehensive and organic form of civic community. [. . .] But this identification also entailed a polemic, agonistic, self-divisive relation between man as a "state-being" . . . and as a [. . .] citizen-bourgeois with essentially familial, economic, and self-conservative motivations. How is the philosopher to integrate these two axes of being? (26)

Since Hegel, many scholars have described the play in terms of these two polar opposite values, but scholar Bernard Knox discusses the conflict in depth in The Heroic Temper: Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy. He maintains that Creon's and Antigone's positions are not mutually exclusive (in that Antigone's defiance is a political act and Creon's refusing burial rites to Polynices a religious one). Knox devotes much of his book to defending Creon's position as proper to protecting the *polis*, but finally notes that Creon's logic is based on hatred and Antigone's on love (114).

[2] In Jean Anouilh's version of the play, written in the middle of World War II, Creon questions Antigone in much more depth than in the original, indicating perhaps a greater allowance for her argument--just as women at the time were gradually becoming more involved in civic life. However, this 1940s Antigone admits to a lesser motivation than family--a desire for death--as if she may be entitled to a chance to state her argument but still cannot possibly have a valid, life-affirming argument.

[3] As George Steiner describes Creon's presence in the play, "[a]fter her exit into night, the drama is Creon's" (177). Other *Antigone* scholars, such as Bernard Knox, note the same incongruence, given the play's title, and at least one theater critic, Benedict Nightengale of the London Times, wondered in a review if the play should have been titled "Creon."

[4] Whether found in the narratives of literature or in the lives of female writers themselves, examples of the pattern abound. One can see it in the stories of those whose madness sparked their talk, such as Joan of Arc, or those who were the only ones willing to tell the truth, such as King Lear's daughter Cordelia. Variations on this pattern appear in literature as early as the Bible, when after Eve defiantly eats forbidden fruit, she and Adam are banished from the Garden of Eden, and God punishes her and all of humanity with pain and death. Until the last century, adultresses of literature--inevitably confined to houses or even to rural areas by husbands--almost always committed suicide. In one of the most cited works in feminist theory, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," Gilman describes a woman locked in a room whose husband has literally denied her the ability to write after she has given birth; he has told her that her stories have helped lead to her condition. As the story ends, the narrator suggests she is so far into madness she may be committing suicide or at any rate has lost touch completely with the woman she once was. Even more recent work shows verbal women silenced through death. Would Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" be so successful if the grandmother, attempting to take a vacation, weren't so intolerably talky?

The list of female writers who wrote, despite societal pressures and domestic demands, sometimes under male pseudonyms, and who were shut out of acceptance in

literary circles and then out of the canon despite arguably equal literary importance, is lengthy. Further, while it is a much murkier area, a thorough study might include the personal lives of female writers, including their relationships with their communities and acceptances of their communities of them. For example, Emily Dickinson wrote hundreds of poems and showed but a few to any editors during her time.

[5] Perhaps because much of the feminist scholarship in literature has concerned itself with recovering and reclaiming texts by women, it is easier to find Antigone or drama scholars who disavow her potential for feminism directly or indirectly (Steiner, Knox) than it is to find feminists commenting on Antigone. Time and again feminist scholars compare a contemporary figure in literature to Antigone, but no matter how heroic Antigone may seem as a model, she falls short in some way. Typical is the faint praise found in Tina Chanter's article "Tragic Dislocations: Antigone's Modern Theatrics," in which she says, "[P]erhaps Antigone's claim on us is a symbolic claim: Sophocles did not go so far as to make Antigone a woman in the accomplished sense of the term. Neither married, nor mother [. . .] better known to the dead than to the living, Antigone is more a voice than a spokeswoman for femininity, and it is perhaps this more symbolic than effectively incarnated status that lends her strength."

[6] Writing in Gender and Politics in Greek Drama, Michael Zelenak says, "Antigone is not, nor was she intended to be, a self-conscious feminist or heroic revolutionary. She is actually a rather conventional sign of the female, created by inversion, negation and antitype. Her character conforms to expected male stereotypes of gender; it does not

challenge or question them." In his chapter on Antigone, titled "A Woman's Place is in the Tomb," (the title in itself a giveaway, a pun the author must have found irresistible without acknowledging how misogynistic it is), Zelenak explains Sophocles' use of the woman in his play.

> As a trope of victimization, the female held enormous possibilities for eliciting pathos and emotion from its masculinized citizen audiences [. . .]. Because women in real life were politically powerless and could easily be subjected to extreme victimization, the female was an especially useful metaphor for the fragility of the human experience. Antigone's fate is the pathetic tragedy of a victim. [. . .] Antigone fails in the world of politics because, in Athenian politics, women did not exist, either realistically or imaginatively. [. . .] [T]he word for citizen simply has no feminine form. (77)

Here again one finds the suggestion that because Antigone spoke against a powerful force, she could not have been a woman; she must have been only a woman acting as a man, or a man who, only presented as a woman, could truly appear to be victimized, and that must have been all that Sophocles knew how to portray. Zelenak reduces Antigone to a mere metaphor. The "human experience," in the Sophoclean age as Zelenak considers it, is a male one. What Zelenak misses is that women existed in real-life Athens, even if not as participants in public life. Sophocles' play suggests that a woman who refused to acknowledge that the state said she did not exist--a rhetoric of language and power, and not a physical truth--might indeed throw the state into unrelieved turmoil. Both Butler and Zelenak consider her only a male disguised as a woman, or a woman acting like a male. For her to represent an actual woman requires, in

Butler's case, that Antigone should not have hubris. Zelenak does not say what he expects to ensure that Antigone be female, or feminine, but it cannot be simply the opposite of masculine.

[7] Women were silenced so thoroughly that Greek historians have a difficult time determining exactly how they might have lived (Orrieux and Pantel 191; Steiner 236-37). Men created almost all of the art depicting women, and thus modern historians see the art that survives as depicting men's views of how women lived--an entirely different testimony than what women might have left behind had they been allowed to create art (Orrieux and Pantel 190). Scholars do say that free women seldom were allowed to leave the household, even to shop or draw water, although rural women were likely allowed to "tend to [. . .] animals [. . .] and gardens" (Jones 137). Orrieux and Pantel suggest that a detailed work delineating male and female household tasks, Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, written by a male of that period, "reflect[s] a moment when attempts were being made to construct a theory of masculine/feminine relationships, a theory strictly related to the delimitation of the public and private domains" (190). Interestingly, these themes in the fifth-century *Oeconomicus* parallel the conflicts of *Antigone*. Clearly, as the Greeks moved from a family dynasty-controlled state to a democracy (as they were in the process of doing when Sophocles wrote the play--not when the Antigone myth was formed), creating a democracy which excluded slaves and women, these issues of gender roles that 21st century critics bring to texts today were in fact in discussion (if only in the beginnings of discussions.)

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Chapter One

Annie arrives in town, and a young, local woman, Honor, attempts to shepherd her through the Sunday school picnic. Annie's Uncle Will finds an easy respect among the parishioners and has no problem challenging the minister. His peers mention his plans to run for office, but he suggests that he has no definite plans to do so. The two are not in the immediate verbal battle of the two main characters of "Antigone," but Annie begins to display a contempt for Will and he nearly ignores her completely. When Honor and Annie are alone, Annie begins to tell her story, although Honor is not yet sure what to believe.

Chapter One

Peace. That used to be the name of our little town. Where are you from? *Peace, Kansas. I was born in Peace. I was raised in Peace. My family settled in Peace.*

This being earth, Peace ended. Or anyway, the name did. Some old banker convinced the farmers and the people in town that they better find a modern name if they wanted to boom. He'd already spent his own money for the courthouse terrazo floors and a bathhouse by the lake, so maybe they decided this change made a fitting thank you.

This all happened long before I, or even before my parents, came along. Thanks to that banker, who wrote corny poetry for the newspaper (poetry they reprint to this day), the old name gave way to Prairie Valley. Not exactly inspiring. Especially when you consider that we hardly have a valley--just a few hills that slope high enough that you can plant a cemetery and , more lately, a feedlot and meatpacking plant on top. (I might just say that Climax, Burden, Protection, Medicine Lodge, Zenda, and Ransom all kept *their* pioneer names and survived.) Maybe we were lucky he didn't want it named after him--Lucious Cowhick. No kidding--that was his real name, and he didn't ever change that. The first name, after the '60s anyway, was harder to shake than Lucious planned, at least in our histories, real and imagined, that we travelled with.

So when the Sunday school teacher mentioned one sleepy morning the *peace that passeth understanding*, while a trapped fly buzzed around in the narrow window, the first thought gliding through my mind was that she referred to this original name of the town, even though I'd heard this quote about a million and two times.

"We all want that kind of protection, don't we? Tell me about a time when you felt that peace protecting you," Mrs. Houdyshell asked, ever so slowly again. She read this question from the teacher's manual. She read it without interest. No one answered. She thumbed the corner of her manual. "Honor?"

Nothing came out of my mouth; I didn't feel like spilling my guts on this one. Someone, others in the room, would jump in. As always. I hooked my toes under the metal folding-chair bar.

"Honor?" she asked again, a little perturbed I wouldn't help her along.

Apparently, it inspired no one else. Not Tiffany this time, or Josh or Blake, people inclined to answer most any question.

"That's hard to say." Oh, that silence that sets in when you've said the wrong thing. Or silence that followed anything I ever said--that prevented me from speaking up much then at all.

"I could tell you something that happened to me," Tiffany said softly.

Mrs. Houdyshell nodded, but frowned at her materials. Maybe her printed questions had let her down. "Okay, Tiffany, tell us a time."

"When my family went camping in Colorado this summer, and me and my brother were in the tent outside the camper? I woke up, hearing these noises?"

We could all see it, of course, Tiffany in the mountains, facing danger, surely for the first time in her life.

"I knew I heard these noises. But Brandon slept in this other tent completely. I couldn't even yell to wake him up, because what if it was a bear? So all I could do,

basically, was sit there and pray. And that's when I felt like, well, everything's going to be okay? I guess that would be it for me."

She looked around. Would you be okay if a bear came after you? Would a prayer do it?

Mrs. Houdyshell nodded, stared at her as if lost. "Let's go on, then."

She read some more from her teacher's guide--this time a story about some guys who thought they had to steal some money from the fast-food restaurant they worked in. Mrs. Houdyshell had wilted, as we all had, earlier that morning. Mrs. Houdyshell, a bit plump, wore a formerly crisp blouse and skirt, and she had dyed blonde hair and glasses she kept moving up and down as she alternated what she wanted to see.

The rest of the class, all of us under eighteen, all huddled at the scratched conference table shoved into this upstairs classroom, struggled with the cool air against the August outside. I looked around. Here eyelids drooped a bit, there someone leaned into their palms, elbows propped on the table, and from minute to minute, all around, others took turns making small adjustments to hair styles. I could smell the cheap drugstore colognes and perfumes, and the fruity lipglosses of some of the girls. Most of us had gone to this same church since before we were old enough to know we were going. This same church being the Prairie Valley Christian Church, nonaffiliated with anything, and only a year ago moved into this new building, one that looked like a brick shoebox with a ten-foot gold cross on the outside. Our old church, a dingy grey white clapboard two-story, sat off Main Street several blocks, with some red graffiti on it (non-satanic as far as anyone knew) and the grass and weeds allowed to grow wild. This new church had seemed to solve a lot of the problems people were having at the old,

squabbles that had phones ringing and a preacher leaving. Now, though, with the gold cross hovering over us, the adults of the church didn't fight much about anything--except what to do with the old church. And so it stood, object of turmoil.

Mrs. Houdyshell lacked the gift of teaching. We made her nervous, and that we, so unfinished a bunch, could give her any anxiety, deadened our brains completely. (With a substitute at school, someone might have taken advantage, but under the church roof, her anxiety could only spread, unchecked.)

"Have you ever had something steal something from you?" she asked.

Blake, leaning back in his creaky folding chair, his hands behind his head, became alert. He'd waited for the moment he could impress her with his knowledge or wit, or whatever he called it, and he was so used to everyone melting at his very smile that he expected Mrs. Houdyshell to flinch, to grin unwillingly. A question had hit the floor; his muscles twitched while he sorted through the kind of answer he might give her. He could make her girlishly nervous--as if she believed he might be interested in her.

Tiffany, too, would have more to say. She had lovely brown hair and brown eyes, and wore a small, spaghetti-strapped dress. She leaned all the way into the table so that her arms disappeared entirely. She couldn't wait for the questions because she knew the answers. The lesson bored her as well, but only because it took so long to get to her answers.

But we didn't have to hear either one of them. The door swung open. Dr. Harrison leaned in, hanging on still to the doorknob. His very presence flagged important news--he had no child young enough for this class, no connection whatsoever, so it had to

be something unusual. Even Mrs. Houdyshell straightened, played with expressions--should she smile? Look concerned?

"Hello, Mrs. Houdyshell. My niece will be here for a while. Annie?"

She swung herself in, and spied the open chair, which was next to me, and shot herself to it, with not so much as a glance at any of the rest of us. She stood tall, and the thing that I liked right away about her, the thing that astonished me, was that she didn't shrink herself down like some of the other taller girls did. Instead, you'd swear she tried to show off her height, by taking those steps to the chair in great, quick strides, and pulling it out of the table with much noise, careless about swinging her arms around. She wore pink-lensed sunglasses. She had jet-black--dyed, I would learn later--spike-short hair, and a short skirt with a leather jacket--August in Kansas and she wore a leather jacket. We had seen people with red lipstick and eyeliner and pale faces, that kind of Goth look, but only on television and movies and in other towns. Never here. Not even the wild ones. There just wasn't any point.

She took off her leather jacket, not in the careful way I might have or Tiffany might have, hoping no one would notice. Instead, she stood up again, shook it off her shoulders and tugged it off. She folded it across her lap. Everybody tried to act as if they weren't that interested, except Blake, who made no secret of his bafflement. Then, oblivious to the silence around her, Annie slapped her hands on the table, drumming them silently a few beats, and looked up. Sharp-pointed indigo-blue barbed wire tattoes ringed her wrists. She had dirty fingernails. She smelled of smoke and some powerful, not altogether pleasing, perfume.

She leaned over to me and asked, only a little whispery, "Did I miss anything?"

I shook my head. Her breath stank.

This small disturbance horrified Mrs. Houdyshell, and she needed to recovery quickly. I don't think we were all so shocked by any one thing, except that all you had to do was watch this girl for a second, and then think back a few moments to Dr. Harrison, handsome, well-dressed, not preparing us at all for this, her particular peace that passeth understanding.

We wouldn't act surprised, though. No one looked like her here, but we knew people did other places, and wouldn't--*refused*--to be on edge about her. But knowing that, that we'd ferociously act as if she were no big deal, I couldn't help but wonder what she made of us. It marked the first time in my life, everything, all of us, looked suspect, people you might or not want to encounter when you visited a place. Did our dresses look funny? Too tame for her, or too goody-goody? Our hair? Did it show that we knew as much about outside of Prairie Valley as we wanted to, and liked it that way? She had nothing on us--even I felt that way, if truth be told.

This girl maybe hadn't actually ever touched any barbed wire before she'd paid someone to needle those designs into her; wire like that stretched across our farm, the one we'd lived on until Mom and Dad bought the restaurant and moved us to town. It hurt just to see her wrists, and to think that a girl might want those gripping her arms for the rest of her life. *What is wrong with her?* I wanted to know, but the way we saw her, she carried bad news. Maybe a different kind of bad news depending on who you were, but bad news all the same.

Mrs. Houdyshell pushed a lesson hand-out her way.

"I don't have a Bible," she announced to Mrs. Houdyshell. We were not yet used to her raspy voice. Probably the smoking.

Mrs. Houdyshell cleared her own throat, as if this would help Annie's. "That's okay. We don't use 'em much in here. We're mostly talking about finding peace right now."

Annie gave her the okay sign.

She had no idea who she signaled that everything was okay: A woman who did not believe anything reached a point of okay anymore. Our teacher wrote petitions for every little thing. We all knew she wanted a prayer said in our school every morning and that she mourned every day for the babies dying by abortion. And so on. That's why she got along as well as she did with Dr. Harrison, who had served on the school board. Once at Easter, I had helped her in the little kids' Sunday school class, and she'd had them play pin Jesus on the cross and, for a treat, eat cross-shaped sugar cookies. Ever since, I did not want to know any more about her faith than she absolutely had to tell us.

Besides Annie and the teacher, seven of us sat around the table. We'd known each other so long we could practically think each other's thoughts. By high school you know who's a slow reader, most of what happens in each kid's home and around it, why they've been in trouble in what grade, or whether they've been put back a grade, and you know what most of their houses are like, at least on the outside. I could remember the time Justin got that scar on his forehead, ten years ago on a playground, or when Gina told me in third grade her mom was pregnant when she got married. The occasional visitor clammed us up pretty fast, a usual thing, but with her, as Mrs. Houdyshell droned

on through the lesson, maybe it seemed the girl needed extra protection from the newness that must be surrounding her, too.

Annie never exactly showed full-out exasperation with her situation, until she folded her lesson hand-out into an airplane and began drawing little paisleys and spirals all over it. On her middle finger she wore a ring with a black-and-white enameled yin and yang sign. Her doodles became more elaborate (fat letters and stars with tails), and I watched her pen, dumbstruck when I saw it slide off the paper, and then watched as the letter she drew continued on the table, as if she couldn't tell the difference. Without thinking, I reached out my hand and pushed her fist back so that she once again could draw on her paper airplane. She didn't lose her focus on her doodle, but, momentarily startled, she let her mouth drop for a second and then went back to drawing, this time on paper. No one else appeared to notice, so busy did appearing nonchalant keep them. Then, a few minutes later, she noticed the plastic basket on the table filled with pens that didn't work, broken pencils, and kids scissors--in case we did crafts, which at our age we never did. She selected a pair of scissors and began cutting up the side of her dress. Nothing that would get her arrested, just some slits on each side that allowed for a little more leg to show. I couldn't do anything about that.

She never said more during class. Somewhere along the way, the contrast, that gap between everyone dying to know what in the hell she was doing there and Mrs. Houdyshell's lecture on safety in God, put some kind of clamp on our brains. By the end of class, exhaustion overcame all of us. Tiffany gave us another confessional about another attempt to be good in the world, which even Mrs. Houdyshell tired of. A couple of the boys--Justin and Tim--reminded us all, as they did every week, that they knew

Bible passages backwards and forwards. You would not want to get into a battle with them over anything--any issue that might call into question the Bible's authority.

After class, she stuck next to me, and we shuffled downstairs with church people of all ages, headed off to the sanctuary.

"Is it always like that?" she asked.

I was at once annoyed and in agreement at whatever she suggested here.

"Pretty much."

We kept walking down the stairs, and at the bottom she leaned over, and said in her raspy nonwhisper: "Go outside with me for a sec."

Her request could have been polite enough, but really, no telling what drove me out there--some kind of welcome new breeze circling around the church today, and I feared it would disappear and leave me alone in town.

Suits--bankers in suits, professors, lawyers and farmers in suits and guys that worked at the CO-OP and the pharmacy wearing suits--all stood together in deep and pleased conversation in the main hallway into the sanctuary. Women greeted friends among them, and their silky dresses mostly represented garden themes. But the greys and browns and blues, the square shoulders, blocked our path, and we had to slip through, unnoticed. The men smiled at each other, some of them, and most of them parted their jackets by leaving their hands in their pockets. When little kids stand that way, they're bullies, but for them, these men, it was the norm. Only Reverand Lemons in his black robe couldn't get so comfortable. His story required his hands in the air, openly welcoming his flock.

We at last made it outside, where the air reeked plainly of August and landed, plainly sticky and hot, on every part of us, even that early in the morning.

"You think it'd be okay if I smoked here?" she asked.

"Sure."

"It's not like holy ground or something?"

"People smoke out here."

"You want one?"

"No, huh uh. I don't smoke. I don't want to."

She laughed. "Whatever."

"Been a long time since I've been stuck in church," she said. "My grandma was big on it. I lived with her for a while. My mind wanders, you know? To everything bad a person can even think of. The worst. Know what I mean?"

By the look in her eye, she seemed to assume I did. Clearly her last half hour held a lot more excitement than the one I'd sat through.

"It's not that I don't think about God, you know," she went on, "I'm always, always, always wondering about God, and what he plans to do to me, and if He's there, and if He isn't, how did we all get so fooled? Or is she there--that's what my friend believes. It's a she."

She talked too intensely for the heat. For the time, or for the place. When the heat rippled up from the earth, you kept conversation to a minimum: Dad in the field, back in town? Dog get fed? You might not ask about more than logistics or chores completed in this kind of heat.

"I swear to God I'm not ever wearing hose again. My aunt made me put these on, but it will be the last time." She pulled out the nylon from her legs as if that would air them out, creating a tiny nude-beige tent.

"You don't have to wear them," I said. "Nobody cares."

"I won't, anymore. That's for damn sure."

She stared at some of those mingling before going in, like Mrs. Knapp, a short little white-haired lady in pearls and a baby-blue dress that hit her knees. And then we watched Ben, this bratty kid, tear out to the parking lot, returning with an ice-scraper. He excavated some railroad ties out of the garden border, and every second he got them a little farther out of the ground.

"Way to go," Annie said, when he lifted one away from its site.

"It's probably about time to get ourselves in," I advised. "Your uncle's probably wondering where you are."

She stubbed the cigarette out against the church wall bricks. "I call him Will, and he can wait a damn minute, but whatever." She threw the butt on the ground. I picked it up and stuffed it in my pocket, imagining myself going up in flames about midservice.

Anyone might suspect me for even talking with her, but out of habit, as soon as this thought occurred, the excuse, same old excuse, arrived: I'd say she felt ill; everyone would believe I wanted to help.

We made our way back to the sanctuary, me wondering how she picked me out of anyone to take her little break with, wondering if smoke clung to my dress now as it did to hers.

"There's the uncle," she said, pointing with her thumb, and headed up the aisle. "See ya later," she said loudly, so loud her voice carried well over the organ music.

My parents and my little brothers, Nolan and Trey, sat in the same pew that we'd taken up for years, a half dozen pews safe from the pulpit. They didn't notice a thing--the smell, the tardiness--but they only looked relieved that I had joined them. That relief pulled me uncomfortably in some new way.

My mind didn't wander nearly enough, not in the way Annie claimed hers did. During the time to praise God I did and during the time to confess my sins with everybody, I did that, too. But during a quick turn back towards Annie, I saw her lift her eyes up to the sky and fan herself fiercily with her bulletin, as if no air conditioning reached her. Maybe she searched for God and avoided scrupulously all those dangerous intervening thoughts she claimed. Her uncle, the good-looking Dr. Harrison, checked on her with a sideways glance, and he appeared mildly concerned. His wife Deirdre's expression gave away nothing more, as usual, than boredom.

Even my mom, a woman who I swear tried to look twenty years older than her real age, once sighed about Dr. Harrison's "glorious, beautiful eyes" as we drove away from his clinic. I'd just had a shot and could not believe she (for once) could get caught up in something besides my injury. Her drift in attention actually made me dislike him for quite a while. Then sometime--was it a year before the day Annie arrived, or two?--certain men around town, men in the congregation, struck me differently. Some frightened me, or rather, the way I would think about them before realizing who I was and where I was, frightened me. And Dr. Harrison, he of the beautiful eyes and easy clothes, was one of those men.

He walked through a world that required more thought than the rest of us lived in, or so it seemed to me then. This duty of his, the life-preserving and pain-prevention, made us completely adore his rare full laugh, and made us hope for it the times in between. Sometime the smile we might think we detected under his thick mustache from time to time satisfied us. His fringy thick mustache, still only greying a tad, covered the ends of his mouth, so that he could be smiling or staring, unimpressed or deeply amused and you'd never be positively sure which. A tall man, he wore a rich man's clothes, clothes we didn't even know where they could be purchased. My father, I thought, was plenty good-looking, but now as a restaurant owner and truck driver, he had not changed much from his farm days' Levi's, t-shirts and plaid shirts. Dr. Harrison's shoulders, always fully squared, stretched quarterback wide, too; he was not fat but a big-boned, wide-jawed man. And most distinguishing of all, his hair fell in dark waves, slightly long--not down to his shoulders or anything, but longer than any other men at the church. In the winter he sometimes wore a yellow fringed jacket, maybe like a serious hunter, maybe like an old rock star.

He had ordered my shots and checked my heartbeat from the time I had no chest until the time I had some chest, and tickled my ears with the [earchecker], and four years back saved me from dying of appendicitis; my birth certificate bears his signature. His mind clicked along, we assumed, at such an overloaded, important pace that hardly anyone ever wanted to bother him, but we all did anyway. Despite the way people felt in town about anyone who might get a little big for their britches, as the older folks said, nearly everyone liked him. Not only because he'd saved more than a few lives here and there, although naturally that would get anyone far enough in life. But also, after he'd

divorced his first wife to marry Deirdre--and he certainly didn't win any popularity contests doing that, but people got over it--he'd gone out of his way to make up for it in stellar involvement in other places around town. Treating aching joints and strep stopped satisfying him. Instead of just coming to church, he got on board as an elder. He joined Doctors Without Borders and flew to Calcutta at his own expense to treat malnourished children. A few years back, he'd run for school board and won, and a board that no one had heard of before suddenly made big headlines in the local paper about every last decision. And now, according to the newspaper and according to my dad who had served him at the restaurant, he wanted to run for Congress. You could just see him in Washington--it would be no change at all, although instead of deciding the rules for what plays the high school could perform, he would decide on highway bills and pesticide regulations. So, on top of everything else, D.C., this strange far-off place, could become some place where someone we knew would muscle in and say something in our favor.

Finally, after the sermon and after another song and after communion and the offering and a prayer and a benediction, church ended. And as always, along came the relief that it had not been so painful as it might have been. We all felt better, albeit better yet knowing that it was over. Some church committee had scheduled a picnic by the town lake, so even though the temperature could most likely climb into the desperate 100s, all of the main families of the church would find themselves there. We would simply count on the nearness of the waters to cool us down while we swatted flies off paper plates.

On my way out, Annie, standing there smoking again, motioned me over. "Now what was your name again?"

"Honor."

"Holy God. How could I forget that?"

My mom and dad and Nolan and Trey passed by me . My dad squeezed my neck with affection and winked at me, trusting that I'd join them instantly. I watched them walk off.

"Ready to party, Annie?"

Deirdre, Dr. Harrison's wife, scared me; I might have jumped a little. But she didn't say anything else, just strolled on past us with Dr. Harrison towards the parking lot.

"What?" Annie demanded.

Deirdre turned. "The picnic," she explained, delighted at some secret horror about it. "Now we go to the church picnic."

"Wow. Do I have to?" She attempted to sound unbothered. As in, I'm in charge here, but would it hurt your feelings one way or the other, say, if I didn't go?

"'Fraid so," Deirdre said.

"Okay if Honor goes with us?"

Deirdre shrugged.

"So come on. Come with us," Annie insisted.

"I'll have to ask. I've got to tell my parents we're going." She didn't thrill at my acceptance. I'd sounded a bit more excited than I'd meant to.

They were waiting for me when I reached their suburban. The doctor's plate said "THKUGOD." This he added shortly after marrying Deirdre and buying the suburban, and he didn't explain to anyone I knew about which of those, Deirdre or the truck, that he

felt so thankful for. As people sometimes do, talkers in town not very discreetly joked that it meant something besides thank you God, perhaps instead a declaration that he was the KU god--the University of Kansas being his med school alma mater.

"Honor here's going with us," she told her uncle.

As always, I couldn't get his reaction exactly; the half-smile didn't always match up with what he said.

Annie studied every place we passed, and except for the castlelike college on one end and the Quik Trip on the other, we passed most every business and gathering spot in town. The tiny flowershop. The Catholic church, where members--whites and a few Mexicans--strolled out. The first grocery store in town, Tom's. Grace's Hair Design. The sickly pink darkened neon of the car dealership and the sickly yellow stones of the former county museum. My parents' cafe. A dry cleaning store, a hardware store where they sold jeans and sweatshirts, too, a tiny JC Penney store and Duckwalls and Otasco Hardware. What did she make of it? It was pathetic? It stood quaint and had everything we needed? People lived here. As we turned the corner, we could see the remainders of Ed Wilson's last crazed project after his wife left him. He decided to knock down his little repair shop, and without even clearing the gravel and debris, embarked on creating his "seven wonders of the world mini-golf course." He built two lopsided pyramids out of plywood and had started on the Washington Monument when Darrell Norman told him the Washington Monument was never included in the seven wonders of the world, and that he'd seen such a golf course in a Goldie Hawn movie. Ed promptly gave up, but never cleaned up. The Washington Monument laid on its side. This demanded too much effort and caution to explain to Annie in front of her uncle.

He checked me in his rearview mirror. "How are things at the restaurant, Honor?"

"Things are good," I said, possibly a little stubbornly. Two years later, I still felt that everyone waited for us to fail again.

We had to stop at their house, their gigantic white house, and the rest of us stayed put while Deirdre ran in and grabbed her beef-and-tater-tots casserole. Then the lid slid off on her lap when Dr. Harrison pulled sharply out of their drive. Irked, Deirdre had to go back to change, and this somehow worked up her anger at Will. Their enormous house stood alone and white facing the lake. Only one tree, a weeping willow, stood out front. My dad once told us as we drove around and ate ice cream one April night that come summer time, everybody wanted that tree in their yard. We all knew, too, that they had a pool surrounded by a red brick patio around back. You could see the blue table umbrella flapping in the wind when you drove by. I turned towards the opposite direction, and could see through the rear window the lake, where people gathered, and past that, the trees and shabby roofs (or anyway, shabby from that spot) of other houses in town. A belltower on the Free Library marked Main Street. Annie asked if she could make a phone call, but Dr. Harrison asked if couldn't the call wait, please? He had no patience with her, but then, who did Annie really have to call?

"MAN. IF I THOUGHT church sucked it's 'cause I hadn't joined in on a church picnic yet." So Annie announced, having a gander around with her hands on her hips. Deirdre and Will had dashed the casserole over to a table to prevent another major spill, or maybe to get away from us. Aside from the terrible heat, nothing measured up to the awfulness Annie made the party out to be. So as she warned that this bored her--really,

seriously, bored her--I offered that the food would be in plentiful supply. She clutched her leather jacket in her arms, and pulled it closer to her.

"In this heat? In Denver it doesn't get this hot. Not even in the summer. And so *humid*. What are you trying to do, grow a rainforest here?" For a moment I hated both her and the whole bunch of people in their good clothes unfoiling their contributions. "Jesus God these heels are burning my feet. Deirdre bought me all this shit to wear and you can not imagine how not used to it I am. I hope you all think I'm normal 'cause I sure as hell am uncomfortable enough."

"Afterwards you could go wade around in the lake if you're feet are still bothering you," I told her, not sweetly as I might have.

She lit another cigarette and surveyed the crowd. "I don't know any Bible verses except 'Jesus wept,' " she explained. She leaned against the truck. "But that's a good one. If he were in this heat, he'd weep, I'm pretty sure."

She did have a point about the heat. Why these people chose such a day in August for their get-together when they all had perfectly fine tables with central air blasting at home added up to a mystery you could waste time exploring. She turned and leaned over on the hood, but she straightened up fast; it gave her forearms a scorch. This angered her. She bent down again and took her enameled ring and drove it through the sage green paint in a long, shaky, but sneaky, scratch.

"Don't!" I whispered lamely.

"Why not, Honor?"

"Do you know how much it takes for a paint job?" It bugged me when people my age didn't understand how much things cost, how hard they were to earn.

She said something about how no, she did not know. Meanwhile, a quick check of the scene revealed that people were not staring at us. At least not in any obvious way. Little kids tumbled around here and there, girls just younger than me walked around awkwardly, the boys their age, my serious brother Nolan among them, gathered for some water project, and adults helped old people to their tables.

"What are you going to do when he sees?" I asked. She didn't answer.

We stood too far away to hear much but a low rumble as Reverend Lemons said a prayer, but everybody bowed their heads, even me so far away. Everyone but Annie, at least until she'd finally registered she alone stood up straight.

After the amen, Deirdre called out Annie's name. Deirdre stepped carefully through the grass towards us. She inhabited the same afternoon as the rest of the world but she came across all cool and comfortable, like being close to the lake air conditioned her completely. She wore this red shift that made her stand out in a way from the rest of the women in frillier garden stuff. She'd also exposed a certain lack of inhibition by ditching her shoes.

Annie muttered, "She's gonna say, 'Hey, girl, go on home.' " Annie's hopeful prediction proved incorrect.

"Come eat with us," Deirdre said. "I've got your service."

"My *what*?"

"Your fork and plate." She brightened without smiling, allowing that none of this thrilled her, either. "C'mon. There's lots of food," she said.

"I thought you meant I had to do some kind of church thing. No thanks," Annie said.

We followed Deirdre to the discouragingly long line. Annie gawked at the three long picnic tables jammed with food.

Deirdre's casserole sat overflowing among many, mixed among dishes with ham slices and deviled eggs, potatoes soaked every which way, and jellos in all colors with items floating in them, a salad with bacon and peas, another with a coating of nuts on top.

She just expected me to follow her to her table with the doctor and Deirdre. I don't mean to brag, but I knew the doctor and his wife wouldn't worry if Annie became friends with me, that even though we weren't anybody in town, she could do a lot worse. People knew I liked to take care of things, that my main friends were really a lot of old people in town--the very, very old people, who barely tottered around--and others who came into the restaurant mainly because they had no one else to talk to. This charity came easy; my social calendar never overflowed, and after losing my best friend in sixth grade, either kids pretty much avoided me or me them. Girls, especially the nice ones from church, invited me to slumber parties, and church stuff and 4H kept me socializing enough, but only the ones nobody else would talk to in town stayed close. If Dr. Harrison didn't discover the trail of Annie's ring anytime soon and put me at the scene of the crime, everything would be fine.

We managed to land at the best picnic table, one right under a cottonwood next to the lake. One of the women sitting down threw out a blue-and-white checked tablecloth, whipping it quickly over the graffiti-scarred green table. The leaves of those cottonwoods above sing a different song than any other trees, and on that day you might guess you heard them slapping each other haphazardly, applauding. (They also spewed cotton-type balls this time of year, and we waved those away without thinking when they

headed for our plates.) The minister and his wife sat with us at our table, and so did two other adult couples. One of them, Julie and Eric, busied themselves managing their roving toddler, Rebecca. Julie's bright yellow dress said it all--such a happy wife and mother. Everything a girl my age in town might shoot for. Then, on the other side of Dr. Harrison, an older couple, the Muellers, frowned about something, as they always did. As one of the town's two lawyers, Carl Mueller ended up serving on every kind of board, even acting as substitute mailman when Gene, the regular, got sick. His wife, Elaine, collected and sold antiques, but I only knew her because of church. Neither couple would probably dream of stepping foot in our restaurant.

"This stuff's pretty good," Annie said, turning to me in astonishment and licking her fingers. "You could get fat pretty quick at a place like this."

Dr. Harrison ignored her. The food gave him trouble, and he blamed Deirdre. "What is this?" he asked, setting off a couples-routine. "It's bok chow, Will. Remember we had that one night?" "Well, this barbecued turkey is way too salty." At first he only spoke to her, but kept turning around to see who'd made it to the picnic, and it took some time before he noticed who else sat at his own table.

"Think of something positive," Deirdre told him. "I know. How about the fact that you'll only have to pay Tom another month to mow our grass?" She turned to the others. "He hates that the grass has to be mowed, and he hates the way others do it. In Will's perfect world, the grass isn't greener--it doesn't grow at all."

"That's because I put myself through med school mowing lawns. I must have cleared a Montana's worth of lawns."

"Sometimes he still wakes up in the middle of the night, wakes me up with this motor noise, and I turn and he's there sitting up in bed, eyes closed, but still mowing that lawn." She stretched her arms out and demonstrated his steering maneuvers.

"God knows I could never go into farming," he said. He addressed the table now, and not just Deirdre: "Bless my father for all those years he put in on a tractor. Still at it. Up in Harvey County."

Annie and I didn't get a chance to say much. Aside from Will's complaints, only one conversation ran through the table as we ate, and from her eyes and attention, I guessed it interested her. Whether she faked this or not I could not tell.

`"By gosh, I haven't introduced you to anyone, have I? This is Annie. She'll be staying with us for a while. Her mom ran into some hard times."

"She was always bumping into hard times," Annie said, apparently making a joke. "I'm happy to meet you all."

Judging by the mix of murmurs and overly friendly hellos, nobody quite knew how to take it--whether he expected polite acknowledgment or a full-scale welcome for her. And Julie, mother of the toddler, seemed almost scared--I didn't think Annie would be hired for a babysitter anytime soon. Rebecca instinctively scooted along the bench towards Annie, and her mother, Julie, instinctively scooted her back towards her.

"How long will you be staying here? You must need to get back to school pretty soon," Carl said.

"Nope. I'll be here in the fall. With old Uncle Will."

"You're awfully lucky," Julie braved, given how little she apparently liked Annie. "But you probably know what a great guy your uncle is."

Now Dr. Harrison smiled; still he cast his eyes downward.

"Do you know that he goes to the bad parts of town and gives shots to those little Mexican babies?" she asked Annie.

"It's a real service," her husband added.

Annie did not immediately go apologetic about underestimating him.

"No," Dr. Harrison said. "I just don't know how to treat polio. That's all. If I didn't immunize, there I am. I'd have to figure out treatment protocols for a host of diseases this country gave up long ago." He brushed off the compliments easily, but he also relaxed, stopped fidgeting, stopped picking on Deirdre.

A yellow lab that had been circling the tables suddenly lurched onto ours, sending Deirdre's Coke pouring into her lap and Dr. Harrison fighting for his plate. Deirdre started to cuss before hushing herself, and Annie caught that but clenched her face tightly so as not to laugh or smile.

"Even a dog gets the crumbs at his master's table," the Reverend Lemons intoned, as if someone might catch him not thinking Bible.

Dr. Harrison gave up the last of his meal to the dog. "Actually, I always thought that meant a dog hanging around the table will eventually get something out of pity."

"No," the minister corrected hesitantly, softly. "A common interpretation is that such is the plenty at the Lord's table that there is enough to go around."

"Knowing what I know about that verse and what I do about dogs, I'd have to say even without the scholar's confirmation that my version's a little closer, Reverend."

Just when the whole thing seemed weird, Eric, father of the toddler, jumped in. "I'd have to agree. We knew better than to ever feed Missy from the table, but you can't

help it. A dog is just pathetic when it gazes up at you stuffing your face, whether that dog's hungry or not."

The others laughed at him, and they nodded. Even Reverend Lemons. Deirdre gave up on sopping up the mess on her dress. She brushed back her yellowish hair behind her ears, as if that beauty effort alone would make the rest disappear. It nearly did. She wore tiny chains around her neck that caught the sun, nothing extreme, but enough gold to give her ears and neck shine that seemed to come from nowhere. Her hair reached her shoulders (I had never seen her wear it longer or shorter) and didn't droop like my mom's or mine would have--it stayed half-curled. Her skin gleamed, too; you could tell she looked older than she wanted to, but jewel-colored flecks, ruby and emerald, covered her lips and eyes.

The adults dropped the subject, and the minister asked how the campaign was going.

"Wait a minute," Dr. Harrison protested. He held his palm up, holding off their assumptions. "Not yet. I know what I want to do, that's all. What I feel like I have to do, the way things are going. Now whether anyone in the party's going to go for it, well, that's another story. The whole thing's a complicated game with them. You cannot imagine. And then of course, once I have their approval, I'd have to convince Deirdre she'd enjoy the life of a candidate's wife. That, my friends, will be the more difficult challenge of my career."

She smiled oh-so-briefly, like that's what she was supposed to do, but nothing she did suggested she cared one way or the other about Dr. Harrison's plans. A lot of times, she seemed mad about something, but then people hadn't been all that kind in talking

about her back when the doctor married her. She knew it; she came to church with him, but she had to know that people thought she'd schemed up the whole affair to latch onto his money.

"Good God, what is that smell?" Annie asked.

About everyone started at her very ability to speak, and then Eric Bonds laughed. But they all left it up to Dr. Harrison to respond to her.

"That's the feedlot," he explained briskly. "Every now and then the wind picks up enough in this direction that you can smell it. But we're just grateful for the breeze."

"Well, *that* just sucks."

We heard only the wind ripping through the cottonwoods and the others, the elms and maples, surrounding the lake for a moment, and then finally Dr. Harrison said, "It's not too bad usually. Pretty soon you won't even notice."

"I wouldn't have noticed unless you'd pointed it out," Carl Mueller said. "Mind passing the ketchup, Julie?"

But now, the smell seemed to pick up and magnify; the wind coaxed it down through the picnickers, and our food, what was left of it, turned unappetizing and thinking of something besides that feedlot more difficult.

Annie made a bit of a show adjusting to it, raising her eyebrows and tilting her head just so, but for a few moments she ate better than anyone else, until she took advantage of the weak conversation. "You know what I hope, Will? If you're senator, I hope you can get something done about gay marriages. That's what I hope. I mean, if people love each other. I guess it's not the thing I care about most. Maybe that's like environment shit, like stop this smell kind of stuff, you know, save the rainforests? But

this is one of the big things too. I have this friend and he's gay? He can't even have a normal life. It's like, he just has to walk around, knowing people hate him, and it's so not fair. You know what I mean?"

Perhaps she truly didn't know the way everybody thought at the table, the way they would always think at that table. That's what I believed then, but now, thinking about it, I think she knew. Maybe she really believed this, and felt free storming into their lunch that way, but she knew. At the time, I feared so much for her I wanted to take whatever they would say, defend her, but no one reached to correct her.

Some old car whipped around the lake, and four, maybe five people rode in it, and salsa music, sounding to me like the calliope at Joyland in Wichita, thumped our hearts. Expensive speakers in a junk car. Then it disappeared. The adults at the table shook their heads in shared disgust, but maybe they were glad to have something to pinpoint their newest embarrassment on openly.

Annie was, as she might have said, so in the wrong place to say what she had. She could probably have brought up a lot of other topics that would have left people's jaws dropped and sent them poking at their Chinet with their sporks, so that Dr. Harrison would have to clean up the mess, but she did a good job nonetheless. And nothing that I might have said would help.

Dr. Harrison cleared his throat and said, not actually acknowledging her presence, "I'll be running for *representative*," but just then the Reverend Lemons stood and climbed out of the picnic table, saying, "Does anybody see a trash can around here?"

About five people tried to tell him at once where they saw one, and then the toddler Rebecca spilled someone's iced tea, and you might have thought that liquid toxic

to grass the way six hands went for it with paper napkins. We all simultaneously seemed to realize that we'd eaten quite well on a summer afternoon, and people began moving. The wind picked up Annie's questions, her rambling, and carried them off into the big, blue sky.

BY THE TIME Annie arrived, our reliable peace had disappeared, gotten lost, and it happened before she ever showed up. I knew that. When I was younger, a kid, when some things had gone wrong, people there, grownups, stepped in. They said, If you ever need to talk about this. . . . Or they offered me treats at the pharmacy or the librarian suggested a book I might like, and once she even let me choose the new books they would order. After things got better for me, I assumed that's how things were in town all the time. But Annie proved them wrong. No one would lean over and ask her if she needed to talk. No one asked where she came from, or why. I knew I would have to.

So when she asked--or rather, told me, "Come over to Will's," asking me to go to her uncle's for the afternoon, I didn't hesitate, even though by now, in two hours, she'd already carved out a reputation, and that streak she'd carved on the SUV would be discovered any minute. (Anyway, Will would discover it if he was anything like my father, who could spot a flaw in any machinery.) None of it bothered me, and no one considered my part of it in a judgmental way. Nothing I did was good or bad--*She just helps.*

When we got back to their house, Dr. Harrison announced to us that he needed to check in at the hospital; Deirdre put on a hat and a shorts outfit and told us she would be weeding in the backyard. Annie led me up the rich-person staircase, white steps and gold

railing. And not only I thought it was built for the rich--she made a whole production of each step, posing her arms to her sides. After years of walking and riding my bike and driving by, I had found myself in this house for the first time.

Her room--or rather, the room she had staked out that once belonged to Lisa, Dr. Harrison's daughter, had lost some earlier glow, and Annie's stuff strung about hurried the process. She pushed in a CD, nothing I recognized, and we sat down cross-legged on the floor of the all-pink room. She'd piled suitcases--and the shopping bags courtesy of Deirdre--under the window, next to a fancy pink-striped chair. The prettiness of it, not Hello Kitty cuteness, but the prettiness of it all could make you cry. One open blue duffle bag exposed a tumbling mess of clothing, jeans and shirts and underthings. CDs and tapes balanced in precarious stacks high in a groceries box between the suitcase and the chair. She hadn't unpacked, but she did have some pictures of herself and friends perched on the night stand, crowded around a phone. She had not made the bed. Other than that, the room still bore Lisa's imprint. Her horse and piano trophies and ribbons surrounded the mirror and drawings of ballet dancers hung on the wall. After Lisa finished high school, she and her brother and mother packed up and moved to Wichita, and I guessed she'd left these behind not because she didn't want them anymore, but to prove to everyone a girl who liked ballet and horses once lived here. No one should forget it. And Annie, aside from the prominent perfumed smell, didn't threaten that.

"So, why are you here? Why are you visiting your uncle, I mean?"

"Oh, problems at home. That kind of stuff. You sure you don't want a smoke? I don't have anything else. Swore off everything. Too much trouble."

"No thanks." Obviously, the questions just needed to be phrased correctly. "So when did you get to Prairie Valley?"

"A week ago."

"How long are you going to be here?"

"I really couldn't tell you, Honor. Probably the school year, till I graduate. Maybe not that long. Guess it depends on how long Will can stand me."

If the smell of incense thrilled him, she'd probably get to stay for years. She lit some more even though the spicy smell already had me on the verge of sneezing.

"Really. Will you tell me why you and your folks don't get along?"

Her eyes froze me. "You sure are nosy. Is everybody like that here?"

"Yeah," and maybe I exaggerated, but her gaze made me at least try to be honest.

"Okay," she said, sighing and spreading her arms in maybe surrender or maybe in a curtain-opening gesture for her own personal production. "There were some problems. My mom and I didn't hit it off very well the last couple months. Okay, let's say we hit it off, like really I hit her. Actually, all my life we didn't get along so well. That's okay. It's not like she could even take care of me half the time. My theory is that not always are kids born to the right moms and dads."

I wanted to ask more questions, ask the right ones.

Looking thoughtful, she searched and located her cigarettes and lighter, and then lit one. "Things got kind of out of hand the last couple of years. There was this guy, and he was a jerk, well, to me. That was my boyfriend. Hers was a real loser, maybe even worse. Not that that was anything new. She acted all huffy about this shoplifting thing--it was, like, a fucking T-shirt was all. And other stuff. Then, I hit her. I'm not saying it

was right. You should love your mother. It surprised me, if you wanna know the truth. But you'd think she'd been waiting for it all my life the way she goes to the phone and calls her oh-so-great brother Will. You'd think she'd forgotten about everything with him." She lowered her voice to a whisper, or anyway a loud whisper over the music.

It would have killed me if we'd heard from Will about then, driving up after discovering the scratch.

"He really screwed her over once."

"Who?" I asked, though I knew.

"Will," she said, perturbed I couldn't keep up. "She asked him for just a little bit of help once, when she really, I swear, really needed it. She could have handled it, too, for once in her life. And he's, he's like, Nope, can't do it. You gotta do it on your own Babe. But this time," Annie said, raising her voice, "this time, with me, he's Mr. Wonderful." She sang, out of the blue: Mighty Mouse to save the day." She didn't belt this or anything, but her singing voice had no hesitation, no flatness at all. She returned to her speaking voice: "Mom said if he had so much damn money, he could try to do it himself. You know, keep me in line? But about the time we're hitting town, here? When she's driving me into the glamorous Prairie Valley? I think reality hits for her. Like it's not just about her and me, but she's facing who he is finally. You know, I really don't give a shit, because my plan is to be a big singing star in Nashville, and frankly, where I am while I'm writing my songs and sending out tapes just doesn't matter to me that much."

But I found that hard to believe. Not the part about her mother, or about her uncle, or even the part about becoming a singer--maybe she would, I thought then. But I didn't believe it didn't matter to her where she was.

"So I don't know. I couldn't live with my dad, of course. And my brother--he's such a jerk sometimes, I can't like live with him. Even though he'd be cool. He's, I don't know, all right, but not really there if you know what I mean." She shrugged. "Mom was sick of me, all I wanted to do was drink more. And I was just so polluted spiritually from my mom and the scene. Figured it wouldn't hurt me to come here. Like a retreat. You know, relax, kick back. Simple life."

She looked up, brightly. "My friend, Charlie? Let's call him."

"Who's that?"

"He's this friend, that guy I was talking about, who's gay? He's in Belize now."

"That'll be so expensive," I said, but I didn't know where exactly Belize now. A lifetime of trying to prevent this, head off any kind of trouble. And now this, some kind of worst-case scenario with her.

"I don't care. Will' gonna be so fuckin' freaked out you won't even believe it."

"He's already gonna be freaked out about the car," I whispered as loudly as I could.

"Huh? Oh, God, that little scratch? He's not even gonna notice it."

She lifted her army surplus backpack and dug through it, the contents of which must have matched Mary Poppins'. She found her phone book, a small notebook with butterflies floating around it, all held together with rubber bands. "He is like one of my best friends. I do not ever, ever let my friends down. That's one thing you should know

about me, Honor. It's just what I believe. You can pick your friends, but you can't pick your family, you know what I mean? " She slapped her knee. "Here is how great Charlie is. When I went to the airport--this is when I decided to try living with my dad, don't ask--he and my friend Sam meet me there. Sam's just a friend. He's not gay, just a friend. And my going-away gift from them is this poem. They didn't write it--I forget who wrote it, but anyway. It's about a pilgrim soul. Sam says I have a pilgrim soul. Unbelievable."

She pushed the many buttons it took to call Charlie, and talked to several people (at least one of whom didn't speak English) before talking to her friend, and I could do nothing. But her face did change, soften, and then I realized it was the first time I'd caught her smiling all day long.

I know that before I watched her talk to her friend, and before I listened to half-stories about Denver life for them, she annoyed me. She took too many liberties. She didn't think about other people. She said not too much during that phone call that suggested underneath it all she cared about Will or anyone. But not even Will could have stopped anything about that phone call--her caring, her being cared for. I listened to her treasured tapes with her. She felt free to sing along. The truth was, I thought I knew a lot about music from the radio, but she knew stuff from every year someone recorded a song. She said a lot of the tapes came from people she worked with at the record store. She did not feel shy about singing along, louder than the singers, better than the singers. She didn't even even care that I listened.

Will pushed her door open. "Do you know anything about this paint scratch?"

She dipped her chin in indignation. "What paint scratch?"

"The one on the SUV."

"I didn't see one. What, was it one of those kids pulling a key along it? That shit happens in Denver all the time. The better the car, the more likely you are to have a problem."

She'd bamboozled him in one detour. How?

He gave her this look, this look that said he knew better to believe her, but he also knew it wouldn't be fair to blame her for something she didn't do, not right away.

He walked out of the room, and Annie turned to the floor but lifted her hand, and she gave him the finger.

"I told you," I said.

"You said he'd be mad at me," Annie said.

All the way home as I walked I thought of how I would get her straightened out, and all the way home she seemed like my greatest challenge yet. But a change is a change, part scary and part inviting.

ONCE IN THE summer I stayed out all night, and my parents after a while became frantic. I slept down by the river, mosquitos chewing red knots into my knobby legs, a mile or so away from the farm, and leeches and cottonmouth snakes were only scary things my father told me about, like ghost stories or hell. Later I would have been too frightened to do this. The difference between Annie Rose and myself is that she would have understood exactly the threats of the river creatures, and spent the night on the banks anyway, and maybe the next night, too. It took me a long time to realize this.

Chapter Five

Earlier, Annie convinced Honor to go with her on a joyride in her uncle's SUV; with Annie at the wheel, the car spun into a ditch. As a punishment, her uncle Will forbid her from using her CD player, guitar, and any radios. Outside of his sight, Annie ignores the rule. The two are at odds, but not confronting each other yet. Annie, in neglecting her uncle's rule, displays some of the defiance of the character of the play; here it appears in a domestic and not state setting.

School has started, and despite a rocky start socially, Annie finds acceptance after singing a capella in the school talent show. Annie has begun a relationship with Carlos, a Cuban whose father works at the meatpacking plant. She keeps the relationship secret; although racism isn't visible all the time, Annie knows better than to test Will's limits, and perhaps finds keeping such a secret dramatic. In this chapter, Honor learns that the relationship between Carlos and Annie is strengthening rather than diminishing. In a nod to "Antigone" as an inspiration, Annie's older brother Zack visits and disappears; during his visit, Annie's overloyalty with those she trusts is at work. She appears to be enthrall to her brother. Throughout, Honor struggles with the town's expectations of her.

Chapter Five

As it grew cooler, sometimes with rain and sometimes with wind, always with those dark grey skies, we had to talk with customers about whether fall was coming early or late this year. We put on sweaters, and the guys at school added sweats and flannel shirts. From all the chimneys, you could smell the smoke, and when darkness fell a little earlier, it reminded me of trying to play outside just a little bit longer as a kid. Like always, the promise of winter meant both relief from all that heat and afternoons with the sky clogged with one expanse of white fog.

At the time--and even now--I wouldn't admit hanging out with her had made me, finally, a little--not as *nice*. Nice, I'd think. What good is nice? You wouldn't have found me swaggering into the pool hall in some getup out of Annie's closet, but it began to occur to me that I could have been wrong about everything I'd ever known. It didn't bother me to stay at Will's. I didn't feel so poor, and nice, there, even while I still thought hanging around Annie would help her settle into living here, and feel at home.

One evening my mother and I sat in our living room, with the windows that looked out over Main Street. Mom had hung leafy-patterned thick curtains, and those made it almost feel like a home and not a leftover part of a diner. She had her feet in the foot spa we'd bought her for Christmas, soaking them. I tried to do some homework, cross-legged in front of the coffee table, but the algebra did not come easily to me. At the last minute I would call Annie to ask her how to do it; she was a fiend for the numbers

and balances and she found everything so simple. Not that she tried to make me feel stupid, but her sheer confidence on the subject did anyway.

"Did Annie get her guitar back?" my mother asked.

"Uh-uh." And then, "I t's not going to make her a better person. I don't know why Will is doing this."

Mom sighed and tipped her head back on the chair.

When she didn't say anything, I ventured: "Well, don't you think so?"

"He's. . . I don't know. What other people do about their kids, their nieces, isn't any of my business. I don't want him telling me how to raise you three. So it works out okay."

"But don't you think so?" Sometimes I hated how my mom and I understood each other; it only made times like these--when she remained a mystery--more frustrating. "Okay, he's nice to take care of her and everything. And maybe she's not Miss Perfect every day. But c'mon. We're talking weeks here."

Forgetting maybe some of Annie's mistakes, it seemed to me other kids in town, kids everybody liked, had sinned worse than Annie and escaped trouble because so many people liked them, had known them since they were plump babies.

"She did wreck a nice car, though. Isn't that right? And she didn't have his permission to drive it. You know how it is. About once or twice a year there's some crazy accident. Kids dying on those gravel roads, on the highway. You both could have been killed."

"Still."

"Still." She looked out the windows, and watched one of the two lights of town blink red and then green. "If she's going to live with him, she'll have to adjust to him. And to Deirdre."

"They're so weird." But I didn't look up when I said this, hoping she'd feel more free to take that ball and run with it if I didn't. She didn't say anything for a long time.

"I think," she said, "that Dr. Harrison needs something that none of us can give him, exactly."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, I don't know."

Nothing irritated me more than when she almost said something important and then backed off, keeping it to herself. "C'mon. What do you mean?"

"One time he lied about me to someone. Maybe he didn't mean to. It was back during all that church business, of course. I don't know."

"Then why do you think he did? What did he say?"

"Well, this, I'm not saying this for sure. That I know this. But it seems like he lies. When the truth would work better, as we used to say."

"What do you mean?"

"Honor, it's just . . . you don't need to worry about it. We were deciding something at church. He had to have his way, I guess. Stay out of his way, is all I've got to tell you." She would not budge even if I bugged her the rest of the evening. If she were going to tell me, it had to be because she couldn't stand holding her truth back anymore. So I let her alone.

The next day after school Annie would hardly answer any of the easiest questions about the situation. We walked along, taking our time getting to the restaurant. Hard as Annie worked, we were always later getting there on Thursdays than on the days I came to work alone. Mom never said anything, and business never picked up until after we'd been there, but we could have helped with prep work first if we'd been prompt about it.

"Let's go see Carlos first," she said, as if it were the first time she'd ever had that idea.

"The restaurant. He'll be there later. Go see him when you're finished."

"I need to go," she said.

They just smiled at each other when we first walked in. For someone outside the situation, such as myself, standing within ten feet of them gave me the sensation of intruding. Luckily, the golden-curled guy was there to take gas money while they smiled at each other.

"I'm going on break, okay?" told him. He led us back to the breakroom, such as it was, and we sat on milk crates under bulletin boards with employees' laws on them. He bought us drinks, Coke for me and a fruity juice bottle for Annie. Annie had told me he took pride in his job--the wages, the location away from the plant where his dad worked, so I knew he would not goof off for long back here. He propped his feet up on some boxes and began bouncing a rubber ball against the wall.

"And how was school today, Annie?" he asked. For a few minutes he actually didn't look at her.

Annie watched the ball, saying that she'd had a good day, a very good day.

He seemed awfully intent on aiming the ball and letting it rebound to him. Then it fell in a way he didn't expect, and he scrambled to retrieve it, and in his clumsiness, and his surprise that he was clumsy, he lost a bit of his cool.

"What happened?" he asked.

She stopped the ball with her platformed foot, and he in turn lifted her foot to his leg. He ignored the ball and it rolled slowly around the floor. She didn't pause or act surprised or anything when he took off her shoe and began to massage her foot. With his hand, he asked for the other one, and then she had two feet perched on his lap while he kneaded her toes and she told him about her day.

She looked nothing at all like the frightened person who'd asked me what to do a few weeks before. She smiled easily and played along when he teased her about how terrible it must have been when the teacher asked her to explain the assignment she hadn't read.

"I was so embarrassed," she said, but only with a little defensiveness--not the usual full-fledged devotion to disaster that she had when she talked to me.

Of course, sitting there caused enough embarrassment for me, knowing too much, feeling their early affection for each other, but I could not think of a way out.

"Well, I know that you will get your homework done tonight," he said to her.

"Maybe. I work tonight. Waiting tables. Some bookkeeping for Honor here's mother."

"Work and homework? How will you survive?"

She'd fallen unreluctantly into the role of princess here in this convenience store backroom. He was much more handsome, weaving his fingers around her feet as he did

now, than he'd seemed waiting to ring up gas and tobacco. He put her feet back on the floor and took her hand and began to draw along the barbed-wire tattoos, and then brushed them with one finger, as if he were trying to erase them. I don't know that this wasn't any worse for me than if they'd begun to make out right in front of me.

Away from that counter, Carlos stood only as tall as Annie, but because of the way he held his shoulders back, his whole body balanced from that invisible wire, until he walked near her, this was hard to tell. He'd walked differently than the men or boys I'd seen ever--with a certain grace, although that made his walk sound girlish, and it was not girlish. His walk was deliberate, and balanced, and you knew in watching one step that he could, and would, dance. He had close-cropped black hair, and in his serious eyes in his somber, narrow features, you might predict more anger until he spoke, and then you might hear only the slightest trace of sadness.

Annie began to slip on her shoes and test them out, balancing her feet on her heels.

"Honor, you had a better day than Annie?"

"Yeah, it was alright."

"She got an A on her algebra quiz," Annie spoke up for me.

"Barely," I said.

"Barely A is still an A. Right?"

"Yeah."

"Annie told me you were trying hard in that class."

"I do. Well, it's hard for me. I don't get it a lot. When I get it, it seems like it's time to move on to the next thing." The longer I tried to make sense, the less I did. And I

knew of course, that he was making conversation, that neither of them right then cared how I did in algebra. I would have left, if I had not worried that Annie would never make it to the job.

"I didn't do very well in algebra. Now geometry, that's another thing. Ask me anything about that--ask me what a rhombus is."

"What's a rhombus?" Annie asked.

"Some kind of shape, I don't know. But I was good at it." He smiled at both of us, shyly almost.

"You graduated from here?" I asked, but immediately regretted the suggestion that it was hard to believe he'd finished school and then worked at a convenience store.

"I have my diploma," he said.

"You should go to college," I said, surprising all of us.

"I should go to college." He tipped back, and spread his arms against the wall, and then dropped them. More of that sadness crossed his face. "That I tried. A little bit. A long time ago."

Myself, I knew when to drop a subject. He began arranging our bottles on a plywood shelf, like one might for a decoration or picture. Annie drained her drink, and I reminded her that we needed to get to work ourselves.

On our way up the street, Annie told me --never saying right out that she was explaining why he didn't go to college--that he wanted to paint. He used to paint, she said, and some teacher thought his work meant something, but he told her things got really messed up with that. The teacher got into trouble with the school board.

"Do you think he had an affair with her?" I asked. Our latest art teacher arrived three years back, making it about the time Carlos would have been in school.

"No," she gasped. She reconsidered. "Well, maybe."

ANNIE told me something new about Carlos nearly every day after that, and I guess I was to assume she saw him more. She stopped asking me what she should do--would he be dangerous--and she started telling me I needed to get out more, stop working so much, find someone to love myself. She was always one for advice.

Little by little, as she allowed them to, other students wanted to sit by us in class, at lunch, to do science and other group projects with us. Maybe she had to punish them for ignoring her so long. Sometimes I went to games on Friday nights, but Annie, although she sometimes promised that she would, never did. Still, the others didn't stop asking if we'd go to the parties afterwards. She'd worked around Will's rule about the music; she'd bring me tapes her friends sent from Colorado, and she'd listen to them at work when she did the books, or sometimes, in our apartment when no one but my brothers were home. My mom pretended she didn't know her rules.

Church still posed somewhat of a challenge for her. Now, freed up somehow, she'd question Miss Houdyshell and argue with Tiffany and Matt and Tim, who not even Miss Houdyshell would bother questioning on their knowledge. Lots of times, when I'd hear her approach the big off-limits subjects for her, such as whether every word of the Bible was the truth, which would lead to some talk of evolution or gay people, I'd say, "I think what Annie means is. . ." but more and more she spoke for herself here. I know at least once she changed into a short-short skirt in the church bathroom before going to

class, counting on Will not to notice, and maybe she did more often than that. Tiff, anymore, rolled her eyes as soon as Annie started talking, but even when Annie's questions were especially good--and her follow-up questions even better--Tiff and her crew had fallen into easy dismissals. Annie didn't seem to notice these. Or that Tiff thought none of it mattered since Annie would go to hell anyway. Privately, she still gave me mini-sermons, sometimes funny, on her smoking breaks. And, forgiving as her fascination with Carlos made her, she still lived in a different world, part music, part Denver, part whatever else.

One day she said to me: "In the night I miss Denver. Not my mom so much, not yet anyway, but some friends. The lights at night. The mountains. I never was much of a skiier--you know, who has the money?-- but it's nice to know that snow is coming down while we all sleep."

"I'll bet it's hard being away from everybody you know," I offered.

"My old friends send letters, some of them. Skye and Jenna sent "Greetings from the Mile-High City" postcards. Get it? That's what they're like." I knew all about it, how Skye sent shoe boxes with different souvenirs in them: notes from other kids in her classes; restaurant matchbooks; homemade cassette tapes; fliers listing bands playing at our clubs; Polaroids of people she knew at parties, which she taped around her room. "Makes my day every time they send some, but it's never the same. It's not like spending lunch smoking in somebody's car. Once I called Skye, and Deirdre agreed to say she'd called Denver, and Skye told me everything she'd forgotten to write."

I knew of her packages and letters and all of her friends. "I'd do anything for them. That's the way I am about people," she would say, and I wondered if she had such protective loyalty for me.

With Will it was a little different. Things stayed tense, only Will didn't notice. A month had passed, and he had not returned her music privileges, the CDs or her guitar, but she didn't complain. True, she had found plenty of ways to get around the rules. Even at her house, she'd borrowed a radio from Carlos and we played that softly while we talked into the night, and on her breaks at work she made up song lyrics she said she would set to music later.

But for a girl who loved to make a point, she took it easy on Will for a while. In a way, I'd expected her not to stay at all, to pack up and move back home or wherever by then, but she stayed on. Carlos did it, I'd think, but then at times it looked as if she'd begun to believe something about the house she lived in that she hadn't before--as if she were, just a tiny portion of her really was, the rich girl who paraded up the staircase and made entrances when she came down. If Will and Deirdre didn't play their parts so well, she'd envision what she wanted to about what they did.

One Tuesday night we ate dinner over at the big white house, so that we could spend a lot of time studying for a U.S. history test scheduled for Wednesday. We would study, and for once the subject came easily to me and less so to Annie. But this was only because she had to stop and consider the implications of every fact and interpretation she read. That wasn't fair, was it? Shouldn't something be done about that, still? Can you believe these people call themselves Americans?

We would also take plenty of study breaks, more break than studying usually. Even before we took a break to eat dinner, we drifted into a conversation break. And then, "Okay, but how did Manifest Destiny come about?" I'd ask in response to her question about whether I planned to go to KU and be with Josh, because it did no good to try to wind up the conversation and gently go back to the subject at hand. Deirdre acted more interested in our little school problems than usual, finally walking in to the den and asking us brightly, "Does anything sound especially good to you two? I'm thinking just something light. I'm not that hungry. How about you?"

"How about some green chile?" Annie asked.

"I don't know how to make that," Deirdre said. "But we could do some tacos or something."

"I'm so hungry for green chile. You could call my mom and get a recipe for it."

Instead of suggesting why this idea didn't work for her, Deirdre only responded breezily: "I bet it takes too long. We've got to do something quick here. But you go ahead and have her send it, and we'll make it sometime. I'm thinking shrimp?"

Whatever her question, it fell unclearly into the den.

She said, "I'll run over to Dillon's and see if they have any. Tom's won't, I don't think."

In the few minutes she was gone, we still didn't get many history years covered.

"Why is she in such a good mood?" I asked.

Annie shrugged. "She's been like that for a while. She didn't seem all that excited to me before about Will's congress stuff, but now for some reason she's on her tippy-toes about it."

Just from hanging around from time to time, I knew the latest business of the household involved Will's registering with the election commission and talking to more state party people and some event coming up that Will was pulling off. He'd convinced the church--or maybe he and some others had convinced the church--to help sponsor Randy Graves, this supposedly famous ex-pro football player to come to speak in the high school lyceum about family values. He was a friend of Will's from school. People from miles around would be there, or anyway my parents were counting on this as they made their orders for the restaurant, and Will and our minister and some Christian singing acts from out of town would come in.

When Deirdre came home and started dinner, we could actually hear her humming in the other room. My mother hummed; my grandmother hummed. But Deirdre humming sounded some alarm. She hit a bad note and Annie grimaced, pulling the muscles below her mouth, but she did so out of her injured ears and not ridicule.

Will banged in from the garage, brushing his hair back roughly, fingers spread, and asking what she was cooking. Annie and I could hardly be expected to study as they began their chatter. Together they sounded chirpier than usual; for Will to talk at all when he first arrived home seemed odd. Who had to see him at the clinic today for what tragedy, what scheduling conflict led to anything. I had visited plenty of kids after school over the years, and instintinctively my breath got shallower and my hearing more fine-tuned as everyone converged before the evening began. A football coach might yell at his wife; a woman might swipe at the kids, and always the high-pitch of the worried child, the exhausted siblings, only created more havoc. So here after a few moments -- when Deirdre actually laughed--my body relaxed. Until Annie attempted to interrupt--

"Mr. Gale wore the same pants for the second week in a row." Deirdre laughed again; Will came in and ignored Annie, as if he could not responsibly take part in this. Annie stared at him. She wanted more than just her radio and guitar and CDs back, no matter what she said: She wanted him to notice her. "Will, they're these red sweatpants. It's not like you can miss them." Will still didn't look up. "Maybe he's washing them every night."

The phone rang, and Deirdre answered with her fake-hello voice.

"It's for you, Will. The reverend."

We all got quiet, and we all listened. The minister never called anyone out of the blue, like friends call friends. This suddenly measured Will's importance. My parents had gone to church all their lives--even church camp together--but in all the years, sometimes even tough years, he had never just called us out of the blue. Will began talking first of posters and then about hotel arrangements--the rally. Then we could hear only a low grumbling and sputtering; they'd reached some impasse.

This wasn't just about you, Will told him. This isn't just about the church. It's about this country. I know you're concerned about things. I know this would be a good time to address certain questions.

You have to understand, he said. This is about taking things to a larger audience. You'll get your turn. You're just going to have to let me go over this. We're not going to change anything drastic, Joel. Then he shouted. You want to make this yours? Then you put something together. No, I'm asking. Go ahead. We're trying to do something for this community. It sounds to me like you're trying to run the show. I didn't say that.

Fine, I can get you right off the program. The program's haven't gone out to the printer, you know. Look, I can't talk any longer. I've got things to do.

He hung up, and spun the cell phone across the kitchen island as if he were skimming a rock on a pond.

When he came to the table, which Deirdre had filled with perfectly matched casual plates and canvassy napkins, he winked at me. "Just a little friendly persuasion."

He sat down, and without looking at anyone, said, "Tom and I have done all the work and now Joel wants to step in and call it his." Then he turned to me. "It's you and families like yours that should worry about Joel, to be frank."

"What?" I asked. "Why should we worry?" Because the way he said it made me think catastrophe was imminent. Had the minister said something about us? And it made me wonder about who families like mine were.

He bowed his head and waved away the question. "Just be careful, is all."

We were well into our dinner before it struck me somehow that he was lying. Reverend Lemons had said nothing about our family that should concern me.

But Annie didn't see that. She worked up every effort to be of help to Will.

"I don't see how he could have a problem, Will. You've been working on getting Randy here longer than anyone."

Will only nodded. He lacked a need for her support.

I thought of the old minister, who had not run into these kinds of things. Reverend Bridges did not like to talk politics, but he didn't avoid things that made people mad. But he began to tire frequently, and my dad said the place ran on automatic pilot. Then people finally suggested he retire, and he seemed grateful to do so. All this newer

stuff, the talk about mothers staying home with their children and the firm preaching against being a homosexual or the organization of a prayer group against abortion--well, that came after Reverend Bridges. Up until now, I felt sure Reverand Leamons brought it with him from Oklahoma.

Annie kept telling Will and Deirdre about our small day at the high school. We forgive everyone, even ourselves, a little here and there for the imperfections of beings on the planet, but Will somehow always earned more than the average forgiveness. And people knew--my mother knew, my father knew--but whatever he did (and I think it was his concern with everyone's good opinion of him) made up for it.

But maybe her close attention worked, because apart from her lack of music privileges, Will loosened up. He seemed glad when she told him later that week that we were going to a party Friday. He asked if my mom had okayed it, and when I assured him she had, he nodded: That was enough. We set out for a party at Kendall and Craig's, two brothers, who, as my mother described them, were full of piss and vinegar, and she didn't know the half of it. I had worked for several weeks to talk Annie into going after the game. She didn't want to miss an evening with Carlos, but he had to work for a long time anyway that night.

The music blared. Annie started dancing with Kendall the minute we walked in. Kendall's surprise did not outweigh his pride that she'd walked up to him and started rippling her arms in the air. Luckily, Kendall was not dating anyone, or the girls lingering around would not have forgiven her. In the kitchen, a friend I'd known since kindergarten grabbed two beers out of the fridge. She handed me one. "To us." I let her

open the bottle; she handed it to me, and I took a sip. I saw Josh walk in; he waved: home for the weekend.

Likely nobody from outside Prairie Valley would have named the party the most exciting on earth, but for once I felt my age. Sitting on a formica and chrome table in the kitchen, I drank the beer and laughed whenever someone said something silly or stupid enough. Maybe because they were drinking, or I was laughing, a couple different guys at different times came over, stood close, and began talking. The second of them, Josh, could say hello and make me blush for as long as I could remember, and he kept talking and talking to me. He acted entertained, even though nothing I said sounded all that hilarious to me. For so long I'd just thought work and school and church would keep me busy until after graduation--in college some guy would be there, surely, or more. But these days, hearing Annie talk about the way she dressed in certain clothes on certain days if she knew she'd see Carlos, or hearing her talk about what he'd said about this or what he'd said about that-- well, looking into Josh's brown eyes under his shaggy brown haircut, admitting to myself that I wanted that same inspiration finally came easily. You should dress this way, or you should do this, my mother or Annie would say to me often, but no one ever mentioned what to do to keep him standing there one more second.

Somehow we ended up outside, sitting on the front porch in the near dark. A few others were there, where the night was a little quieter, and then Annie joined us too.

Only Annie and I would have known that it was Carlos' junker car driving by. He lurched the car back in reverse, and slowed and then stopped, and waved her over.

"Who's that?" Brian asked while we watched Annie half run to the car. But I didn't answer, and no one else did either.

Carlos got out, and they talked and talked, and maybe they discussed whether she should go with him or not, or whether he should come in and cross those lines, the invisible ones he would have to cross. A half dozen of us watched from the porch. Then she got in the car with him, and drove off into the cold October night. I remember them leaving, Carlos' car sputtering up the hill, and the tug on my hand: Josh leading me to his car sometime after that. He told me he would take me home, and he did, but for a long time on Main Street we kissed, we made out, in his ancient Honda. Only afterwards, when he drove me home, did I allow myself to wonder how much anger hid in people I knew about people like Carlos, people not like themselves.

ANNIE KNEW WHY she would not mention Carlos to Will. When I asked once, she looked at me as if I were out of my mind. His age, his background--even the idea of Will's bringing Annie under control--all added up to bad news to give him. Or maybe she just knew to keep everything in her life separate. You didn't share certain things with the adults around you. It never occurred to her. Even though she snapped back at Will less now in person, and even though she tried all sorts of nice ways to show him how great she could be, she still came to me and griped about his and Deirdre's daily offenses. When he mentioned that he had heard from one of her teachers that she sang well, she beamed, laughed, delighted in the attention. He then suggested that she play a song for his big old rally. She would get her CDs back then? Yes, and he'd give her some religious tapes; Carolyn from church could help with that. She told him she'd think about it. He wanted her to play the rally--she saw that he thought this would make him look good. And she would make him pay.

ONE DAY I had to take my little brother Nolan to the clinic; he needed to take his physical for junior high basketball and Mom said she was tied up with vendors. My brother hardly said a word, so embarrassed was he to be seen with me We were waiting in the room, and old folks I knew and mothers with young children already had glazed eyes from boredom when we arrived, and then more people came in even though the nurse had called few names. It looked more like it usually did in the summer, with that season's sprained ankles and spider bites. Then, instead of the nurse, Will himself came out, and stretched out his arms to everyone, and they smiled. "We'll get you all in here and fixed up. Everyone take it easy, and help yourself to the suckers."

"Hey, Honor," he said to me, and the mothers turned to me and wondered how I might deserve this. There was this sense of relief--these were good hands we were leaving my brother in--but also something creepy about it. On the job, he wasn't like at home. He was *nice.* He cared.

The nurse called in my brother. I flipped through an old magazine. Then Will called me back.

"I need you to tell your parents something, Honor," he said. "Paul here has an irregular heart rhythm. No need to panic. Don't panic. This happens in lots of kids this age, and doesn't mean anything. We just want to keep an eye on it, okay? Can you tell your parents it's nothing to worry about?"

I nodded, certain I had the correct, important message in mind.

Then Will stepped over to his counter and placed his hand on the empty surface. "Barbara?"

She didn't hear him, and he yelled her name. Barbara came running quickly, with a helpless look on her face.

"Where's Corey's chart?"

"I . . took it out. I thought you were done."

"I was not done," he said, loudly, startling all of us. "When I'm out of the room, then I'm finished with a patient. Jesus Christ. Get that through your thick skull."

She left and returned and dropped the retrieved file on the floor. Papers fell out, and then she picked them up and handed them to him.

She left, and so did he, but in a second or two he came back into the room and shut the door. He smiled the smile that didn't match anything. "Honor, hey, I apologized to her, and I'm going to apologize to you guys now. You didn't need to see that I know. It's just, with everything going on today, and the rally and everything, I'm afraid I just can't be as patient with Barbara as I usually am. I've got one million things on my mind. But look, I've told her I'm sorry. So you guys just pretend you never saw that."

As we walked back to the restaurant, I explained it all to my brother, and the more I explained, the more I believed what I said about the doctor's pressures and how he probably couldn't hire anyone good. Disloyally, the thought that Annie's presence had him on edge crossed my mind. But now instead of thinking he could act so nicely when he wasn't at home, I worried that Annie hadn't told me he'd been like this at home, or that Annie didn't know what was coming.

I knew that Annie wanted to please Will. Whether she wanted all of her old privileges and more, or if she wanted him to care about her as he cared about some things I couldn't say. She accepted the religious tapes he'd had the church woman hand her.

She agreed without so much as a smart remark to go to the fall youth trip, a hayrack ride to a corn maze with the youth group. Fully in the spirit, on the way there, she asked Tiff if she wanted her to trim up her hair, but Tiff visibly shuttered. (Just because she had reached some layer of respectability didn't mean certain people like Tiff thought they wanted to hang out with her.)

None of us had expected it to turn so chilly so fast; we'd worn jackets when we should have worn coats, and darted into the corn thinking it could protect us from the wind. You could only see the Jonah's whale shape of the corn from above or from the map the owners handed out, so all we saw standing were seven-foot high stalks of corn, and we walked through them on muddy paths. Annie decided to run ahead, turning it in to her usual race. I ended up walking with Tiff, listening to her try to ask polite questions about Annie. When do you think she's going back to Colorado? Did she get in trouble or something, is that why she's here? Do you think she ought to wear that yin-yang ring? We wandered through the rows, following the signs that referred to different Bible passages from the whale story. But when we reached the Ninevah sign, we couldn't see Annie. She wasn't waiting for us. It grew darker; we were the last ones out; and finally I wandered back in. I heard her singing--that Dave Matthews Band song, "Runaround"--softly, for her. Her voice, dipping and purring, sounded happy enough, but when she saw me, and she knew even in the dark it was me because I talked to her, she cringed and snarled at me: "Why did you just leave me here? Why did you walk off like that?"

It didn't matter that she'd walked ahead and tried to jump in and scare us. She was mad. She told me all the things that could have happened to her. She almost cried. She complained that I wasn't loyal. Her friends in Denver were loyal. She pouted while

we sat around the campfire, except when she challenged Dave and Sandy, the college-age leaders, on their interpretations of the Christian life.

THE NEXT DAY she took me to see Carlos. I think she wanted me to see loyal, and I think she wanted me to see love. She took me the back way to his house, and we wandered through alleys and a few vacant lots in the light left after the sun goes down. The short cut, she said, and we scrambled under low-lying trees and over one fence.

She stopped us outside the house, a small one-story with a patchy orange couch on the porch. She turned to me and smiled.

"This is the best part." She took a deep breath. "The heart's welcome. Knowing they want to see me in there."

Carlos' father opened the door.

"Hola," Annie said sweetly.

He nodded sharply and grinned, but didn't say anything. He wore jeans and a long-sleeved shirt, and showed us the indoor couch, which did not seem much less dilapidated than the one outside. We took a seat. His father called Carlos--we could hear his name and then something else. We heard Carlos shout from his room.

A Spanish soap opera played on the television. His father walked back into the living room and, holding up two pop cans, offered us something to drink. I could smell cumin, I thought, and beef, but mostly it smelled *male*--some absence of flowers, some priority of jobs done rather than jobs done elaborately.

"Gracias!" Annie said, and took them for us.

Carlos walked in, his solidly paced dance, and leaned over and kissed Annie. He watched the television with us blankly and then said, "Raquel does not want Julian to leave." Annie laughed.

If she indeed wanted me to see love and loyalty, she and Carlos did a good job. They spoke in English, but she also, through Carlos' translation, spoke to his father, who smiled and nodded, a lot.

Once when we were talking about his paintings, I asked if he'd ever been over to Annie's house, and seen the one on the wall in the living room. I heard my mistake as soon as I spoke it, and it wasn't that Annie liked a painting I made fun of.

"I never go to her house," he said.

"It's not that I never asked him to," Annie said quickly. "When Will's not there or anything."

"I know her uncle," he said, and left it at that.

"It wouldn't hurt anything," I defended something--not her uncle so much as people in town-- weakly.

"He got that art teacher fired. She was only helping me try to get scholarships. Other kids got jealous, I think."

Nothing he said surprised Annie, but she looked at me as if this were proof. Of something.

We watched television some more, and then Carlos disappeared back into his room and returned with a guitar.

"You want to play something, Annie?"

"No," she said. She looked embarrassed.

She had never mentioned that she'd solved her guitar problem this way. Between radios here and there and a guitar and her own voice, she'd covered about every space Will had tried to leave her.

"Oh?" he pleaded. "One song?"

She played, and she sang. More shyly at first than I've ever seen her, and even as her confidence picked up, she couldn't look at Carlos.

"She's going to be a star," Carlos told me afterward, applauding.

"Probably, yes," she said. "And I won't ever invite Will to any of my concerts."

"You should remember he's been good to you, though," Carlos said.

"Oh--sure, by letting me stay at his precious house?"

"He took you in. You should be grateful, even if he isn't nice about it. You have a roof, don't you?"

"You're too forgiving of him."

"Annie," Carlos said. "You are too much. You won't need him much longer. You are more than his niece, more than your mother's daughter. You are just taking him too seriously right now."

The next day, she told Will she would not play at his rally. He said that she would. She said that she wouldn't if hell froze over.

"What are you going to do?" I asked her at work.

"Well, I'm not going to play. That's for dang sure."

ONE FRIDAY EVENING, when I was working at the cafe and she was not, Annie came running in again, eyes wide, and I knew that good news or bad, it would be an emergency for her. "Honor, you've gotta get off work," she said.

I didn't look at her, but nodded. "Yeah. What's up this time?"

"My brother's in town. Zack. Come out with us. You've gotta come meet him. Ask your mom to let you off work."

I looked around, back at the kitchen, where my mom emerged, carrying out an armload of plates. She caught my eye, saw Annie, and I'm sure that she was thinking: Whatever it is, no.

I pushed a glass to fill it with ice. "I'll be off at nine," I said. I'll come over then."

"But Honor! He'll take us into Wichita."

"It's just an hour and fifteen minutes, Annie. Either wait or whatever, but I'm supposed to close tonight."

"We'll wait, but he's not going to be happy about it."

I shrugged.

So after work, Dad let me drive the Impala over to Will's house. I don't think Will liked having it in his driveway, but by then, this idea pleased me.

I might have expected Zack to be as hyper as Annie was, but he was not. She was all wound up, happy to lead me in. We were the only ones there, but Annie explained Deirdre had fixed a tator tot casserole for them and some brownies before she left. Zack and Annie made fun of the tator tots for a while, and sat down to eat in a way Deirdre would have hated: no placemats, no glasses for our Cokes.

"Tator tots," Zack said. "Not tator nuggets or tator pillows or tator rounds. How do you suppose they decided on tots?"

"Zack's a chef," Annie explained, and I wondered if fancy food had better names. "And a guitar player. My friend Honor here, she and her mom run a restaurant."

"Oh yeah?"

"Just a cafe, you know. Nothing gourmet," I said.

"It's a tough business," he sympathized, and I imagined that it was for him.

"What are you doing in Prairie Valley?" I asked.

"Driving through. On my way up to Maine from Arizona, and thought I'd stop in and see if Will had killed Annie yet."

This delighted her. She looked at me. "Zack hates Will!"

"I don't hate him. We just have a different set of values."

"Why are you going to a cold place for the winter?"

He laughed this big laugh and said, "I always am being contrary."

Anyone could see that. Zack was tall and lanky, with shoulder-length brown hair he didn't comb much. His eyes were exactly like Annie's--not in color, but in the way they shifted from cynicism to amusement minute by minute. His plaid shirt hung over a T-shirt I couldn't read, and his jeans were ripped, but he had new canvas sneakers on. He slouched down in the chair and didn't look at us all that much.

After we finished eating our tator tot casserole, Annie sat out the pan of brownies and took a knife and cut everyone a square.

"Tell about how you survived that week stuck in a snowdrift."

"Tell about the time you fought the bear," he mimicked her, and laughed. "I had my candy bars."

"He was on the news and everything," Annie said. "Tell about how you played guitar until you didn't have the energy."

"That I did," he said. "I was delirious."

"It was so cool. I don't think I could have survived it."

Zack cut himself a second brownie. "Yeah, you would have. Surviving's not the problem. Getting someone to find you is."

I watched Annie resist more of the brownies--glancing down at them every now and then, and then turning away.

"Did you guys sing together when you were little?" I asked.

"Uh, no," he said. "Nobody did anything fun when we were little. Anyway, she's really into a different music thing than I am."

"Not really," she said, hurt somehow. "We were just different in ages for so long."

"Annie's got a gift," Zack said, as if he hadn't wanted to admit it, but needed to spill this secret. "She didn't need to get mixed up with any of my bar bands, you know."

For once she couldn't say anything, but her face lit up so that I thought she'd hug the guy. She looked down. Then, oddly, she cleared her face of all that delight. She stopped resisting and cut herself another brownie, and I did the same. This was how she looked with her real circle, how she would have been with any of her Colorado friends, and nothing would have changed.

"You should take me with you," she told him. "I could get a job in Maine, I'm sure. And then raise some money, get to Nashville. You could play on my first CD." In her voice, a mix of longing and sense--we all, even Annie, knew, he would do no such thing. "Don't make me stay here with Will in this stinkin' hog town."

He shook his head. "You've gotta live your own life. . . ."

She recovered. "Well, who wants to stay with such a slob anyway?" She threw her wadded up napkin at him, and he volleyed it back.

Zack changed the subject--asked her about school, and pretty soon she was telling him funny stories, and I was even telling some, surprised in the telling at how much I had begun to see Prairie Valley like Annie did, in a way. We kept taking one more small piece of brownies until the pan was empty, and then Zack even took a knife and cleaned off all the sticky part at the bottom of the pan. We laughed, caught up in the thrill of an audience who understood how strange things were for us.

"Well, gotta go," Zack said suddenly, around midnight.

"Stay here," Annie said. "You can't go driving this late."

"No, I was planning to get to Kansas City by morning. I've got a friend there I need to see."

Annie watched him prepare to leave, gathering his coat and some Cokes from the fridge, and she came up with some alternative plans that would work out for him. He could stay a few days, or even longer, save up some money here. They could get their own place. He would have none of it.

"You write me then, and give me a call," she said, as he walked out. Again, we all knew he wouldn't. But he said, "Right," and then gave the top of her head a wave of his hand. No hugs for them.

After he left, she talked about all the good times they'd had together as children, talked about how she was sure they'd eventually meet up in Nashville, and about her Colorado friends and me and how we'd all live in this big house. I guess she thought we'd all be working for her or something, but that didn't strike me as being as sad as her insistence that she had this family of people who would instantly get together when the opportunity arrived.

FOR THE NEXT week or so, I didn't see Will. Even when I went over, he was gone: to do political things or to make his rounds at the hospital. And he hadn't been in the restaurant for weeks. Then one afternoon I was at the bank, holding the zippered plastic bag of money for deposit, and everyone heard a crash from outside. Everyone looked out the window. He'd screwed up, this time, in public. He'd hit a car while driving down Main, and it belonged to the boyfriend of Barbara, his nurse. He ran into the bank to withdraw cash on the spot for the waiting boyfriend. He looked around and made cheesy apologies. I know he was angry underneath that crazy little smile of his, the one that didn't match what he was saying Barbara's boyfriend must have too, but he pretended not to notice. A man like that, he could afford to pay cash and not even think about it. Had I been asleep all my life, or had the campaign or something else begun to unnerve him?

If I'd been ambivalent before, for sure I didn't want to go to his stupid Rally for the Family then. I'd never been to such a thing in my life, but a picture began to form of what was in store. He would be on stage, making sure people saw him with all these famous or semi-famous Christian people. He would not have to limit himself to one church or one town even: We'd all witness what a great guy he was. The event had grown to such proportions that they'd moved it to Wichita, and a senator planned to speak too. That would put Will right next to someone who already did the job. He'd look shiny and smart.

I often wondered where all that came from, whether any of it was real. His mom had told us about his winning sixth-grade essay, the one about how real people who work hard make this country great or something, and maybe that was it. Maybe he'd thought a lot about the U.S.A., and this was how it turned out, or maybe --and I leaned towards this--maybe that award made him want to win more.

By the week of the rally, Annie had changed her mind again, which I expected. She would sing a song on stage. I don't think she realized she'd be singing as Will's niece, being Will's family, covering up how his family was not only grown but not in existence truly. Possibly, though, she knew all this, and didn't care. She didn't say. She only talked about how she would be grateful, for once, to wake up to music when he returned that clock radio. Will had asked me to lead the Pledge of Allegiance and I agreed. Later I would ask myself: Who made me? My parents? Will? Me thinking it would help Annie? I couldn't be so sure anymore that he found me so upstanding; maybe he wanted Annie to see that deep down, I was.

People turned out as if the President himself had come to town; the license plates on the cars showed cars from counties all over. The senator, governor and a few state representatives came and sat on folding chairs on the platform. News cameras showed up and taped us all. Several of my classmates, including Tiffany, of course, gave their heartfelt testimonies for the crowd--how they'd struggled and finally turned their problems over to the Lord, and everything got easier for them.

Annie would sing "Awesome God," the first verses, and then would lead the crowd in the chorus. Will had it printed on the program.

But if he'd asked, I could have told him he shouldn't plan on her to go by the program, and she didn't. Again, I worried that she was not up to the task of performing as I watched her--a tiny girl--walk up to the mic with her guitar. I waited for the song. Of course she didn't follow the plan. She sang not something wild, but something old: "Will the Circle Be Unbroken."

Now it would be years before I fully appreciated this. It had religion in it, it had Nashville in it. It had old-time religion with real sadness in it--you don't find that so much in this modern stuff. And it had Annie in it.

And she sang it well, and she had the crowd, because this is not what they expected, not at all. She looked pretty singing it, and honest. She did not raise her hands in the air and have people watch her pray and praise. It might not have been what people came for, but it pleased them anyway.

Which did not please Will. We stood in the wings of the theatre and I watched him stare at her as she waved at the crowd's applause and walked off the stage. She

smiled right up until she practically bumped into him, and I saw in his face all that bubbling anger and him holding on to that shaky smile.

"That's not what was on the program."

She shrugged. "It was Christian."

"We did not--*expect* this."

This made her smile, but she got it under control. She would not lose those priveleges this late in the game. "Sorry. I was just moved to sing it."

He could not argue with that. He turned away from her, and she strolled towards me, grinning.

Annie got a ride back from Wichita, but I stayed with Tiffany and rode back with her. At the reception later, I listened, not really wanting to, to Will and some of his friends. Someone mentioned his only possible contender so far, Sheila Wright. But she was too scrawny, someone said, and she's divorced. He laughed. No one would miss me, and I begged Tiffany to take me home, saying I felt ill, after hearing someone else chopped down in an instant.

I walked by the lake, like Annie would do under stress, and across the water I saw them, Annie and Carlos, walking hand in hand, her dance and his, and how it defined the water's edge. I wanted to warn them. I wanted to say, Look out, you're right, Annie. And you too, Carlos. Those people at the lyceum were after love, hunting it down. But maybe Carlos and Annie, maybe they understood more than I did.

Chapter Ten

Through the Thanksgiving and Christmas school vacations, Annie's relationship with Carlos has only intensified, and Honor witnesses in the community a more serious hatred towards the outsiders of the town than she'd let herself see before. One night Annie insists that the three go to a party (Carlos has never before joined them when classmates were around). The conflicts between town members, conflicts usually left unspoken, surface, and in the brief but pivotal action that follows, Carlos is shot. Echoing Creon in "Antigone," Will refuses to allow Annie to attend Carlos' funeral.

Chapter Ten

Will drove us back to their place. He didn't even ask if I wanted to go home, so I didn't say anything. He might have been angry if he even realized I rode along. Deirdre was up, making coffee, and she looked at us with curiosity, for once. She offered us some when we arrived, a crazy thing at midnight, but I took the mug she handed to me while Annie showered upstairs. Then she asked if I wanted a sandwich, of course I did, she'd make me one in no time. She'd left all the sandwich stuff on the counter, maybe from dinner, maybe from the moment Will first got the call about the party. I shrugged, and took a cheese sandwich, too, assuming this was her idea of comfort. We entered a strange time, where nothing needs to be done and yet you stay convinced that you must be fully alert for the next emergency. Will explained, probably picking up from a conversation they'd had before he drove to the farm, that a kid named Carlos had died. She looked like she was about to say something to him, and then looked at me and bowed her head. She knew, then, that Annie's boyfriend had died--and she wouldn't tell. Their doorbell--a a familiar but unnameable song--rang, and we could hear Will in the foyer talking to the sheriff again. Will came in and stood there and told me the sheriff wanted us to answer some questions, separately. In the white-carpetted living room, the guy nearly stood on his tiptoes with excitement as he asked me questions. While he didn't seem happy, clearly a murder after nights of nothing whatsoever called on all of his abilities. He told me Mark had been arrested, but he need to have all the facts.

He asked me what I saw, and I told him, alarmed a little when he stopped me and said, "This Carlos. Is this the dead Mexican kid?" As if that described him at all. And as if this resembled sounding professional.

Annie came down the stairs in her robe and with her wet hair stringy. I wanted to cry, because for a second it looked like she'd forgotten, like she'd put it all out of her mind, and I knew that any minute now it would all pop back into her head. Annie took her turn talking to the sheriff, and I could hear her sobbing and talking. When he left, she strolled into the den, tearless. She lit a cigarette right in front of them, and neither Will nor Deirdre said anything.

"He sure thinks he's the king of the county," she said.

Deirdre and I laughed small laughs, for her benefit. We stopped, our first release in hours, and Will said without looking at us, "He's got a job to do, that's all."

"Did he talk to Carlos' dad?" Annie asked. "Somebody will have to. I better anyway. Even if somebody has talked to him, I better."

"You don't know any Spanish," I reminded her.

"Mike will track down someone who can tell him," Will said.

"Well, still," Annie disagreed, but no one argued with her.

"What I want to know is, what was this guy doing at the party in the first place?" Will asked. He knew, but he didn't want to know. He'd heard the rumors, and now, preparing for Main Street, he wanted someone to explain differently.

Annie stared at him, contemptuous that he would question her.

"He died," she said.

"He had a gun," Will said, as if everyone knew this, and as if she were trying to deny it.

"Maybe it was because he had a feeling, some kind of premonition about people like this asshole who killed him for no reason." Always before, when Annie annoyed him, it had seemed unintentional. You didn't know if she really didn't mean anything by it, or if she was just being careless. She blew a thick tunnel of smoke his way.

Will shook his head, but he didn't argue with her. In a way, that made it worse. Like he was saying she just couldn't understand how she'd been playing with fire again. Anyway, it didn't matter whether he argued or not, because in a second, tears began falling down her face, as if it had just hit her that she wouldn't be able to meet him at the end of her nightly journeys anymore. She covered her face, though, with her hands. Deirdre, who I thought would do something, at least offer her cookies or something, looked away, and so did Will.

"You want to go upstairs?" I asked, thinking these were not the kind of people you wanted to mourn with.

She nodded vigorously.

Before, sleeping over, I'd been uncomfortable here and there, but now I hated them as much as Annie might on the wrong day. Not even this would shake them out of their worlds. Eventually I fell asleep, crashed out, fully dressed, on her bedroom floor, but I woke up with the unmistakeable feeling of nausea, and ran to the bathroom. It marked the first of many trips that night, and well into it, I figured out something had been wrong with Deirdre's mayonnaise. Some things you can't leave out for hours. But worse, while I ran into one bathroom to throw up, I heard Annie in the other bathroom,

sobbing her little heart out. I couldn't take it, but on the other hand, half the time I fell asleep cold right next to the toilet. It surprised me that at first neither affliction brought either Will or Deirdre running in with whatever medicine this called for. Only once did Deirdre approach: She knocked on the door and asked me if she could give me a Coke. I took it, but it didn't help much. This was the worst night I'd ever spent trying to sleep, and has been since. Listening to her sobbing, all night long, my own unnecessary painful throwing up, and the dreams of blood and gunshots I had when I did rest. We were in no way ready to face that day. But we did. Annie had put on a sweater and skirt, the kind Deirdre purchased.

"I didn't want to wake you," she said when I opened by eyes. "You were barfing all night."

"Yeah."

"I'm going over to Carlos' father's. He's gotta know someone cares about this." You'd think she'd be upset, but she had a plan in mind. Plans for her fixed everything. "And I'll have to find out when the wedding is. *Funeral.*"

I nodded and fell back to sleep. Half the morning passed before I woke up, mouth so dry it had me in pain. Annie slammed through her door. She flipped angrily through a pile of CDs. I worried about what she might come up with to listen to.

"What is it?" I asked, and looked around for a Coke from the night before.

She started on another stack.

"His dad, Robert, Roberto whatever. He won't let me talk to him. Even to say Carlos was a wonderful guy or whatever."

"He just doesn't understand you, Annie." I sat up. "I've gotta have something to drink."

"Be right back." She came back with a gigantic glass of water and a cold diet Coke, both for me.

"It's like he thinks I killed his son or something."

"He doesn't think that, Annie." I guzzled the water. It must have been ten or eleven o'clock, maybe even later, and we hadn't heard from Deirdre or Will again.

"You didn't see him. He shooed me away. Have you ever been shooed away from somewhere? I swear it's like he thinks I shot him."

"He must be pretty upset. His number one kid died."

"So why be mad at me?"

But it made sense to me, even if it seemed too much to tell her. A strange girl who doesn't speak your language walks in, walks out with your son, and he never comes back. Why let that girl in?

"When's the funeral?" I asked.

This threw her. "I don't know. I mean, he couldn't tell me. Maybe Will knows."

"Probably not." Our paper only ran on Thursdays; it would be another week even before any notice appeared.

"Well, who's the funeral guy?" she asked.

"That's, um, Eddie Langhover." Alvie's niece had married him the summer before; he didn't think it sounded like a good idea at the time.

"We'll call him. You call him," she said.

She handed me the phone, and shuffled around until she found the phone book. She did not, for once, marvel at how small it was.

"Hi, I was wondering about the Maravilla funeral?" He didn't need to know my name. "Okay. Nothing at the funeral parlor? No church service, either?" I wrote down two p.m. on Annie's notebook, and then hung up. "They're just going to have a graveside service tomorrow."

"But he went to the Catholic church. Wouldn't they have a service there?"

I shrugged. "I don't know anything about funerals."

"Maybe it's the money," she said. "I could get some money if they need something bigger."

She looked around the room, as if in any drawer or under the bed she might have a thousand or two dollars stashed away. "How much do you think these things cost?" she asked.

"I don't know. You know, maybe they don't even want to have something extravagant. It's not like he probably knew a lot of people here."

She looked away; she would never say she might not be right about something, but she'd let it drift off until no one remembered it.

"Maybe if we take some food over there. At my granddad's funeral, they had lots of food."

I had only been to one funeral before in my life, and that was for my great-grandmother, an old, old lady. This was a meaner, more capricious Death--not the one I saw before, nearly welcome. Of course by then I'd known for years someone practically my age could die, but this was the first time ever I knew someone who had, and that loss

of breath returned in memory and seemed impossible. I thought about Mark, who had aimed the gun, and how even though he was jailed he had no opposite instrument as powerful as the gun, nothing that could make Carlos stand again.

"Are we supposed to send flowers?" she asked. "Call somebody about that."

So I called Mildred. She told me, after I ordered a giant bouquet without either her or me questioning how it would get paid for, that this was the first order for that funeral. And she said: "You aren't mixed up in this mess, are you Honor?" This I denied, and she accepted it easily. "You've just got a good heart. Well, that's okay by me."

Annie seemed to relax at our accomplishment of getting flowers to the gravesite.

"I wonder what it would be like," she said. "I mean, think, if I went to France, or something, and no one with me spoke French. Would they be able to get me buried, do you think?"

No doubt anything might be a problem, even if they got an interpreter. Someone Carlos knew wouldn't get there, or someone out there owed him money and wouldn't cough it up for the family. Someone who had seemed to survive so haphazardly, going from one mean and narrow situation in a country to a slight improvement in a completely different country--well, you don't expect them somehow to succomb to an early death.

Annie stretched out on the floor. She did not seemed relieved, or over her sadness at all, even though she had run out of tears. In fact, quiet, listless, her hurt stung so palpably I couldn't avoid it myself. For once, we both stayed quiet: no chatter, no music, no nothing.

I wanted to go home and sleep and be where there was work to do instead of wondering around in this sour dreamtime. My body ached from the night before, and I knew that at home someone would care. We heard the garage door creak open and slam: Will home for lunch.

"Girls?" Deirdre called up. As if we were on our way to ball practice; as if we were on our way to scouts.

We made our way downstairs.

"I know you aren't feeling well," Deirdre said to me. "I've got some soup here."

I don't know that it would have been as appealing if she'd cooked it instead of getting it out of a can.

"Will," Annie said, "I need the truck tomorrow."

They hadn't allowed her to drive since the night of the wreck, but she didn't approach the situation like anybody might have a problem with it.

"You won't be driving the truck for a while," Will said.

"What about the funeral? Are you going to take me?"

"You aren't going to the funeral."

It hadn't occurred to me he might forbid it, and it obviously hadn't occurred to Annie.

"Well, yes I am."

"No," he said and let out a small laugh. "You're not."

Annie gave him a look of utter scorn. I don't think she believed he would be a problem, even as she argued for the truck. Deirdre focussed heavily on her soup. Will continued to eat as if nothing had ripped the luncheon calm. We, Annie and I, still had

images of blood in our heads, I knew, and maybe he was used to that, but Annie and I, we'd never be the same. A lot of ways to tell him this circulated through my mind, but nothing settled.

"Will," Annie pleaded now, "It's Carlos." Tears began running down her cheeks; rarely did she show any vulnerability to win an argument, even if it would have worked.

"I don't know who Carlos was. You never mentioned him. I did, however, hear from people in town that you were seeing somebody completely inappropriate. Pass the salt, Deirdre. I guess recent events bear me out on this."

Of course--he had been there at the beauty salon, and Mark had been there. He knew, and never said anything.

Annie had recovered herself. "I loved Carlos, probably more than I've ever loved anybody. And he loved me more than anybody ever has, you can bet on that."

"Well, this was a kid who if I have it right worked at the Quik Trip, and lived on Marjorie, if I'm right. Am I right?"

"That doesn't have anything to do with anything."

"And he carried a gun, and I don't know about you Annie, but I don't usually do that myself, do you?"

I'd never seen him like this, and from the look on her face, she hadn't either.

"He just wanted to be *safe,*" she said.

"So, no, you're not going. I'm not that familiar with gangs and so forth, thank God, though I've seen a few knife wounds in my office, even here in Prairie Valley, and I don't intend to have to call your mother and tell her you got shot."

"I'm going to that funeral."

"No, you're not."

"Deirdre?" Annie asked--or rather, demanded, awaiting support.

But Deirdre shrugged.

Annie let out a pointed gasp. She looked downward and stated clearly for them. "I am *going* to Carlos's wedding. Funeral."

"You will not be going," Will said flatly.

"The hell I'm not."

For a while the silence stuck, as both had made their intentions clear.

"You live in this house, and you'll follow the few rules I make for you."

"I loved him. We were going to leave this hellish town together."

Will put down his spoon and asked if Deirdre had any dessert.

"Some lemon cake," she said.

"Fine."

"You can't keep me here," Annie said. "You think you're so big on being a Christian, you know, but this isn't Christian. Just pretending he wasn't important doesn't make him some kind of nonperson, you know. Same old shit, you know. God loves some of us."

"You ca n stop right there, Annie. You can just stop that line of thought now. I never said God didn't love this kid. I'm thinking of your safety."

"No, you're not. You're thinking of whether it would look good if I showed up."

"Where you show up does matter, and I know you can't appreciate the reasons. You've never respected my position. I know that. And you don't care about my campaign. It doesn't mean anything to you, because of course you have your parties to

think about and the latest song on the radio. I'm not ashamed of having standards, if that's what you're driving at. I never have been. So don't think you can fool me with that."

"You're the one who thinks God is pals with you and your friends."

"I'm not going to get into this."

"Would you just let them bury somebody you loved? If Deirdre died, you'd go to her funeral--"

"Oh, for heaven's sakes," Will groused.

"I want him to pay his respects, of course," Deirdre said, "but I don't plan on him having to any time soon."

"Annie--" he said, and I thought he was going to tell her to go to her room or something. "You're not going. Don't plan on it."

If he'd known her as well as I had , he would have known that her whole expression said he had no say in in it.

THAT NIGHT I returned home to sleep and change. My mom, of course, worried, even though I'd told her no gang knew about me, and I couldn't keep myself from telling her about the night of food poisoning. You could see her clicking through the assumptions that not only could Deirdre not cook very well, but she probably couldn't keep her food uncontaminated, either. Mom even said, "Maybe it's not a good idea for you to eat anything over there," in the same way she suggested after hearing about Carlos that I watch whose party I'm going to in the future, as if she could boil it all down to one little lesson.

But bless her heart, when I told her and my father about Will not letting Annie attend the funeral, Mom dropped her jaw. "Of course she's going to the funeral. They saw quite a bit of each other, didn't they?"

"Will's not going to let her."

My dad spoke up. "I'll take her myself if I have to. A person pays their respects."

They startled me, and I loved them for it.

THE NEXT MORNING, Mom offered to fix me some sandwiches to take over to Annie. What did she intend to do? Casually feed her from afar as long as she stayed in town?

In the meantime, my plan was to go pick her up, as if Will had said yes, and if he happened to be there--because Deirdre herself wouldn't say anything--I'd go on home. Still, it wasn't clear to me how serious my mom and dad were about doing anything to get Annie to that funeral, but they became my back-up plan anyway.

Will looked at me strangely when I walked in all dressed up. "Going somewhere?"

"I just came by to go with Annie."

"She's not at school?" he asked. I shook my head. He yelled up the stairs at her.

"In a minute," she yelled down.

She came down the stairs amazingly dressed up, for Annie. Amazingly normal, or maybe she had turned into this since she arrived here. She wore that skirt and top again, and her hair pulled back in a ponytail. No color, no wacky cut jobs. You couldn't even

see her tattooes under the sleeves, and if her army boots looked a little much with the skirt, well, no one around here cared anymore about that. She looked pretty--except that she had no emotion in her eyes whatsoever.

"Where do you think you're going?" Will asked.

"The funeral."

"You aren't going anywhere."

"The hell I am," she said. She carefully brushed a strand of hair back over her ears.

No one said anything for a moment.

"You will be going over my dead body," Will said. He'd acted mean before in front of me, but nothing like this.

Annie didn't say anything for a few seconds. "I don't think you understand, Will. I loved this guy. He was the love of my life." Then, weakly: "This is the only right thing to do."

But honesty would get her nowhere with Will. She should have known that.

"I appreciate that you had strong feelings for this, this, guy. But you aren't going."

"I'll be careful."

"No niece of mine will be going to a hooligan's funeral."

"Hooligan?" she asked, incredulous. She began to laugh, and really, if she hadn't been laughing at Will right in front of him, it might have been good to see. "Will, I'm not exactly sure what a hooligan is, but Carlos was not a hooligan." Unfortunately, to get her point across, she'd had to say his name aloud, and hearing herself say it apparently

caught her off guard. Even as she tried to muster more bravado, her eyes watered. But she jumped back into the conversation with Will. "I hope when you're dead only. . . only people who think it's safe show up at your funeral."

She didn't give it much thought, that sentence, but she'd hit Will at some sore spot: Maybe he didn't plan to have a funeral.

"You can say whatever smartass thing you want to say, but you're not going to that damn funeral. You're going to school. Go."

When I heard people later talk about someone digging their heels in, this picture of Annie on the bottom steps of the staircase always came to mind. She had nowhere to dig, of course, but she looked like she would not budge. How far would he go? She could escape any confinement he tried to rule--she'd proven that without him knowing it already.

Then she relaxed. "Alright. Let's go to school, Honor."

So I followed. He called out after me, "You're not going."

When we were in her bedroom, she shut the door, but kept her hand on it, like we were spies. Her face became animated; she now had a mission and not simply grief to contend with. A mission--that she could handle.

"Okay, you're gonna leave, and we'll just say, oh, okay, Honor's going," she whispered. "Then you drive on over to--wow, where should you drive? I know, go to that stone house around by the school."

"The Welch's?"

"Yeah. But wait for me. It might be a while."

"No," I said, startling her. "We're just going. I'm going downstairs, and then you get whatever you need, and you come down there. But we're not going to sneak around."

Will stood in the foyer smoking his pipe.

"You aren't going to the funeral. I will drive her to school myself," he said, and it sounded like a threat.

I didn't stop to look at him. "She's gonna go and I'm going to go with her," I said. I kept walking, down the steps and across the fake-marble tiles to the door. Never in my whole life had I said something like that to anyone, let alone someone like him.

"She'll stay right here all day then."

"You can't make her. She needs to go and I don't know why you can't see that," I heard myself saying. "Everybody can see that but you. If you weren't so worried about what people thought you could see that too. If you don't let her walk out of here with me, I'm going to call my mom and dad 'cause they think she should go too." I looked at him, but I saw fine lines and pores and a bell-shaped nose, shifting muscles underneath that skin while he picked the right expression to give me. Then I wanted to laugh because it struck me that he didn't know what to do about me; he'd barely registered me for all these past months. Was I part of Main Street, needing charm? Was I some mousy kid hanging around with his useless niece? I had served virtually no purpose to him ever and now he couldn't figure out how to put me in my place. But I looked straight at him, taking advantage of his confusion, hoping we wouldn't actually have to call my mom and dad and see if they'd back me up.

"Do you want me to call my mom?" I asked, going for broke.

He paused. "Then go," he said, as if he were giving permission, and he walked back towards the den.

I yelled up the stairs. "I'll be in the car!"

Outside, I started the car, and shook from the cold and incredulity that I'd said anything. Annie knocked on the frosty window, and I unlocked the door.

"C'mon, we're going to be late. You've gotta hustle. You know how to get there, Honor?"

"Of course I do. It's just out of town a little ways."

"That's my girl. That's my Honor."

As I drove off, she took a deep breath.

She sobered quickly, missing her ambition, as we pulled up to the cemetery.

"This place gives me the creeps. Once Andy brought me to a place in Denver, at night. We were just fooling around. You think you've got any Satanic cults in Prairie Valley?" She rattled on, but she didn't quite have the conviction of her usual patter.

"I seriously doubt it."

We pulled up to the tent, and people turned around. I didn't know if Carlos and his father knew any other Cuban people, but they must have known everyone in town who spoke Spanish, except of course for the Spanish teacher, Mr. Hayes.

"Wow," Annie said. "People loved him, didn't they?"

All I could think of while we got out of the car was how hard it must have been to dig through the frozen ground. No one had bothered to drive the Caterpillar digger off, so it sat in all its grease and dirt, as if to say you could have a real good life, but it comes down to a good motor and a little labor to finish you off at the end.

Then, as we walked up, I noticed what even Annie couldn't miss. We were getting dirty look as we approached. Annie stopped so that we were still a little ways away, including ourselves in the service, but not pretending we were like them. Carlos' father looked back, sensing something off-key, and when he saw her, he looked her straight in the eye. She ignored him.

The priest, some other priest than the one from our town, said the whole service in Spanish, and two years of study didn't help me to understand one word. Only the rhythm of the Our Father prayer, and the way everyone joined in, clued me into that part.

The casket was closed, but Annie seemed to be able to see through the shiny wood and into it, and she didn't seem to care whether anyone wanted her there or not. His father, among others, wept. So strange did everything seem, with the Spanish and the strangers who didn't like us, and Carlos a somewhat goofy guy only a few days ago, that I found it possible to imagine that Carlos didn't lie in the casket--and the casket became all the more the enemy. Afterwards, people walked by, and Annie waited until everyone was through until she approached it, kissed the top, and then couldn't seem to pull her hand away. I patted her shoulder, and finally tugged her wrist. She would have to give him up to the plain old dirt.

Against what I would have advised, she walked up to Carlos' father, and standing there said, "I'm sorry." Maybe a trace of pity, a trace of love, crossed his face, but he could not give in to reach for her.

Annie and I drove around a little bit in the overly cold countryside. She didn't want to go home, and possibly she had more reason than that she would have to face the music there.

"My whole body aches for him," Annie said, her eyes closed. "If I ache this powerfully for much longer, I'm going to bring him back to life."

A little ways down the road, she sighed. "His dad used to treat me like the queen of the world, you know? How could he think I was so bad all of a sudden?"

Sometimes people don't really want answers to their questions. Maybe I still can't judge that well, but she didn't demand any words of making it all better from me.

"Let's go back. Just for a few minutes."

"Oh, Annie--"

"Just a few more minutes without anyone around, please." By now the sun had fallen

I drove the car up the hill to the cemetery and parked next to the black iron fence surrounding the gravesite. She had wanted to be alone one more time with Carlos, but Carlos' father, and a small woman wearing a coat with the hem a foot shorter than her dress, and three other men, one with his guitar, stood around the long mound of chewed up dirt that swallowed the person she'd loved. We could hear their song when I switched off the ignition. Annie snapped open the car door and walked to the fence, hanging onto the railing for dear life. I had never heard anything so beautiful as these sad, sweet songs they sang to Carlos. She closed her eyes and didn't make a sound, but tears streamed down her face, and then she looked at the five people standing around mourning the boy. They might have benefited from her voice, but they didn't welcome her. I would have given anything not to have seen this. She slumped against the black fence, the way a

little girl hangs onto the bar on the playground when she's too tired to turn flips, upright only because she was clutching the top rail.

She returned to the car, and still she had more tears. Then she stopped, and between sniffling, said, "This is what I want." She took a deep breath. "People who might sing that song after you were gone. That's what missing, you know? That and Carlos I mean. Carlos who of course has gone now, too." She said all this with great gestures of her hands, as if anyone could understand it if they just tried.

SHE DID NOT appear in school the next day, and when I called from home, she said she was too tired. I had to ask her if Will did anything, what he said, when he figured out she'd gone.

"Oh--he's saying he's sending me out of here."

"You're going to Phoenix?"

"Um, Phoenix? No. Mom doesn't think that's a good idea. Maybe my grandma's."

"When?"

"When he gets back."

"Where is he?"

"He's had some meetings. Some dinners, talks he needs to give or something. So he can get elected."

"Aren't you coming back to school?"

"Yes. For a week or so maybe. I was just too tired today."

The next afternoon after school, I walked over to see her. Deirdre let me in. Annie's curtains were pulled shut, and the light out. She huddled on the bed and pulled the pink covers up to her chin, even though she was fully dressed. Outside it was February, and cold, and snowing half the time.

"Sometimes I think I should go out to the gravesite and push the snow off, but the snow probably looks nice, and maybe there'll be some flowers. You know, when it gets warmer."

"You ought to get out of bed, don't you think?"

"Deirdre's not making me. She's kinda letting me do whatever. Giving me some of those Zolofts so I don't get to feeling bad."

"Jeez, Annie."

"Oh, Will said I should have him." She rubbed her face. "Deirdre knows exactly what kind of pillows to buy--not too stiff, not too floppy--and you could bunch 'em up and your eyes just get heavy. You know what? I think I have mono."

"Oh, Annie. You just miss Carlos. That's all."

"Maybe."

"You're gonna have to at least walk around. Your legs will atrophy."

She studied me. "Things are not so good," she said.

A WEEK PASSED and still Annie did not get out of bed, even to go downstairs and eat. Deirdre let her get away with this for a while, taking her meals to her room. Mom called Annie once and asked her if she wanted to come in and work just a few hours, but she declined. It didn't help that Will would tell her, each time he returned to

town, that he would be soon talking to her mom about sending her on her way. Even if Annie couldn't see, it became clear to me that Will didn't know what he planned to do, or he would have already done it. It was just his way of keeping her under some kind of fear since she'd been so fearless that day. So she escaped punishment, but the way he convinced her she could be shipped out any minute didn't help her get out of bed and back to school

Weeks passed. I would go over to see her, and take her homework, and by then she'd at least go downstairs and snack around, or watch television if Will was out of town, but she didn't leave the house, and quite a bit of the time she crawled into that bed and did nothing.

When the music teacher, Miss Tate, asked about her one afternoon as I picked up her assignments, I took the opportunity to confess.

"She's just laying around, doing nothing, and they're not making her do anything."

Miss Tate agreed to come over with me that afternoon. I thought about calling Annie and warning her, and then didn't. Miss Tate had pressed about Carlos--what exactly happened--and I didn't want to talk about it. But she asked forthrightly, and you couldn't help but be impressed.

Annie didn't necessarily trust her at first, walking in, the first time I think somebody from a school had ever walked into where she lived. But she did tell her all about Carlos, in a way that said dare ya. Try to tell me I shouldn't be sad

"You're a lucky girl. I heard about his paintings. I heard about his teacher, too. She really wanted him to finish school."

"They never had an affair. She just tried to get him some college scholarships. She had a boyfriend, and both of them tried to help him."

Miss Tate helped herself to one of Annie's CD, and put in the player.

"That's a crying song," Annie said.

"A cryin' song?"

"When I write songs I'm not going to write such stupid ones. The radio's gone downhill. Well, it was always bad, but nothing good is coming out."

Miss Tate nodded.

"So how long are you going to sleep?"

"I think I just have mono and they missed it. They gave me some drugs, so they know something's wrong. They're not exact about my diagnosis, but these are like real meds."

"I can see why you'd be so sad, Annie."

"I'm sick. There's something wrong with me."

"Well, you're depressed. But you ought to know you're wasting time. You can't finish school this way, and it's a shame 'cause you're a real good singer, and you could have a career."

"I am? You think so?" Annie asked, interested in something for the first time in weeks.

"You know you're a good singer, right?" Miss Tate asked.

"I guess so."

Miss Tate suggested she get dressed and we all go for a spin.

We drove out in the country, listening to Four Non Blondes and their Trying to get up that great big hill of hope on the radio. We drove all the way out to where there wasn't ground or sky, just one big globe of white. The snow on the ground was so glassy it looked like you could ice skate across the top, skate for miles, even though plowed fields and not water lay underneath. You couldn't make out a line between the white of the ground and the white of the sky, except the sky was a little less sparkly.

"Can you slow down?" Annie asked. "Yeah, stop here."

A fence tried to slump itself out of the ground here and there, but she found a place where the fence was down, and even the farmhouses and barns had disappeared. She tromped across the snow and for no reason crossed the sunken fence and kept walking until we saw her surrounded in white, pure white. Snow gathered in rings around her ankles.. She dropped down onto the ground onto her knees, ruining the surface of the snow. I started to get out, to go stop her from doing anything strange, but Miss Tate held me back. Annie's gloveless hands looked cold when she rubbed her wrists together. I knew that in doing so, she meshed the spiky blue barbed wire surrounding them, protecting her. It must have been God she tried to hear, like she'd talk about sometimes. She buried her hands into the cold, as if they would come up bare of the tattoes. She stretched her arms as far apart as they would go, her hands fisted, not Christlike but like some mean prisoner, defying that silent sky. At least as far as I could see, the angels didn't show up and the visions didn't. Somehow her wrists--her little slave bracelets disguised as protection--were as far away from each other as they could possibly be. She laid down in the snow, exhausted from the action. Then she turned around, looked at us. She headed back to Miss Tate's car.

"Just needed to feel cold for a minute," she explained, and slammed the car door. I turned to see how she was doing. The hazy light shone on her wrists, and they were there still, but mere colorless, plucked daisy chains now, in need of spring.

Will was at the house when we got back, and he nodded at me when we walked into the den.

"How're your folks, Honor?" he asked, and I knew then that they somehow scared him, even though he knew they were not anyone, not compared to him, in town. My mom and my dad did not so much scare him, that is, but the idea that people out there might be willing to come tell him he was wrong.

Chapter Thirteen

Although he threatens to punish Annie for attending the funeral, Will is indecisive and takes no action. (In this he is indecisive like Creon, but not as quick-acting.) In a great departure from the play, weeks pass after the forbidden funeral. During the months following Carlos' death, Annie grieves and refuses to admit that she is pregnant. Her uncle's answer to the problem, one that he believes will solve the problem of his image, as well as his son's and daughter-in-law's condition of infertility, would be that Annie would go live with her grandmother, give birth, and turn the baby over to her cousin.

For a while, Annie goes along with the plan, but facing her cousin Joseph , realizes she has no intention of giving up the child, and she returns to Prairie Valley. Annie makes a general nuisance of herself to Will, dancing in public while pregnant and flaunting her conflict with him. The defiance is now open, but rather than fighting her, Will becomes resigned to not being able to control his niece. When the baby is born, it is Deirdre and Honor who are with Annie, and not the doctor, her uncle. Will is no more supportive of Annie in the hospital than before the birth, and Honor's patience with him--or fear of having an opinion of him--begins to fade. She must finally stand up to him. In turn, Annie must begin to learn how to nurture her newborn, an act that does not come easily, and might not take place at all without the support of Honor, Deirdre, and Honor's mother.

Chapter Thirteen

We had changed from the inside out, all of us, during Deirdre's little sermon, but it took standing up to realize how much. No one spoke. Helen Weidenheimer had played a quick hymn on the piano, quit with a flourish, and leaped from her seat, darting back into the choir room. We filed out abruptly, as if ordered to leave instead of just having had a benediction prayed over us. The absence of the last-minute piano exposed the sound of everyone silently shuffling out. In the parking lot, standing there by our car waiting for my folks to catch up, I knew everyone walking by had the answer to my one question: "Could she have been right?" But I didn't ask. Deirdre shouldn't have said what she said; she shouldn't have stood right up there--never, never has anyone ever acted like that in church that I knew of. What if everyone just stood up in church when they didn't like something? It wouldn't be church anymore--more like some kind of cattle auction.

Even though it might somehow place me in trouble, I wanted to go home and hear what my mom and dad had to say about the situation. I leaned against our junker car and tapped my feet around while waiting for them, looking for Annie, partly so I could avoid her. Anyone might think that I'd known about this, as much as they associated me with this family anymore. And I'd be judged by the company I'd kept. No one talked to me, or each other--even in the parking lot, parishioners seemed hesitant to chat, as if that would give their amusement or disgust away. And no one talked to me. No doubt the

phone lines would burn up later, but for now an odd quiet surrounded the church, with those you might expect to comment scattered all around not talking.

Annie waved and walked up to me, shoulders straight and belly out, as if nothing had happened.

"C'mon home with me," she said.

"Oh, I don't know," I said. I was not up to an afternoon of weirdness while Will fought it out with his wife and niece. Sometimes their house meant no more than gloom and doom to me anymore. But Annie didn't seem to think there might be any reason why her invitation might be less than appealing.

"What she did was--" I couldn't think of the words, because I had wanted to do as much a number of times lately, and I wanted so badly to be like Annie and even Deirdre, to be able to just stand up and say what I felt, to have it all on the tip of my tongue. "I don't know. People will make her pay for this, you know."

"Whatever. Listen, Deirdre's going to take me to stores this afternoon in Wichita to buy baby stuff. You better go help us. Make sure Deirdre doesn't force anything gross on me, something no baby should have to live with. You should see some of the stuff she's already brought home from garage sales."

"What about *Will*?" I asked, shocked, after all this time, that she didn't even think of him, what it would be like to be at her place even for a minute.

She shrugged. "If he's going to bother you, we'll come pick you up. You know," she said, leaning towards me, "it's no secret he has a fake religion."

I frowned.

"God doesn't want us to put up with people like Will, slamming him all the time," she said.

As usual, she had covered all the bases, without really acknowledging any of them.

So the two, Deirdre and Annie, came by to pick me up. My mom and dad hadn't said much, but they left me with the feeling that they planned to do their talking after they were alone. Deirdre drove Annie and me to Wichita, and now neither of them acted as if anything out of the ordinary had happened. In a whirl of unfamiliar but inviting stores she bought Annie a crib and a dresser and stacks of tiny blankets. For once Deirdre's purchases delighted Annie, and she walked around the shops almost on tiptoe in her happiness, balancing well the anonymous, kicking baby underneath her shirt. When she seemed oblivious to the impending childbirth, I often thought she wasn't dealing with it; when she appeared so happy, I tended to think she had no idea how much work she had in front of her, how much of being a teenager she was about to lose. My life hardly could be considered exciting and full of thrills, but that didn't stop the sense that everything would be over if I got pregnant. A baby? I had taken care of my littlest brother; they weren't complete mysteries, but they were wonderful to hold and stare at and horrible to care for over and over.

Deirdre guided Annie through what she should buy--telling her what would be practical and what they were buying just because it was too cute. I certainly didn't know (and didn't ask) how she knew what Annie would need. Some outfits costs thirty dollars and more and Deirdre thought nothing about getting out her credit card; it didn't seem like you got enough fabric to even justify that. (Annie had told me her mother still

wouldn't talk with her about it much, but that she had shipped some sleep-n'plays and a thermometer, and said in a note that these, with some diapers, would be all she really needed.)

On our way back from Wichita, Annie clutched the sides of her car seat.

"What is it?" Deirdre asked, almost angrily.

"This *hurts!*" Annie said.

I felt fear all over, and not just because of the terror, for once, in Annie's voice, but because of the pain I'd always suspected childbirth brought. She had not talked about it, and I hadn't wanted to ask, for fear I'd scare her as much I was scared for her. I hadn't asked anyone if women could still die having babies like in the pioneer days, but it crossed my mind, and it seemed like it must still happen as shocking as the procedure still had to be.

Deirdre pulled over on the highway, and made a U-turn so that we were going back to Wichita; she stepped on the gas. She looked at her watch.

"Honor," Deirdre said to me, "Reach into my purse and get out the phone. Call Dr. Hayes--the number's in my book. Tell her we're coming into Wesley."

"I deserve this," Annie said. "I know, I know. I should have given it to Matt. Just handed it over and said, Hey, it's your kid now. Jesus."

"Okay, Annie, shut up," Deirdre said, and then slightly softened her voice and kept moving that SUV down the road. "Right now the important thing is that you're the mother and you're having a baby."

"And Will and my mom were right," Annie added, more quietly. Then, "*Ow.* Fuck."

"No," I said. No to her sudden beliefs, no to her pain. She must have wanted some last-minute clearance before she arrived at the hospital. "It's going to be yours."

You'd have thought Deirdre did this every day of her life as smooth as she pulled into the emergency room parking lot and swung into a small space.

"Hello, Walker Texas Ranger," Annie said, but she strained saying so, and the pain hadn't left her.

I'd never liked Deirdre much, but then she hadn't seemed so reliable before . The second the nurses saw Annie's belly, they swung into action. Coming from around the emergency room desk, a nurse eased her into a wheelchair, and seeing her in that made the possibilities loom even worse than I'd imagined. She'd stopped wavering about her decision, and seemed to have moved into some sort of trance of fear and disbelief and resignation.

"Is it going to be okay?" I whispered to Deirdre as we trailed the nurse wheeling her to the elevator.

"Yep," Deirdre said.

Annie was only eight months along. That week we were supposed to start Lamaze classes together--she had chosen me to be there in the room when she had the baby, and not Will, who while a doctor, bugged her on the best of days. But now Deirdre asked if she could go in to the birthing room. She explained in a few seconds that Annie's parents weren't around and that she was her aunt, her closest relative in town. The nurse showed her where to suit up in the greens.

It took me a full second, but finally I spoke up and asked if I could, too. The nurse said, "Let's just have one person in there if she's early," and the truth was I was relieved.

But Deirdre spoke up, "They're Lamaze partners."

And before I could find a denial, the nurse pointed me in the direction where I could change, too.

"Is this normal?" I asked Deirdre breathlessly while we slid on the hospital garb. "I mean, is she supposed to be in so much pain so early? Do you think the baby will be okay?"

"I don't know," was all she said.

When we opened the door of the birthing room, Annie was already stretched out on what looked to me to be an operating table, and she wore a faded gown, something that looked like my grandma's worst aprons.

"We're here," I said. I rushed to her side.

She looked up at me. "They don't know what's going on."

"You've dilated to six centimeters, that's what's going on," one of the nurses rushing around said.

"Where's a doctor?" I asked.

"She's on her way."

"It still hurts a whole hell of a lot," Annie complained. "They've got to do something about this."

"I imagine it will hurt for quite a while. You ain't seen nothing yet," the nurse said. She had nails that were too long and too shiny and too red, and from then on this look would sicken me.

Nor did her warning strike me as very comforting for either of us.

"Oh-h-h," Annie moaned again, loud, and maybe she didn't even add her usual dramatic punch to it; maybe she really could barely take it.

I knew I couldn't. I didn't want to have kids, not any time soon. Not if it took this much commotion and measurement and downplaying of pain too hard to bear. I held her hand, letting her grip mine as if the pain would disperse through me.

The doctor, a short, plump woman with a head of messy brunette curls and ears full of earrings, rushed in and acted as if the fun (and she did approach it as fun) could begin now. Everybody but Annie let her calm pervade the room.

One of the nurses gave the doctor the counts: Annie's blood pressure and the heartbeat of the baby, which she'd measured with a grey strap like a seatbelt over her belly.

"Something is wrong. Would you *do* something?" Annie asked. She could not have known how terrified she sounded . Now, rather than let the doctor relieve things, she'd turned this into another battle.

The doctor ignored her, though, talking while she examined her. "What'd you eat so far today, kiddo?"

"You want me to remember everything I ate today?"

"Some chicken nuggets and crackers," Deirdre stepped in. "Did you have some cereal for breakfast? I can't remember."

Did this matter? Didn't they have more important things to talk about?

"Sweetie, I think we'll have the best outcome if we get this baby out by cesarean.

"

"You're going to cut me open?" Annie shrieked. "Hell fucking no."

"Annie, that's it, I mean it. You're just going to be in more pain if you go into it this way," Deirdre, the woman of no opinions, said.

"What do you mean this way?"

"Listen, we don't have that much time," Dr. Hayes said. "Your blood pressure is skyrocketing, and that's putting you and the baby in danger."

"Well, it's just going to be worse if you cut into me."

"It's going to be worse if you don't calm down, first of all. Let's all take a few deep breaths before we get going."

"Annie," I said. "You're going to have to have this baby." This tripped out suddenly, and it wasn't until after saying it that I realized in my inward fight for her, we were both attempting to put this off, and it couldn't be put off.

The doctor grew firmer. "You can stay awake. We'll give you an epidural so you don't feel a thing. And you and the baby have much greater chances at good health. Wadya say?"

Annie nodded, her eyes dampened in released fear.

Quickly they had her sit up. They tried to give her a shot in her back, and she jumped.

"Not on an epidural, don't jump," the anesthesiologist complained. "This is your spine we need to get."

"You're going to have to hold still," the doctor said more soothingly.

They let her lie down again. They pulled a blue sheet tent over her belly, and pulled up trays of instruments. It all happened so fast with so many people now rushing about the room--the doctor, the anesthesiologist, a nurse and a resident--that it began to sink in that the doctor had sounded sincere about Annie being in danger.

"Are my toes supposed to tingle? Because they're tingling," Annie warned.

"Her toes are tingling," I said, thinking of the knife cut without pain medication.

"They're supposed to," the anesthesiologist said.

Annie stared at the ceiling. I know that I couldn't help but look over to see what the doctor had going, but when I saw a knife, a real knife, I looked away, back at Annie.

Only minutes passed before Annie said, "I can feel it. I can feel you take out the baby."

Not knowing if she really could or not--she hadn't screamed when they cut into her, after all--listened for the sound of a live baby.

Then we all heard it. Some little thing was unhappy, and it couldn't have pleased the crowd in the room more.

"Welcome to the world," Dr. Hayes said over the baby's outburst. "Yes, yes. There you go."

"Congrats, Annie. You're a mom," Deirdre said and leaned over and kissed her.

Annie looked at me, eyes wide; I thought I'd seen her happy before, but nothing like this.

"Wow," I said. "It's a baby."

"A baby girl," the doctor announced. "What's her name?"

"Charlotte," Annie answered immediately, although she'd never admitted to picking a name before.

I don't know what they did to her in the meantime, but the baby quieted and smoothly the nurse, now approvingly, handed the baby to me to show Annie. I couldn't hold her tight enough--not enough to assure that nothing bad would ever happen to her, starting with not falling on the floor.

The infant made spitty noises, and she looked so tiny and wrinkly, and truthfully not really pretty to look at because of all the wrinkliness. Of course I'd known a toddler couldn't fit into Annie's belly, but still it felt as if I might do anything wrong because she was of course too fragile.

"Let's get you stapled up," the doctor said. "Then you can nurse her a little before we take her to ICU. She's a preemie, Annie. Four pounds exactly."

"Something's wrong with her?"

"She's just going to need some time. Remember it'll be another month before she's even as old as a baby usually is when she's born."

When they were finished with whatever messy business they had to finish, they wheeled Annie on the cart into another room. The nurse put the baby up to Annie's breast.

You might have thought she'd just be cute and small. Her smallness--she could have fit into a shoebox if we'd been short on cradles--stunned us. We couldn't keep her alive. I knew I should have said something to reassure Annie, but nothing truthful came to mind.

"You do want to breastfeed, don't you? Anyway, you can try it a little now. Good for bonding, anyway. No, you try it. Just for a few minutes, then we'll take her along. There you go. Let her take everything, I mean everything. There you go. See, you can do it."

She looked like she wanted to refuse and couldn't. But Annie also looked like someone new--worn out but real. Her hair fell in a close-to-natural blonde around her, a little greasy from the time she spent in labor. Annie with a baby. The room we were in, Deirdre and I standing, Annie still on a gurney, must have been some kind of hospital afterthought, not quite patient's room, not quite operating room. The curtains had baby's foot prints in pastels on them, but they didn't do much for the green walls. Outside you could see that it was still daytime, which somehow surprised me; this whole business had seemed to go on so long, and so momentously, that to think those baby stores might still be open and fast food places still served up burgers seemed incredible, too normal. A baby, a person, out of nothing. Out of something, a love, but maybe not a safe love, one that could keep her going.

If anyone could have seen this, the subdued Annie startled, afraid of what now lay near her, and this baby that had no idea where she'd just landed, they might have changed their hearts about anything that say, Annie's first morning at church, so many ages ago, had made them think about her. She smiled--not to me, not for anyone, not that 80-watt thing she could turn on when she wanted. She smiled at this baby, her baby. It's true that people are born every day, but to see this Annie and a newly certified human where before just a pudgy Annie took up space, it didn't make sense. Not that it wasn't good,

but who could believe it? And here she was, the baby that is, counting on Annie for dinner.

Annie looked up at me; she hadn't noticed my presence for a long time. "She is really little," she said. Not admiration, but fear.

I knew that tomorrow it would be different--that Annie was barely eighteen and had no job or husband, but right that minute it was amazing.

When one nurse took the baby away, and another wheeled Annie to her room to sleep, Deirdre and I headed out of the hospital to get something to eat. I stopped, though, at a payphone, telling Deirdre I'd catch up with her at the Jeep.

I dialed my home phone, and mom answered.

"Mom, I'm in Wichita," I said, and then, as I began to tell her the story, began to try to say that Annie had had the baby, I began to weep, and not at how terrible or even how happy the event had been, but at how unusual, how Godlike it was, when anyone looking around could see how it was so common.

Mom understood. She gasped when I told her how little Charlotte weighed. She said she would pray for her, and we ended our call.

Deirdre drove the two of us to some Chinese restaurant. She talked a lot; maybe as we sat there she confided something that on another day wouldn't leave me, but right then she couldn't say anything that would seem more important than the birth we'd all experienced hours ago.

After the waiter had cleared our plates, she sat back.

"You know, Honor, I'm wondering. Annie's going to need someone here. And really, Charlotte will, too, new as this is for Annie. I can't be hanging out here all day all the time, and anyway I think Annie would rather you stay around, don't you?"

She had this way of having you agree with her without even thinking, and I nodded.

"So what I'm thinking is, why don't you stay in Wichita? We can set you up at that motel by the hospital. For food--well, you'd have to eat at restaurants, some junk food, and I don't think it's too bad at the hospital restaurant. We could probably get you some rolls and things for breakfast, and take you to something decent at night when we get over here. The doctor said Annie would be in for three days, maybe a few more. And Charlotte--well, she'll be in longer but we'll cross that when we come to it I guess."

Not that I didn't care about Annie, but my first thought was how cool it would be to stay in a motel by myself.

"I'll ask my folks," I said. It would have to be my idea. Deirdre's generosity wouldn't matter; they wouldn't trust anything she said, at least not for a while.

DEIRDRE, WILL AND me stood around her when she woke up early the next morning.

She looked at us, and hopefully asked, "Where's Charlotte?"

Deirdre stepped to my side, and said, "Down the hall."

"Look, Annie. She's a month premature," Will explained, as if it were some doctor's experiment. "The baby needed to be in the womb another month."

She looked down at her deflated belly.

"Well, she's gonna live," Annie said. "The doctor said that."

Will smiled. "Whatever happens will be God's choice. It will be for the best," he said, squeezed her hand, and left the room.

"The best?" she demanded. Her moments of contrition had ended. She yelled, "You're so hateful. You're Satan."

But Will didn't turn to face her anger.

"He was trying to say the right thing and didn't," Deirdre said. "It happens. I know the best is when a baby is born after nine months. And that didn't happen, kiddo. I'm sorry, but I'm sure she'll be fine in time."

She cried, this time with sound. I wondered how Deirdre could bear to defend Will again.

We were quiet for a while. Tears began to roll down her cheeks again.

"Just bring me a joint, Honor," she whispered. "xx or XX will have one. Just one, then I'll quit forever, I promise."

I stared, then shook my head. It could be arranged of course, at least somewhere on the grounds outside. In a way, no one deserved it more; no one faced as much as this kind of wait.

"No, Annie. It's just pain. You're just going to have to walk through it. You could go through it stoned, but eventually you'd have to face it. Might as well now."

"Oh, come on Honor. Stop being such a perfect person."

"You know, a party, it's one thing. I don't care. I wouldn't stop you. But you do this, you take something to take away that kind of pain, you think about that pain when she's relying on you, well, that's when you're in trouble. You should know that." This

last part, this wanting to use her mother as an example, killed me to say, but nothing else would be so convincing. Saying all this, knowing all this, came as a surprise.

A nurse whisked into a room, this time a guy nurse with a strawberry blonde beard.

"Okay, up and at 'em. We're gonna take a little walk. Just to the bathroom for now."

Annie began to sit up obediently, and then cursed. "I'm not ready yet."

"Oh, it's going to be like that for a little bit, but if you don't get up it will be worse."

"It's just what happens after surgery," Deirdre explained.

"Yeah, when you've got a fucking knife wound," Annie reminded her.

"Well, I'm going to help you," the nurse said.

They argued for a bit, and so stubborn was Annie that I was sure she'd get her way. But the nurse wouldn't leave.

"You're going to hate me, Annie, but not as much as if I didn't make you do this. Let's go."

It tortured her to sit up. I didn't think I helped in the matter, so I left, walked down the hall for a cup of coffee.

For a second, or maybe a minute or longer, I stood at the coffee machine, sipping this awful stuff, thinking in a logical way that it tasted awful but not caring. Then he was in my face, talking, Will was. I saw his mouth move and his eyes change and my brain just did not shut on, as if it knew not to bother because nothing he would say would have

anything to do with the look of compassion on his face, and it wouldn't have to do with the real people around him.

"Huh?" I finally asked, figuring that if I agreed with him on whatever he proposed that I'd sign my life away somehow.

He stood too close to me, leaning over. He stood here in his element, smelling clean like the hallway, and this might not have been his hospital, but he ruled. Patients desperate to see doctors with answers for all their questions wouldn't have cared that they'd never seen him before. Nurses would have taken nearly any order he gave.

"I said, Honor, it's you. You can talk to her. Talk her out of this. Matt and Tessa would be over here in a heartbeat to start loving that baby. They're ready. They have a room. She's got nothing. What's she got? A suitcase and a crib Deirdre bought her? You know what the right thing to do was."

Oh, I knew how much Matt and Tessa would love that baby. Plus, no way would you pick Annie for a mother; even leaving my dog Betty Jo in her care would have given me worries. She shouldn't have gotten pregnant, and she should have made a lot of provisions before this day. I knew I would have. She should have been, right now, acting like she'd just been given a gift, or at least a responsibility, one way or the other, and all she was thinking about was her pain. And even as I knew all this, I knew that she deserved a chance because she had it in her, still, to be a mom. What took me over the edge in Annie's favor? Looking at Will, his you-trust-me-don't-you smile, the knowing that he hadn't provided a home for anyone--not really--and wasn't trying to find one for Charlotte now. He wouldn't strike a bargain with me.

"No," I said.

"No? But Honor, you must know. You're that kind of girl. You know as well as I do that she can't raise a kid; she can't even take care of herself--"

"No."

"You feel like you're being loyal to her."

"No," I said.

"I think you've been spending too much time with her. Do your parents know how much you've changed?"

"I guess I do see things from a different point--"

"You see things the way Annie has made you see them. You're so easily manipulated, you should know that."

Right then I didn't know why I hated him so much; I only knew I did. I knew a thousand things swarmed my mine, ready to tell him.

"What's her favorite song?"

"What?" He laughed, backing up, like he feared I'd left his conversation.

"What's her favorite song? You know, you got someone living with you who wants to sing. She likes to sing all the time. She likes her favorites. What's her favorite song?" Now, to this day I would never admit it was a trick question, that her favorite song changed from day to day, but I would have taken about anything for an answer.

He shook his head. "When I grew older, I put away childish things. I hope to God for your poor parents's sake, that you grow up soon. Put away those childish things. Or you know what people will be saying about you."

He swiveled, stormed down the hallway. Hospital hallways. His territory.

I wondered, not for the first time, how we could be of the same religion--how I had believed it from Day One--and we believed such different things about being a human being.

MY MOM AND dad brought flowers to Annie that afternoon. She would not know the sacrifice this meant--that they had left the restaurant in others' hands for the day--but she brightened when they came in.

"How are you getting along?" Mom asked her.

"Oh, it hurts like, well, it hurts real bad."

"Don't I know it. I had a C-section with Trey."

"Did they make you walk the next day?"

"Oh, yeah," and then she whispered, "and the nurse was awful--not sympathetic in the least."

"That's the way mine was! And I just want to hold Charlotte."

They chattered on like this, and for a few seconds it felt uncomfortably as if Annie had graduated to another place, just by having a baby, and here I stayed in teenager land. My dad shifted around in the doorway, and he looked over at me and winked. I never knew if he meant you were in on some kind of secret with him when he did that, or if he did it out of habit.

Then I heard my mother say that it was no trouble at all for them to drive over today. "After all, we had to get out of town. Honor's father got into an argument with Jerry Blanchat, the newspaper editor."

My dad spoke up, "He didn't think they should run a story on some robberies on Main Street. He likes to concentrate on the positive news, you know. But your business owners want to be informed about this stuff."

"So you told him?" Annie asked, perhaps as surprised as I was that he'd said anything to anyone.

"More than he needed to, probably. Who knows if it'll do any good?" my mom asked.

"Maybe it will precipitate a positive change," my dad said, in his smooth way that suggested he meant more than he said.

"Maybe so," Annie agreed.

"So let's see that baby," my mom said.

"She's down the hall," Annie said, and looked out the window.

"Well, let's go see her."

"You can go. I'm really tired now," Annie said.

"No, you go with us, too," my mother insisted.

Annie pulled herself up, resigned to my mother's instructions, and began to walk, slowly, with us as we headed off to see Charlotte.

My mother and father tried not to act shocked, you could tell, at her painful walk, and then didn't act shocked to see this tiny thing, and they said all the right words, like she looks like her mom and even my dad argued that she looked like her father, which stood as a big acknowledgement, in a way.

After their visit, I walked my parents to their car. Mom wasted no time getting into her real-mother voice.

"You are going to have to get her looking, talking to that kid, Honor."

"She did yesterday, after she was born."

"Well, she sure isn't today, and that's got to change. A preemie needs more, not less, than other babies."

"I will," I said, like you might agree to take out the trash or do your homework.

THEY PAID FOR me to stay in the hotel, Deirdre and Will. They drove back to Prairie Valley. Will had work to do. My mom was spitting mad that neither of them could stick around, and gladly gave me the time off from work, if only to prove their fallibility. During the day, we walked through the halls of mothers to be and new mothers, mostly older, to the I.C.U. All of the women appeared to be in so much pain, Annie included; she walked hunched over and cussing half the time. I rubbed the baby's hands and back with my fingers. Annie wouldn't at first--she said it was too pathetic--and I built up an anger at her apparent indifference. When I'd tell her to, finally, she'd begin the massages in miniature. Eventually we ignored what she was supposed to look like, and agreed from time to time we saw improvement in her flesh. Annie might have been thinking of what she should do--keep the baby truly, give her up--but she never said anything. Back in her room, Annie tried the breast pumps, encouraged by doctors who told her that her breast milk was especially good now given the prematurity of the baby, but the pumping annoyed and frustrated her, and it took everyone's encouragement to keep her going. At night, when visiting hours were over, I walked over to the hotel, frightened of not knowing exactly where I was in the world, who might attack me how in the block, and thrilled that no one knew my name.

SEVERAL OF our friends visited a few days later. Nicole and Jenna brought flowers and candy; the nurses made them wear yellow aprons.

We took them down to the ICU and pointed out Charlotte. They asked a lot of questions about how she ate and whether we could pick her up very much.

"Are you feeling okay?" Nicole asked with a shrug when we were back in Annie's room, and folded her arms against her chest.

"Much better," she said, looking away from them.

A silence crossed the room.

"Dave and Tiffany have been dating. They went into Wichita the other night to go to dinner and a movie," Jenny said.

Annie pulled her eyebrows together, like she had to think even of who Dave and Tiffany were.

"Sounds serious," she offered.

"Yeah. Tiffany says she's not in love but everybody thinks Dave is," Jenny said.

"Oh," she said.

"And there was a party at Trevor's and Taylor and Mark got into a big fight. Taylor had to go to the hospital."

"Really?" she asked, but she didn't care about these news items anymore, if she ever really had.

I think it annoyed them that Annie barely cared. I think that's why Nicole said next, "Well, my mom says it's probably for the best if she doesn't live. You know, your age and all."

Annie began to say something, but for once I stepped in. "She's a baby. Alive. And she's going to live. She's just a little premature, is all."

But if they were going to be angry at me, it got lost promptly. Annie sat up, in pain or not. She told them, "This isn't some kind of soap opera! This isn't a T.V. show. I'm a real mother with a real baby that I'm trying to get to live. You want to visit a show go somewhere else."

They looked at me like I might calm her down, like I might say it's okay for them to not care one way or the other whether Charlotte came through okay. They looked so scared. For a moment it was all I could do not to laugh, not at their fear but at the way some kind of courage or stupidity had taken over Deirdre, and me, and Annie. Somewhere along the way even I had stopped caring what people thought, and maybe this came from spending too much time with Annie, but it felt like a choice I'd made into this other realm, where we lived apart but with these people who took pleasure in others' miseries and worshipped neighbors like Will, who had nothing like love inside of him. These people should be thinking we're nice and strong and people who thought about what God wanted, not somebody like Will.

When they left, Annie said, "They better not come here again."

"Charlotte is getting better," I added.

"Charlotte's going to be fine," Annie said. "Let's go see her."

Maybe she hadn't believed that she was a mother until she had claimed the title for herself in front of our classmates, or maybe she believed it now to spite them. At any rate, where she had visited Charlotte out of duty before, she walked like a trooper to the infant ICU, said hello to the nurse on duty, and began stroking Charlotte with two fingers.

Only this time she made cooing noises--cooing noises!--and I swear that that tiny, premature infant gathered all her strength and turned towards her voice as so many of us had in the auditorium. In spite of herself, Annie let slip a smile over something as deep as this. She looked up at me.

"I'm scared. Bad things happen when I say this is *mine*," she confessed quietly.

Truly afraid myself, afraid that she'd lose this, the words rushed out: "You have to. Bad things will happen if you just hang on, if you don't call her yours. She needs you to say she's yours."

Sometimes I don't say things because I'm afraid I'll be wrong, but this time I knew for sure that I was right. I don't know how I knew, but I was certain that for once I was right.

ONE MORNING, VERY early, Deirdre called me at the hotel. I was afraid I'd overslept.

"Honor? I have some news for you. Will shot somebody last night."

My first thought was that this was her idea of a joke, or if not a joke, that she'd gone off the deep end entirely, and now was fabricating entire lives. Either situation made it uncomfortable for me.

"Oh," I said.

"Honor, I tell you, he went out and shot some kid." Her own disbelief made it easier to grasp.

"Why?" I'd question her into the truth. You'd think it wouldn't be so easy to picture, this doctor who we all had trusted with our lives trying to end someone's. But as

she told me what happened, I could see it. He'd grown agitated because Deirdre wasn't around, as he did. She had embarrassed him Sunday, no matter how much he'd stood up to her, and the news was spreading around town. He'd made a snack, practiced his golf swing, talked to Tom about some impending campaign problem. Maybe Will had even gone downtown to talk to people--no, he definitely would have gone downtown to talk to people. But it would have been evening, with only the late restaurant eaters and the bar crowd on Main. Then he sees Lloyd, maybe with her, Deirdre, in a parked car. (Deirdre's first version on the phone: "I have this very special friend, Lloyd. . . .") Deirdre, who he gave up a whole family for, the one who had understood him, had loved him like no other. He goes home, thinking he's just going home, but he gets there and it occurs to him that, if he wants, he does have a gun, and he thinks no big deal, really. (Deirdre quotes him on the phone: "He figures he'll just scare him."). So he takes it back to Main Street, and he's still not thinking he's actually going to kill him; he wants to show him the gun, the force behind it, let this scum kid hanging around town know, and watch his face when he sees it. But he gets down there, and there's nothing worth saving. He shoots.

This all passed through my head as if I'd been there myself. Maybe I had Carlos' death on the brain, and it overlapped with Lloyd's shooting. How easy it was for those metal pieces my dad used to hunt pheasant turn into human killing machines. Or maybe by then I understood too much about Will.

"He found out we had something going on, Lloyd and me. It wasn't any big thing. Just a romp in the hay occasionally." She was telling me more, as if I were questioning her. Did she not have any friends to talk to?

No big deal--a romp in the hay, as if romps don't make spouses too mad usually. I had never heard her talk this way, and for a second I asked myself if this really sounded like her, or was Annie doing another dead-on imitation.

"Why would he do that?"

"To tell you the truth, it surprised even me. I have to tell you that. Anyway, the good news is, Will's a lousy shot. Or smart. He got him in the shoulder, and it looks like he's going to live, probably. He's in Wesley, too, on another floor from Annie. But I don't think we'll be going to visit him or anything."

Out there in that hospital somehow, two lives hung on wires, literally, then.

"Is Will. . . in jail?" I felt guilty, somehow, for even asking.

"Yes. For today, anyway. We shouldn't have to worry much if Lloyd lives."

Three thoughts would hit me at once with each thing she said. For instance: Does she love Lloyd, and wish she could come visit him? Would Will really be okay? Where would Annie live? Also it occurred to me that his life--at least his life as someone running under a decency banner--had changed permanently, even if this guy lived. Maybe that would make things better somehow, though I didn't know why.

ANNIE STILL WALKED GINGERLY, a stiff kind of walk that might make any woman rethink whether she wanted to be a mother. She had dressed completely for the first day since her admission, and they'd told her she might get out in a day or two.

"I've got something to tell you," I said as we walked the halls for her exercise. The amount of noise surprised me--nurse signals, elevator bells, rolling wheelchairs. Deirdre had left it up to me, saying I would know the right moment since I'd been

spending so much time with her. Before, it had only seemed like more interesting gossip to pass along, more justification for her belief, and mine, that her uncle was nuts, but now, where people freshly entered the world, nearly wearing out grateful mothers and frightening fathers (I'd seen them, too), it was as if the bullet still spun dangerously, if more slowly, through the world, violating all of us if not so lethally as its first victim.

"Shoot."

"Your uncle, he shot somebody. Lloyd. I don't even know him, really. He and Deirdre, well, I guess they were sneaking around or something."

"What?" She stopped in her wide tracks. "You are kidding me, Honor."

"No, I'm not."

"You mean shot, like with a fucking gun?"

"Yeah." For the first time I wondered why I had pictured a hunting rifle, like my dad owned, when more likely he used a smaller handgun.

"He shot him dead?"

"No--that's the good part. Lloyd's apparently hanging in there."

"You are fucking kidding."

"No, I'm not." I didn't know what I'd expected from her--maybe that she would laugh. But her face turned grim, not with her knowing anger, but with sickness. She shook her head, and slowly began walking again.

"I hope Deirdre's helping him, you know? That she's not so caught up with this guy that she's just leaving Will."

Her reaction puzzled me.

"I should get out of here. They don't think she should leave for a while, but we really should get back, help out Will."

I might have felt this way about my father, but Annie, I had never believed, felt anything for Will close to what I felt for my father.

"Who else does he have?" she asked.

From then on, we gradually began to leave the nontime of the hospital even as we spent our hours in it. Neither one of us kept track of the days up until then, but now Annie began to pester the doctors about when she could bring the baby home.

ANNIE AND I stayed on in Wichita for another three weeks. When she moved out of the hospital, she moved over with me to the motel, and we walked back and forth so that Annie could nurse and massage Charlotte. We spent a lot of time watching T.V. Annie tried breast pumping, and Deirdre brought us magazines and books and a Scrabble game. Annie's mother started calling to ask about Charlotte and Will, and gradually Annie could take the calls and finish them without cursing. I thought maybe they were working things out, so that when we got Charlotte out of the hospital they'd be ready for Annie to take her to Phoenix. We never talked about what Annie planned to do, and we never talked about how the summer was passing by and I had hardly talked about college at all.

Chapter Fourteen

Annie, painfully and gradually, is beginning to learn how to nurture a child, and in turn herself. She has not escaped tragedy completely, having suffered the loss of Carlos. However, the fate of Antigone is reversed, as Annie survives and maintains her fearlessness in speaking (and singing) while taking steps towards a gentler life. As she always promised, Annie leaves town, setting out for Nashville as a teenaged mother. Old friends have agreed to travel with her and set up a home.

The focus shifts to Honor. Honor finds Annie's absence painful, but hears her from time to time on the radio, a voice that not only survived but survived to face a larger audience. A time leap takes place, and we find Honor helping to "bury the dead" --that is, she nurses the remaining elderly population as she watches the town slowly fade away. She no longer denies the community's inconsistencies, nor does she stay silent when she witnesses them. Annie may have been willful and careless, but her actions altered the course of Honor's life. We see then the effects of Annie's defiance, a great departure from the play "Antigone," in which the action ends once Creon discovers he has lost his family. We never know from that play what might have happened afterwards: Did the community take into consideration their sometimes opposing views? Did they demand a greater participation, with more people considered citizens? Annie Rose ends with an affirmation that Annie indeed changed the course of events, exposing the faults of the town, but also setting a trail for those who wished to defy its hypocrisies.

Chapter Fourteen

"I guess I'm about ready to head on to Nashville," Annie said.

We were at the big white house, in the den. I looked back at my college application and loan form. They didn't want to know much about me, after all my worry. Anyone could get into college for at least a semester in Kansas. I chalked her comment up to sleep-deprivation--induced delirium, as I had the other times she'd mentioned it lately, and wrote down the figures from my parents' income tax statements they'd given me. The thing not to do when you had a baby would be head yourself off to a city with no means of support and no education.

"You could go to college for a year. That will be hard enough," I advised. Since we indulged in so many naps taking turns with Deirdre getting up with the baby, we hardly ever even saw each other, and neither of us made much sense when we did. We watched talk shows, and soap operas, and CNN late at night, as if they equaled companionship for us, but they truly only contributed to the blur at the end of July and beginning of August. Charlotte began to fill out and look pretty, not so wrinkly, but as Deirdre would say with a laugh when she cried, "What strong lungs you're developing!"

"No, listen," Annie said, and because even she had become so worn out, she did not sound as convincing as she might have before. "It doesn't matter where I go. I'm a high school drop-out with a baby. That will be hard anywhere, but there must be drop-outs in Nashville. They survive."

Technically, she could no longer call herself a drop-out; she had completed a GED, but she didn't consider that as much of an achievement as high school. She didn't understand that good, hard-working and talented people could fail, that she had time to wait until such a move would be risky and not just stupid. I started to argue with her, to tell her that in fact striking out with this eating-and-crying machine might trip her whole career up before she'd started, but sleep-deprived also, I lost focus, and wondered what Deirdre would be fixing us for lunch.

"Why don't you come with me?" she asked. "Please? They have college there."

"Out-of-state tuition, Annie? Thousands of dollars? Jeez." Maybe she exhausted me as much as Charlotte.

"Carlos wouldn't want me to wait around. We should have taken off the minute we talked about leaving," she said.

Nothing mattered after she mentioned Carlos, which she did to end any argument. I tried to be forgiving of this; I knew him and knew his goodness and saw him shot, but Annie loved him deeply, no matter what anyone tried to say. And you couldn't argue with that.

"Wait a year," I said, and sighed. "Work at my folks' restaurant while I'm gone. That'd work out for everybody. You could save money, they wouldn't have to take a chance on hiring some lazy person. You'd have this house to live in. . . ." She could replace me, and do us all a favor.

She cocked her head, puzzled, like a puppy hearing a strange noise. "I'm not you."

In some way, we'd taken possession of the house. Or Charlotte had, and we had to help her. Will sat in jail, although a group of people in the community was trying to raise enough money for his bail, according to Deirdre. Once I wondered who all might get that privilege around town, but it depressed me too much to think about how quickly funds could be raised for a near-killer doctor and how other things in Prairie Valley went wanting. Deirdre talked once about moving some place, maybe to Wichita, but we could not get her to say anything more about that or the injured guy, Lloyd, who now walked around town telling his story over and over to anyone who would listen. And Matt and Tessa, who had so expected Charlotte to be theirs, never came around, even when they visited Will in jail. When Annie got tired and said "You do it," when one of us told her the baby needed changing or rocking, I'd think she would surely give up that baby to them then, or at least when Deirdre or I weren't around to help her, but in some moments I saw that she already needed Charlotte. We didn't go to church. Fall--notebooks and dorm supplies I might need, people who might not be friendly to some kid from the country--stared down at me, knowing it would have me before long.

ONE DAY ANNIE and I drove downtown, with Charlotte strapped into her babyseat in the back. Annie parked in front of the drugstore.

I reminded her, as I always did of things, as if she'd run off and we only had a certain amount of time to tell her everything she'd need to know, that she could never leave a baby alone in a car, even for a few minutes, even in Prairie Valley.

She made a face. "I know that. Can't you wait here for a minute with her?"

After she left, I realized that somewhere near this very spot, next to the pool hall, Lloyd Pell had been sitting in his truck with Deirdre when Will shot him. Instinctively I turned to see if anyone, anyone fierce or even unfriendly, stood behind the car, but of course, no. Still, the place--the place of the drugstore window dressing and the tinted glass of the poolhall and the flowers for all occasions in the window of the flowershop and the cement of the sidewalk, where I knew every crack and etched initials; the air so heavy with hot moisture today--it all had cleared in my mind. I wanted it back, the way I'd believed I knew where bad shit happened and why. I wanted to believe nice was best, and that I knew nice.

When Annie returned, I told her, quietly, as if Charlotte might understand, "I got the creepiest feeling sitting here. It's where Will shot Lloyd."

Sometimes I didn't know what she thought about that. I think if she'd had money she would have contributed to his get-out-of-jail-free card.

She got a funny expression on her face--maybe angry, maybe confused--and began backing out of the parking place. We drove down Main Street, took the turn to the big white house, but then she passed it.

"You know," she almost whispered over the car engine, "Sometimes I think nothing would ever have happened if I hadn't moved here."

"What?" I asked, and it surprised me that she had thought about such a thing, as much as what she believed about it. "What do you mean?"

"Well, if I hadn't come here and fallen in love with Carlos, he'd still be alive, and if I hadn't made Will so mad, he'd still be running for senate now instead of sitting in jail. Right?" She didn't sob, but tears streamed down her cheeks, and she drove on like people

cry as often as they breathe. "Will's not such a great guy, but he's worked real hard for stuff."

But I'd thought about this, so I was ready. "No." And maybe what she said held some truth in a way, but I didn't think she really deserved to think she was guilty of two shootings, when it came down to it. "Will is responsible, and Grace at her salon, and all the people in town who could have noticed their old white town is gone, never was, and that it's a good thing. And most of all Mark is responsible for that shooting, for hating people so much and loving his hat so much. You might have made a mistake, but you were choosing love when you took him there. You didn't want him to die there, did you? We were leaving when we saw there was trouble, weren't we?"

I kept talking like she might not see my point if I shut up. "And Will, well, he was a problem. I don't know if Lloyd would have been shot if all this other stuff hadn't happened, but you know, you were out of town, out of his hair that week anyway. Probably Deirdre's been cheating for a long time--I really have no idea--and that's how he would have acted no matter what. He'd lost nearly everything for her; I don't think he could have given her up easily. And not that Lloyd cares about this or anything, but what if somebody like Will became your senator? I don't know much about politics, but I'm not with everybody on this, that it's some mistake a good guy made. I mean, you should forgive people and all that, I believe that, but I don't think. . .I don't think he's deep down a good guy. He wants people to think he knows more. He makes people believe he's some great man who knows the whole Bible and is better than they are at following it. And it's just whatever makes him look good. So he can shoot people, I guess, and then

it's okay, well, we all understand 'cause Deirdre was such a tramp or something. You know?"

She didn't say anything for a while, but she turned around before we headed into another town completely. "You may be right," she said finally.

Maybe she needed to see him to test my opinion. At the end of that week, she announced that she was going to take Charlotte and show her to Will.

"Go with me?" she asked me.

I looked away and shook my head. "A germy jail isn't any place for a baby. Let me keep Charlotte"

"It'll just be for a minute."

But when she came back, I wanted to hear everything. See what he had to say for himself.

"Well," she started with seriousness, and then laughed. "He was in this stupid looking orange jumpsuit."

We both giggled, imagining that picture.

"He said the food was bad. That Ed couldn't cook worth a damn. He agreed with you that the place was too germy for Charlotte, didn't even look at her. So I said, well, hey, you're her great-uncle and he didn't like that because it made him sound too old. She's really getting pretty, you know, but he hardly even looked at her.

"He said he thought he was close to making bail, that he didn't think it was fair that it was so high. He has his Bible sitting there, and I asked him if he'd been reading it. I was thinking about what you said, wanted to see if he really read it. He goes, No, then he starts rambling about how God knows the truth, even when other people are too mad at

you or not mad enough. I don't know. It's like all of a sudden he's mad that people are too nice to him, but still he doesn't care that he shot somebody."

I knew this would puzzle me for a long time, and it did.

Annie said, out of nowhere, "Well. I decided to call my mom and see if she wanted to go to Nashville. It wouldn't be that much fun living with her, but maybe you were right about needing help and everything."

That night when we ate dinner Annie told Deirdre a little about her visit, and Deirdre nodded. She didn't seem that much interested.

"I just want you to know," she said, "I'll probably be leaving. After everything. There's no rush. You decide what you need to do. But Lloyd and I, we're getting married."

"Oh! Congratulations!" Annie exclaimed, as if some twenty-eight-year-old (twenty-eight always seemed like the perfect year to get married, to me) had announced her engagement.

A little smile flitted over Deirdre's face. "Scary."

"You love him?" Annie asked.

Deirdre didn't say anything for a while. Then, "Of course it sounds strange, but I do. So maybe we should just end it here. I already know what he does that will drive me crazy if we're in the same house. Maybe I should strike out on my own, see what the world has to offer a middle-aged broad. I don't know. My first marriage, I just wanted to get out of the house, and you know what happened to that."

"What?" Annie pleaded.

"Out of the frying pan and into the fire, as they say, except then I had to worry about the electricity and rent. He sure wasn't going to do it. But that's only part of the story. Then this--" She glanced around. Maybe the photos and fancy couch answered her own secret question. "I really did think this was love, too. I really did."

We didn't question her, didn't press for more. But we wanted to.

WILL RENTED A tiny house near downtown when they bailed him out. Probably they didn't even make him pay rent, so in love with him were the right people in town, more than ever before. Deirdre had said maybe she'd have to hurry out if he had to have the house back, but she stuck around, and Lloyd began to pop in from time to time. No one lived like we did in town, planning moves, eating at any odd hours, talking to each other on regular days about anything in the world, guns and peace and love.

One day Will called and asked to speak to Annie. He'd heard she would be leaving town, and he wanted to take her out to dinner. He invited me too. I went. I guess I was curious about what people might think about us, but I told myself I wanted to see what he like.

On the way there, Annie wouldn't stop with the stories about Charlotte. She made all of it, the weeks of sleepless hell, sound funny, and even Will, who I'd thought incapable of laughing, laughed out loud instead of just giving us an amused, not-all-there smile.

He drove us through the country, and near Hutchinson, but not in it. He pulled us up to this restaurant I'd never heard of--Paganica. It looked like some fancy rich-place restaurant, with the people walking up the flight of wide steps in front.

As we walked up the steps, and then as the hostess escorted us through the dining room, People smiled at us. They waved at Will. He still had that thing, where he was richer and smarter than anyone there, and now he had more of it, as if shooting someone had helped his stature even as he quit the race for senate. If he made a mistake, they could understand; they'd felt that way themselves. I didn't know this for a fact, but what else made them come up to the table to say hello, an alleged murderer out on bail? We are not so much against murder, it seems. Only against losing the fathers--those who look like they might protect us, keep us safe.

He asked first Annie to dance, and then me. I don't know why I said yes. I approved of him less than anyone I knew, but I wanted to see what it was like. Not dancing with him, but being watched. And we were. Those people looked up from their prime ribs and nodded. You'd have thought he was Prince Charming, and perhaps, available again, he was.

We watched everyone love him, only now they loved him more, because he was so bad, too, helpless in the face of love, like they were only more dangerously--and we were lucky for dancing with him. Who were these people, smiling, hoping he would notice them? Who were these strangers to me for whom a near killer could be so attractive? Neighbors--but nothing like me at all. My mom once told me (and I should have listened the first time) that farmers don't talk to their wives, so they take the word of preachers and doctors too seriously, want them too much. But men in town acted the same way with him, so that didn't explain everything.

NOTHING turned out the way I'd figured it would, hazy as I had seen the picture when Annie first wanted me to be friends. I thought we would have wild times, occasionally do what one shouldn't, that I would finish out high school with people seeing a different me. I'd help her get through. Then I'd move on to college, she'd go back home to her mother. Nothing had happened all my senior year the way I'd imagined it would, and nothing happened the end of that summer as I'd predicted to myself.

Annie made her announcement to me in a way that you might have thought she'd already told me and was just reminding me. "Kyle and Dave are driving in from Denver. They're going to pick up me and Charlotte and then we'll go down to Nashville."

At once jealous and fearful for her, I argued. Two guys won't want to live with a baby, then you'll be stuck there. It's not too late to go to college. You could stay with your mom a while, even fly to Nashville on weekends.

But she wouldn't be stopped, and I realized that she'd been cooking this up for a long time, sending letters and phoning people until someone agreed to accompany her.

"You gotta get going to college anyway," she'd counter to anything I said.

She packed. She perked up. Even Charlotte giggled more, the anticipation contagious. And I must have pouted--Annie constantly tried to cheer me up, prod me into getting myself ready for the university. She began her countdown, and then one afternoon, Kyle and Dave drove up. They hugged her. They began to take her away.

She had everything packed in the car--boxes, guitar, and baby. Then she stood with her hands on her hips, ready to go become a star. She pointed to Deirdre, and then

to me. She said to me, smiling slyly, "I saw you being good to me." And then she hugged us and was gone.

FOR TWO YEARS I stayed around, and then I left for college, and came back with a degree in elementary education four years later. Josh and I still wrote letters. Maybe people thought of me as the daughter of the folks who ran the cafe, or as Annie Rose's friend, or the friend of the girl who got washed down the drain, or all of those. I didn't ask. A few of my old people at the cafe died, but a few newly old people needed company, and I helped my mom and talked to them. The doctor got dumpier and more stooped as he walked around town, and he forgot he knew me. No one ever heard from Deirdre that I knew of.

Some arsonist set the meatpacking place ablaze, and it could have been anybody. Some vegetarian, one of the workers, disgruntled, or one of the old townspeople, disgruntled with all the workers changing the place. The corporation didn't want to rebuild, so the town was stuck, falling apart, just like it had before. A few more stores died, and more than a few houses emptied. Not many of the Mexicans, or the other groups of willing workers, stayed. Prairie Valley began quickly to die, and I stayed on, at least for a while, as a nurse to those who stayed, the old folks, as they pretended nothing changed at the same time their numbers, their great numbers, frightened those who looked around and saw that it would take a miracle to keep the town alive much longer.

I looked for it, and sure enough Annie Rose sent flowers on Memorial Day to Carlos' grave as she got more famous, and she did get famous, even though there were better ways to do it. I listened for stories of Prairie Valley and Carlos in her songs, and

sometimes thought I could pick up a trace here and there. I can tell that we still agree, though. We always agreed that things don't necessarily happen for a reason, as people around here will still tell you the Bible claims. We always agreed that things happen without a reason from God, and you've got to work to make a little more place for God's reason in the world.

One summer, years later, a movie production came to town, and used our streets and some of our houses to make a movie about living in a small town. At the end, a girl takes off on a train while there's this parade going on downtown. She waves goodbye to everyone, even though you don't really get on the train anymore to leave Prairie Valley.

They shot that scene over and over, backing up the train and having it run across the tracks while the actress waved happily at all of us strangers and I stood watching them filming it, and it broke my heart, thinking about how Annie never, ever could have really fit in at a place like this. It was like saying goodbye to her over and over, and I couldn't help but think, Too bad for everyone that she had to leave. And good for her that she made them listen--that anyone with a radio had to hear her now.

I walked over to the cafe, and the old folks got to talking about Annie, our other connection to the world, as if I wasn't even there, and one old woman said, You know, everything changed when that girl came to town, that niece of his. We didn't have much violence before that. She brought it from Denver. And my blood was boiling, and I thought about how the famous bank robbers lived here, and a woman was shot years ago and some kids died in a car accident just a while back. How Mannie whipped his dogs with chains when I was little. How everybody just sat around when I was a kid when Miss Tauer beat up kids at school, and how the Potters' beat their kids to pulps. Long

before Annie got here. So I stood up, hell I spilled coffee all over the counter just to get their attention. I said, "It was Will who brought her out here. He brought her here because he needed somebody with something in her eyes in that house. He thought it would cure him or something. But it didn't. You all just crawl into the sand again. But I'm not going to."

And I didn't, and the reason I said this, and was so violent about it all in my language, and the reason I never wanted to run and hide in rows of June wheat again, that I could help it, was that Annie Rose was right--Annie always said that love saves the day, and cranky and thoughtless as she could be on any given day, she knew how it turned some of us into family.

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