

EVERYTHING PASSES
EVERYTHING CHANGES

Thesis for the Degree of M. A.
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY
PHYLLIS EYER KEON
1974

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By

Phyllis Eyer Keon

A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

1974

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1974

FOR

Norm Keon
who spent eight years
telling the man no.

I'd forever talk to you
But soon my words
Would turn into a meaningless ring,
For deep in my heart
I know there's no help I can bring,
Everything passes
Everything changes,
Just do what you think you should do,
And someday, maybe,
Who knows, baby,
I'll come and be crying to you.

From "To Ramona"

Bob Dylan

CHAPTER 1

There were two beds in the labor room and the woman in the other one was moaning. Before they had drawn the white and blue pin-striped curtain between the beds, Colleen had watched her furtively, annoyed, yet fascinated by her welling moans. She was a long-legged woman with short hair that sprouted from her head like a moist plant in a bog. The woman's mother sat by the bed in a white paper gown, knitting a pink and blue baby blanket, her darting eyes flicking up from her needles and yarn every few seconds to look at Colleen or at her own daughter.

"See, she don't make any noise, Paula. She's further on than you are and she's being nice and quiet."

Paula heaved more noises out of her mouth, sounding as if, Colleen thought, she'd like to get the baby out of her by throwing it up.

A student nurse pulled the curtain along the track in the ceiling, hiding Paula and her mother from view.

The student nurse shook her head and smiled apologetically at Colleen.

"It's her third baby, too," she said softly, under cover of another moan. Colleen shook her head, closing her eyes for a moment. She had tried to have everything planned out in advance so there would be no tension while she gave birth, but now this woman was riling her stomach with her angry, sullen sounds.

Dan brought a wet paper towel from the lavatory and wiped the drops of sweat from her forehead and temples. She closed her eyes and willed herself to be calm and joyful.

"That feels great," she said, even though the water was too cold and sent a chill over her skin.

"Want me to wet it again?"

"No, not right now."

She watched him as he gazed nervously about the room. They had been there an hour and he still was ill at ease.

He looked austere in his white paper gown, like the doctor he once thought he'd be. Even his long brown hair and full, droopy mustache failed to detract from the stern appearance the white gown gave him. Only his jumping blue eyes gave it away that he wasn't an unconcerned medical man, but a scared, twenty-five year old kid about to become a father. A swift, excited smile passed over her face at that thought. Whenever she thought of him being a father, her lungs would feel as swollen as her uterus. They would fill with air that tried to push itself out as a laugh or a sob.

She clutched at his hand, blinking hot tears.

He gave her his one-sided smile and a quick wink. Then his eyes started the rounds of the room again. With embarrassed curiosity he flashed glances at each student nurse, at the R.N., at the firmly upholstered vinyl chair, and at the pale blue walls. Colleen thought he seemed to be searching for an escape route, although he had claimed he was eager to be with her. The muscles in her lower back drew tight, which she had learned was the signal her body gave at the start of another contraction. She drew her hand out of Dan's grasp

and began the light sweeping of her fingers over the sides of her belly, and the slow, deep, oxygen rich breathing.

"Another contraction, Mrs. Bryant?" asked the student nurse who was timing them on her wristwatch. Colleen nodded and watched the clock on the wall at the foot of her high bed, seeing the second hand swing around the numbers, but not interested in it, or in anything but the action within her body.

The breathing controlled the rising pressure in her womb, but it didn't ease the pain in her back. This was another unexpected factor. She hadn't known she might cramp there. She had been reviewing in her mind all the books she had read on childbirth and thought in her LaMaze text there had been some mention of back cramps, but she couldn't remember the remedy.

"My back's hurting awful," she said to Dan in a low voice after the rippling in her stomach had circled wider and wider until it was nothing.

"You want me to rub it?"

"No, I don't think it would help. It's just when the contractions are working."

The deer-eyed R.N. with a pencil stuck through her hair leaned over the other side of the bed so she could see Colleen's face.

"Something hurts? You want a pain-killer?"

Colleen turned her head slowly and made her eyes hard and sharp.

"Definitely not."

"Okay." She backed away, her eyebrows disappearing under her short, gray, curly bangs. She spoke on a rising tone, as if she washed

her hands of any misery Colleen might encounter.

Dr. Johnson strolled in, dressed in his dull green surgical pants and shirt, his face and eyes full of smiles and ready assurances.

"Okay, Dan. Out to the hall with you. I want to check your wife's cervix."

"It won't bother me to see you check her."

"Hospital rules. Not mine. When in Rome, you know?"

"Just go," said Colleen, reaching to squeeze his hand again, but missing it. "I'll yell if I need you."

He strode out, his boots thumping loudly on the linoleum.

Her knees were already up, because the position seemed more comfortable, and she opened her legs. Dr. Johnson's slippery, plastic-sheathed fingers moved inside her, making her feel stuffed and uneasy.

"She's at two fingers," he announced to the nurse, still groping at the tip of her uterus.

"How much longer then?" asked Colleen. He drew out his hand and the nurse peeled the glove off and threw it in a metal can.

"Oh, you're moving right along. You'll have your baby before dinner time anyway."

It was three now. Colleen sighed and immediately another surging contraction moved in on her.

At two that morning it had all begun. The evening before she and Dan had tramped about in the snowy, ten acre woods behind the farmhouse where they lived in the upstairs apartment. The temperature was at zero, but she sweated during the whole hike and had gotten too tired from moving her heavy body through the foot deep snow. All the books warned against going into labor when you were exhausted, so Colleen's

first thought when the tightening of her uterus woke her at two was, "It can't happen today--I'm not prepared."

She had slipped out of bed as quietly as she could, rolling over the edge since sitting up first jounced the bed too much. For two hours she sat in her old wooden rocker, leafing through summer issues of Ladies Home Journals that Evelyn, her mother-in-law, passed on to her, and timing the contractions with Dan's stopwatch. They were spaced from two to ten minutes apart. In every book discussing labor it had been emphasized that the contractions would be "as regular as clockwork."

At four she eased herself back in bed, pressing her rounded abdomen against Dan's warm back, wishing the baby would come so she could curl tight against him once again.

She slept and the muscles in her stomach and back drew up like tourniquets, bringing her careening back to consciousness. When the pains dwindled, she rose again and started packing, feigning quietness, but knocking the deodorant and toothpaste on the shelves as she pulled them from the medicine cabinet, and clicking the suitcase open and shut a few times as she pretended to remember things to put in, when really, she knew exactly what to take. A month before she had made a list, a compilation of all the lists she'd come across in the dozen books on childbirth, nursing, and motherhood she had read.

The little noises woke Dan.

"Is this it?"

She grinned at him, nodding, pleased to have not been the stereo-typical wife frantically shaking her husband awake.

They had waited until noon, debating every half hour whether

or not they should finally go, before driving down through the countryside on I-96 to Hutzel Hospital in Detroit. Colleen watched the billboards and trucks flash past, gaudy in the glare of the winter sun, as she managed the deep breathing and relaxed between times. Everything had a different look to her, sort of shadowed around the edges, as if she were peeping at things from some dark place.

She'd been breathing deeply and stroking her belly for thirteen hours and she was aware of fatigue closing in on her. The woman in the other bed was swearing now with each moan.

"Jeee-susshit."

"Hush. Hush that," her mother said each time, and Colleen could hear the faint click of her metal knitting needles through the curtain.

Dr. Johnson put his white, neuter-male hand on her hump of an abdomen as the next contraction came.

"You should be panting now."

She couldn't answer because of the breathing. She nodded and felt her hair tangle worse on the hard, flat pillow. She had intended to braid her long, red hair so it would stay neater, and she was angry with herself for neglecting to. Tomorrow she would wash it. She was determined to be strong enough.

Dan came sidling back, giving out his furtive glances.

"What's the word?" he asked, nervously smoothing his mustache.

"Before dinner. Three more hours. Man, I'm getting tired."

"Well, you can sleep all you want after it's over."

"I'm hungry, too. I hope they feed me good tonight."

The student nurse who was timing the contractions chuckled.

When Dan and Colleen looked at her, she tilted her head and turned her pale lips up into a smile.

"It's so neat to see natural childbirth," she said. "Hearing you say you're hungry, that's such a change from the nauseous ones."

"Natural is best in most things," said Dan, and the girl nodded. "Like organic gardening."

"Yes, and did you know the muscles in your feet really develop good if you go barefoot?"

"Oh, yeah?"

Colleen stopped listening and concentrated on the new undulations. She tried panting, but sensed that the pain was too close, and resumed the deep breathing.

It wasn't that she hadn't practiced panting. In the past six months, everyday, twice a day, she would lie on the bed, pulling in short, light breaths and timing herself with Dan's stopwatch. She was supposed to learn to do it for two minute stretches, but she was never able to keep it up for over a minute. According to the LaMaze Method, panting was more helpful at this stage of the birth process, but the twinges of pain she felt when she tried it frightened her and made her reluctant to change over to it for a full contraction.

It bothered her that she couldn't do it right. She had wanted to make each step of the birth process perfect.

On the next contraction she tried panting, but panicked when it was at its peak and gulped great gasps of air in.

"You all right?" asked Dan.

"Wow, that hurt. I better forget about panting. I can't do it right."

"Sure you can, sweetie," said the R.N. "Just do it real light and high up in your chest." She banged the edge of her hand at a spot above her large breasts. "Don't move your diaphragm, you know?"

"I can't do it," said Colleen curtly.

"Okay." Again the implication in her voice that Colleen was asking for trouble.

"Shit," said Colleen under her breath.

"Just cool it," said Dan. "It doesn't matter. If the deep breathing works, stick with it."

"I wanted to do this whole thing right."

"Calm down. It doesn't matter. There's probably a million right ways to have a baby."

"This is the right way and you know it. Wipe my face again, will you?"

The contractions seemed to be coming faster, as did the moans and obscenities from the next bed. Colleen kept thinking of her own mother, giving birth to four children without benefit of LaMaze.

"Of course it hurts to have a baby," Mavis had told Colleen. "I am just grateful I was bearing children in this scientific age when anesthesia is available. I'd think you'd want to take advantage of it too."

From three-thirty till four the contractions seemed to come in one flow of continuous risings and fallings. Colleen was wet all over and feverish and thought sometimes that she had groaned the words that came out of the woman in the next bed. Dan wiped her face every few minutes and the water never seemed cold enough. She visualized it hissing and evaporating on her forehead as water does in a hot pan.

At the peak of a contraction she felt a subtle shift inside her womb, and a special, chilly, quivering sensation vibrated through the muscles in her body. The baby was in the birth canal. She opened her eyes wide and looked at Dan.

"This is it. The transition stage. Get the doctor." A student nurse left, her rubber soles squeaking harshly on the floor.

Her muscles were harder to control now. They sought a different direction and it took complete concentration to keep them from bearing down. The urge felt almost senuous, but it was too near pain. She knew if she didn't push soon, with all her strength, the sensation would clutch and tear at her muscles.

"I want to push!" she yelled at Dan.

"So push," said the thin, blond woman who was clipping the name and number strip of plastic around her wrist.

"Get that damn doctor!" yelled Colleen ignoring the woman.

He came striding in, grinning, and shoved his hand into a proffered plastic glove and felt inside her briefly.

"Okay, go to it, Colleen."

She grasped her thighs and held her breath and bore down, her head and shoulders rising up from the bed.

The relief was exquisite. She had practiced the position and thought she might feel awkward with people watching, but the sensations were exhilarating, and the satisfaction so keen to actually be working on getting the baby born, that she didn't think about her audience at all. She sucked in more air and pushed longer. When the contraction ended, she flopped back.

"Oh, wow," she said to Dan.

"Don't talk. Save your strength."

She nodded. Another quivering urge was already rising.

From the foot of the bed she heard Dr. Johnson say, "There's the baby's head. One more push here and then we'll load you on the wagon."

"Really!" She beamed at the doctor and at Dan, new energy rushing through her muscles.

"You better go get ready," Dr. Johnson told Dan, and a student nurse took him out.

The next contraction lasted nearly two minutes. Colleen had to gasp for fresh air twice.

The nurses had the cart ready and they held onto her armpits and legs and helped her as she crawled and shifted onto it. Colleen remembered having read in one book that women in French hospitals labored and delivered and recovered all in one bed, and she wished she were in France. Another contraction overtook her as they began wheeling her down the hall, and she joyfully pushed, vaguely noticing faces of interns and nurses as she sped past them on the cart.

Again there was the awkward shifting as she trundled herself onto the delivery table, trying to ignore the stirrups and straps. The anesthetist began to put her feet up just as another contraction began.

"Wait!" she gasped at the cold-faced woman, and she saw the doctor nodding. The contraction ended and the anesthetist put her knees over the padded stirrups and laid towels on her legs to keep them warm.

Voices bounced gently around the tiled room. There were a lot

of people in there doing small chores. Colleen had no interest in them. There was a large light, round as the sun, but without glare, illuminating her legs. The doctor adjusted a mirror so she could watch the birth.

"Where's Dan?" she asked suddenly.

He came, then, garbed in green paper, with a circular beanie on his head, under which all his rich, brown hair had been tucked. He was grinning at her, but was pale.

"I've even got paper on my boots," he told her, and she pushed a little laugh out for him.

She strained zealously during three more long contractions, and then, at the peak of the next urge, Dr. Johnson told her to stop. She saw the scissors in his hand.

"I don't want an episiotomy!"

"I have to. I simply have to. You'll tear."

"All right, all right." In Europe they didn't cut you so readily, according to her books. She watched in the mirror as he snipped the taut skin below the dark, furry spot that was her child's head. She felt nothing. It was as if she were watching the anonymous legs of another woman with an anonymous head in the vagina waiting to be thrust out. Blood streamed from the wound, and immediately she was caught up in another contraction.

"Keep pushing, keep pushing," said Dr. Johnson. "Here comes the baby's head," and she could feel the large round ball slipping out.

"Oh, wow," said Dan, his trembling hands stroking her hair.

"Keep pushing, keep pushing."

She was blacking out. She leaned back and drew in air, and then was up and straining again.

Suddenly she could feel the baby leave her; a quick, warm slippery exit, and a strange, tired, abandoned feeling overwhelmed her.

"You've got a boy," said Dr. Johnson, and she heard Dan exclaiming and she smiled and nodded, shutting her eyes. She heard the gasp of the aspirator as they sucked mucous from the baby's mouth and throat. Suddenly she recalled old fears.

"Is he all right?"

"Perfect."

She relaxed again and shivered. Another contraction came, a gentle one, a sort of momento of her past experiences, and she slopped the placenta out.

From across the room she heard the tiny sounds of a baby and remembered it was her own child. She turned her head and watched the nurses wipe the shortening-like vernix from the baby's skin. They laid him in the electric cradle and he turned his head, which was too large for his miniature red body, and looked into Colleen's eyes.

"Oh, you sweetheart," she said. "Dan, he looks just like you."

Dr. Johnson and the nurses laughed. Colleen ignored them. The baby was kicking and beating his arms in the air, content to be free from her womb. He reached up and waved his frail arm, trying to grasp the thermometer at the side of the cradle, and Colleen knew that was a precocious thing for him to do. A feeling of significance and satisfaction wrapped around inside her, near her heart.

The doctor was sewing the episiotomy and she could feel the stabs of the curved needle.

"Ow!" she yelled. He put another hypodermic needle of pain killer near the funny, flabby wound.

The anesthetist was hooking up a bottle of glucose water on a pole on wheels. A long thin plastic tube ran from the bottle to a three inch needle. She swabbed Colleen's elbow veins and tried to stick the needle in. Dan was peering closely as she jabbed again and again. It was his occupation to take blood samples from suspected V.D. patients, and he knew tricks for catching veins with needles.

"You haven't got it," he told the woman.

"It's in there."

"It's not in the vein."

She felt it with her thumb and then pulled it out.

"My veins are hard to find," said Colleen.

The anesthetist tried again, and Dan nodded his approval.

"What's this stuff for?" asked Colleen.

"Just to keep you from getting dehydrated," said Dr. Johnson.

"There, a beautiful sewing job. Well, I guess that's all, Colleen. Wonderful job. Next time you need to have a baby, let me know." He held his hands up and a nurse peeled off his plastic gloves.

"Thank you for helping me deliver him, Dr. Johnson."

"It's easy with patients like you. Bye Dan."

"Bye."

Colleen knew her smile was smug, but she was tired of controlling the muscles of her body, so she let it stay the way it was. She felt she'd done well, despite not being able to master panting.

"What are you going to name the baby?" asked one student nurse, and all of them crowded forward, clutching their clipboards, their sparkling eyes wide and awed, Colleen thought, at having witnessed her achievement.

"Ryan Daniel."

"Oh, Ryan, that's nice. I like different names."

"And Daniel's after your husband, right?"

"Yes." She and Dan nodded together. She looked at him and was amused by his stalwart gaiety now that the work was done. He grinned at her and laid a hand on her abdomen.

"Flat again," he said, and raised his eyebrows.

She smiled and laughed a little and he bent and kissed her mouth.

CHAPTER 2

In the recovery room where they took her pulse and blood pressure every fifteen minutes, and put long, thick pads between her legs to catch the hot blood working its way out, Colleen tried to sleep, but she was too excited. Her heart was beating uncomfortably hard and she was cold and shivering even though the nurse had put an extra blanket on her. She talked with a student nurse for spells that seemed long. She wasn't really interested in that girl's life. She was only interested in her baby, and felt bereft without him in her.

Her stomach was flat, but loose and watery. Every now and then a nurse would knead it with her fingers to verify that the uterus was "back in place."

"Never have to worry about you natural deliveries," she said. "Uterus always stays put when there's no anesthesia. You should be proud of yourself."

"I am. Have you had babies naturally?"

"Five babies, naturally, yes, but I didn't know the Method. Didn't have any control, you understand. Almost like to have one again to try the Method. How 'bout you, you gonna do it again?"

"Sure."

"That's the right attitude. Oh look, here comes your dinner."

A small, plump woman wheeled the tray over to Colleen's bedside. She was scowling and shaking her head.

"I don't understand why they're giving you supper, just having a baby less than an hour ago."

"I'm hungry, that's why."

"You may think you're hungry, but the doctors know better that you shouldn't eat. At least most of them do, Dr. Johnson being the exception."

"She did it natural, Esther," said the nurse. "It's hard work, makes you work up an honest appetite."

"You can get nauseous, just the same. I've been working here long enough to see some naturals throw up."

"Don't worry about me," said Colleen. "I can always eat."

"That's the right attitude," said the nurse as she moved across the room to clutch at another woman's belly. The plump woman walked out, shaking her head.

The roast beef and mashed potatoes and small dab of green beans were still hot. Colleen ate them rapidly and ignored the woman next to her who made a face and turned away from the food. She sucked the milk through a straw and ate the green and red cubes of jello and was still hungry. The last real meal she had eaten was the night before, and that hadn't been large. She had carried her baby high, and he hadn't left much room for a stomach at all, let alone one filled with food. She put her hand on her curiously flat, pliable belly. It was amazing to have the baby gone. In the ninth month she had been certain she would be pregnant forever. Twenty-four hours ago she had been a pregnant woman, and now she was a mother, although she didn't feel much like one without a child around.

After another half-hour the student nurse wheeled her into the

hall and got her suitcase from a locker and loaded her onto an elevator. They went up a floor to her room. The baby would stay with her there after she was settled. Soon she'd be able to nurse him and then maybe she'd be convinced she was a mother.

Once she was in her bed, and had been shown the buttons for getting the bed to go up and down, she told the L.P.N. she had to go to the bathroom.

"You mean you want a bed pan?"

"I doubt if I can go in that."

"Well, I'll help you into the bathroom, since you were a natural delivery. But if you get too dizzy, tell me."

She shoved Colleen's slippers on her feet and gripped her hands and pulled her off the bed.

"I'm okay," said Colleen. She felt a rush of blood fill the pad between her legs. "Better bring another one of those, though," she said, pointing to the flowered box with Maternity Napkins printed on it.

Her sense of balance was depleted, but she said nothing about it. The L.P.N. left her alone in the bathroom. Colleen could hear her outside the door, humming a low tune that she felt she should recognize, but didn't feel up to recalling right now. She urinated and heard clots of blood leave her and drop into the water. Her fingers had lost all dexterity and it took her several minutes to unhook the old, brilliant red pad and hook the new one on the elastic belt.

"You okay, honey?" asked the L.P.N.

"Yes. I'm coming." She stood and her head felt like a balloon on a string, loose and light. She put her face against the cool tile while she flushed the toilet.

"Your husband's here. He's getting his paper clothes on."

"Oh. Good."

She walked slowly to the bed and closed her eyes as she nestled into it and waited for the blankets to warm her. Her heart was thudding violently.

"You okay?" asked Dan as he sat down in the chair by the bed, garbed this time in yellow paper.

"Yes. I never thought going to the john could be such a hard job. I'm really worn out."

"Are you bleeding a lot?"

She nodded and felt her hair mat more.

"I thought I could wash my hair tomorrow, but I bet I won't have the strength."

"Don't worry about it. When are they going to bring the baby?"

"At eight. What time is it now?"

"Five to. Listen, I called our folks."

"Oh yeah? What'd they all say?"

"My mother says we should have named him Daniel, after me, not just Ryan Daniel. She was hurt by that, you know her."

"She wanted a Daniel Kelly Bryant IV, right? For tradition's sake."

He nodded.

"And your mother offered to come and help when you come home from the hospital, but I knew you wouldn't be able to cope, and neither would she, so I tried to tactfully say everything was under control."

"Thanks."

"And I called Jack and Anna."

"Oh yeah?" Colleen grew more interested. "What did they say?"

"Well, I just talked to Jack. He's got all these idealistic ideas about kids, like you, so he's all excited."

"I wish you would admit you're excited."

"The birth was thrilling. I'll grant that. It's just the expense, and the hassle of crying kids, which you never seem to consider."

Colleen sighed.

"I wonder when Jack and Anna will have a baby."

"I hope they're smart enough to never have any."

"Oh Dan." She smiled and he returned it, but his eyes showed he was serious. He was always serious, never rowdy or frivolous.

"You know, if Jack and Anna did have a baby, it would be beautiful. Mulatto children always are."

"The hassles are the same, no matter how pretty your kids are," said Dan, and Colleen nodded and shrugged at the same time.

A nurse with short white hair and a striped smock on wheeled a small cart in carrying their baby.

"Read your number, please, Mrs. Bryant."

"187835-4," said Colleen, reading the number on the strip of plastic circling her wrist. The nurse watched a strip on the baby's wrist to see that the numbers matched.

"All righty, here's your new baby, dear."

"Jeez, only three hours old and he's got a number," said Dan. The nurse arched her neck back and laughed at the ceiling.

Colleen pressed the button on her bed and rose electronically to a sitting position.

"Pretty fancy, huh?" she said to Dan.

"Fantastic."

The nurse lifted the baby from his bassinet, her large old hands gentle and sure.

"Here you go, dear," she said, placing him in Colleen's arms. The small round eyes with no lashes fixed on Colleen's eyes and then the baby turned his head to her breast.

"Look, Dan, he wants to nurse."

"Let him, let him," said the nurse. "Here, let me help you."

She untied the hospital gown and pulled it open.

Colleen looked down at herself, nervous suddenly, and reluctant to have her breast exposed. But the baby felt the nipple touch his cheek and he whimpered eagerly. His excitement inspired Colleen. She put her fingers on either side of the areola and helped the baby get the whole nipple into his tiny mouth. The pulling seemed strong for such a little person.

Colleen glanced at Dan, who was watching, transfixed.

"Fantastic," he said, and the nurse laughed again. "What does it feel like?" he asked.

"I don't know. It feels good. It pulls. I can feel it drawing, sort of, way up inside my breast."

"Unreal."

"He's a good strong sucker," said the nurse.

Suddenly the baby let loose and strained. His mouth pulled downward and he made a small grunting noise.

"What's wrong?" asked Dan.

"I don't know. A burp, maybe." She sat him up in her lap, holding his tiny chest with one hand and patting gently on his back with the other.

"Why, I think he's having his first little bowel movement," said the nurse. "Wonderful!"

"Oh yeah?" said Dan, curious.

The nurse took the baby and laid him on the foot of Colleen's bed and undid the diaper from around the skinny red legs with the long feet, the skin on them shriveled and cracked from the months spent in the water of the womb.

A thick greenish-black paste colored the diaper and stuck to the baby's bottom.

"Oh God," said Dan.

"It's only like this for a few days," said the nurse as she swabbed the skin with wet and dry cotton balls. "Soon it will be nice and yellow from drinking mommy's milk." She pinned on a clean triangular diaper with the pin in front.

When the nurse handed the baby to her again, Colleen eagerly took him and helped him resume sucking. She smiled as she watched him, satisfied. At the moment, she felt as if her own life, the life she really wanted to live, had finally begun.

At ten o'clock they took the baby to the nursery for the night. Dan had gone an hour earlier.

Colleen's stitches in the episiotomy were pulling and hurting. No position seemed to relieve the pain. She pressed the button and rose up and then down, searching for a comfortable angle. They all seemed as bad as the rest. After an hour of tossing, she grabbed the controls and pressed the buttons and went up and down madly for several minutes, which relieved some of her frustration, but still did not help her sleep.

The halls were noisy with nurses squeaking by on rubber soles and whispering so that she had to strain to hear what they were saying. She could hear the babies crying in the nursery. She was sure Ryan wouldn't cry, but even so she worried and wished she were home with him.

At two o'clock she sat on the edge of her bed and waited to get lightheaded. She felt normal. She stood and her heart pumped harder, but she thought it was due to excitement and not strain. Wrapped in her long, flannel robe and with soft slippers on her feet, she went out of her room and down to the nursery windows.

There were four large rooms filled with babies. Colleen wandered from one window to the next, gazing in at the carts lining the walls, each one with a red or brown face in it and skinny arms either flailing angrily or stretched in relaxation above the head; each little body tucked snugly beneath a blanket that went down under the mattress; each child's wrist encircled with plastic, the number on it corresponding to its mother.

Colleen stopped in front of the last window, feeling a strange deflation in her lungs, and the thuddings of her heart diminished to insignificant thumps. A chill crept over her and she wrapped her arms around her flattened abdomen to which she was not yet accustomed. All those babies, packaged and labeled--yet it wasn't just the tidy commercialism of the nursery that was bringing her emotions down so hard and fast. Even if the babies had been naked and strewn about, her feelings would be the same. It was impossible to tell by looking at them how their mothers delivered them. The weeks of study, the hours of careful labor made no difference in the final product.

The scene was getting stark and drifty at the same time, and

Colleen felt alienated from it all. Maybe she'd never had a baby. Maybe she should pack up and leave the hospital now before they could insist that one of those children had come out of her and was her responsibility.

She wished she could be lying close against Dan's back, with the baby still only a thought in their minds.

"You should be in bed." The voice was gentle, but firm. Colleen turned to see the white-haired nurse in her smock frowning reproachfully. "You need your sleep, dear." Colleen started to smile her recognition, but saw in the woman's eyes that she didn't remember her.

"I was just looking for my baby," said Colleen, drooping her head a little, feeling as if she had done something wrong.

"Tomorrow, tomorrow, my dear. When you get home, you'll wish you'd gotten your sleep now."

"There's so many babies in there," murmured Colleen, staring again into the room.

"Yes, aren't they lovely! And there are two more floors of them above us."

Colleen shook her head and hot tears distorted her vision.

"Are you getting the depression, dear?" asked the nurse, peering around into her face. "The postpartum blues?"

Colleen gave a short, low laugh.

"I don't think so," she said. "Although I wish it was something that transient. Good night."

She walked back down the dim hallway to her room, ignoring the windows that she passed and the babies inside.

She lowered her bed so that it was flat and threw her pillow on the floor. She laid straight and still on her back, staring at the empty expanse of ceiling.

She wondered how her mother had spent the night after giving birth to her, her fourth baby, and a girl. Mavis had told her once that she'd never wanted a daughter. Colleen had always planned on finding the right moment to ask her why. She thought now that she could reason it out on her own, although she didn't feel up to thinking about it right away.

CHAPTER 3

Dan sat at his desk watching a one-eyed fox squirrel outside the high narrow window of his basement office in Building #7 in the Herman-Kiefer Hospital complex. The squirrel was chewing kernels off an ear of field corn he had put out there. Every three or four days Dan brought a new ear. Last winter, soon after Ryan had been born, he'd noticed the squirrel with matted fur and balding tail chewing a sodden acorn outside on the icy drift by the window. Its good eye had been toward Dan and it had regarded him with pure interest. Most squirrels he'd been near, whether or not he'd had a gun in his hand, watched him with curiosity mingled with a readiness to run. This squirrel's sense of security appealed to Dan.

"Phone," called Jack Mason who sat in the next desk back in the row of them under the windows. There was one phone for all nine of the Venereal Disease Investigators.

Dan shoved off from his desk and his swivel chair on rollers travelled smoothly on the concrete floor to Jack's desk. The other men had to get up and walk to the phone. Dan's desk was coveted by all of them, including Jack, who got tired of answering for everyone else.

"This is Dan Bryant," he said into the receiver, his eyes still on the squirrel, which had its dry, crusted-over eye socket towards the window now. Probably a B-B had popped the eye out. He wondered if the B-B was still in the squirrel's head. He fingered the hard, round spot in his own cheek where a B-B was buried, shot in by a childhood friend

from the loft of a barn, straight down, piercing and sliding in under the flesh, as they played war.

"Dan, listen, something terrible has happened."

He sat forward, the blood in his brain draining out and making Colleen's voice sound far away.

"Ryan?"

"No. The mail came, and the draft board took away your job deferment. They reclassified you 1-A."

He leaned his elbow on Jack's desk and started plucking the hairs on his eyebrows with his fingernails.

"Jesus," he said.

"I'm so damn mad, I feel like going there and burning that place down. All those damn files on guys, all those damn numbers."

"29-30-44-14," he said softly.

"Hey." Her voice was calmer. "Are you all right? Listen, it's not all over, Dan. We can fight them. We can go to Canada."

"I know."

"Are you all right?"

"I'm numb. I wish I could come home right now."

"Listen, I'm going to read through that book we got on the draft, and I'm going to write a letter to that guy at the Midwest Center for Draft Counseling, okay? I'll get busy on stuff. Check it all out."

She never made a move without researching everything she could find on a subject. Usually it irritated him. She would pile books around her on the bed, twisting her long red hair around her finger, scribbling notes that were illegible to him, frowning intensely so that

even when she had quit concentrating, red lines were left scribbled, like her notes across her forehead. Now the idea of her studying and preparing notes relieved him.

"That sounds good," he told her.

"And we can order some more draft books they have listed in the back of the other book. That one came in a week."

"Yeah, go ahead and order them. And I guess I should write a letter requesting a personal appearance and appeal."

"I'll do it."

"Oh man, Colleen, this is too much. I wonder how come they revoked my 2-A? Nixon ordered them to stop giving new 2-A's out, but there was nothing said about old ones being taken away."

"I know."

"I'll talk it over with the other guys here. Maybe we'll all get them revoked."

"I thought you said Jack and Phil got their's renewed a few weeks ago."

"Yeah, that's right. I forgot. I don't know, then. It's really strange."

"Well, listen, one thing more. It looks like the envelope's already been opened."

"Really?"

"It's torn a little plus the glue is stringy, like rubber cement, and there is a smudge of dirt, it looks like, on the letter, and you know that impeccable woman at the draft board wouldn't send it out that way."

"Hmm. Weird. What's your theory?"

"Post office, maybe. Or maybe Weber's."

"You think?"

"I've seen Talbert open our mailbox many times."

"Yeah, me too."

"His car was in the barn when Louise and I went downtown this morning, so he had a chance to get the letter and look it over and put it back before I got home."

"That fascist pig."

"Now we don't know he did it."

"Well, if it is him, do you think he'll do anything? Try to kick us out of the apartment?"

"I don't know. I sure don't trust him."

"I wish we could find another place."

"I know."

"Well, do what you can, and I'll try to get home a little early."

"Bad news?" asked Jack when Dan put the phone down.

"Very bad. I'm l-A."

"Impossible! This job's definitely in the interests of national health. They can't do that, Dan."

"They did it. Now I've got to prove they shouldn't have. Real democracy, huh? The burden of proof is on me."

"God, you of all people, with a kid."

Dan nodded. Three of the VDI's were bachelors and none of the married ones had children, except him. He felt embarrassed, stupid, to have a child and a non-working wife on his salary of \$7,000. Phil Crampton had asked him straight out a couple times if Ryan was unplanned, and Dan avoided answering directly so that the other guys would think

the baby had been an accident. It seemed more acceptable that way.

"What are you going to do, man?" asked Jack, his high forehead wrinkled with concern.

"About the draft, I don't know. I won't go in the military, you know that." He was leaning back in his chair, fingering the B-B in his cheek, knowing he shouldn't agitate it, but too nervous to will himself to stop.

"God. Was Colleen upset?"

"Pissed off. You know her. She's ready to burn the draft board down." He smiled ruefully.

"Might not be a bad idea, but I can't see how it would help your situation."

"Yeah."

Phil Crampton came ambling down from his end of the long, narrow room, buttoning his double-breasted suitcoat of brilliant blue and adjusting his wide tie with blue and yellow geometric shapes splashed on it.

"Hey, what's with the serious discussion?" he said, acting jaunty, but truly curious, Dan was sure.

"Too high-powered and intellectual for you, Crampton," said Jack, picking up his pen and starting to work on a form. Dan grinned at Phil, hoping to soften Jack's words, as he rolled back to his desk and continued filling in the names of sexual contacts of one Jerry Peters on the Infectious Syphilis Epidemiologic Control Record form.

"When are you guys going to lunch?" asked Phil, sitting on the edge of Jack's desk, looking at Dan.

"I've got an interview with a suspected pro upstairs at eleven," said Dan, looking over his shoulder at him.

"Oh yeah? Sounds good. We can wait for you and go to lunch at twelve and hear all the details."

"It might take me more than an hour if she's had a lot of contacts."

"We'll wait," said Phil.

"Anything sexual he'll wait for," said Jack. "Hey, Crampton, don't you get any at home?"

Phil giggled, his narrow, white face distorted by the smile. Usually he kept his lips in parallel lines across his face.

Dan turned back to his form, glancing up first at the window to see if the squirrel was there, or even a sparrow. All he could see was the square of blue sky and a chunk of the brick smoke stack of the incinerator the hospital and other buildings used. At home, in the upstairs country apartment where he and Colleen lived, he could look out the windows and see for miles. Their house sat on a high hill with fields and woods rolling away from it in modest humps and hollows. It was always a relief for him to come home from the stark, jagged lines of the city. Driving up out of the concrete walled John Lodge Expressway to the open highway was like being born again, every time he did it. Most of the other guys thought he was crazy to live an hour away from Detroit, but the ridicule he took for that didn't touch him like the wisecracks did about having a child already. He was a small town person with a need to see and smell green plants and brown earth and to hear calling crows and crickets on summer nights. He thought this need was legitimate and that the others were crazy to not have it.

"Are you going out in the field at all this afternoon, Jack?"

Phil asked.

"Oh, go by yourself, Crampton. Nobody's going to stick you up. They can tell how poor you are by looking at you."

Dan grinned as he continued working at his desk. When he'd begun the job two years ago he'd been nervous about going into the back streets of Detroit, into the wooden tenements and grimy brick apartment houses, confronting pushers and addicts in their broken, cluttered rooms, being met on occasion with a shotgun or a revolver, the ultimate sign of distrust, around the edge of a door. But only one VDI had been robbed in the two years Dan had been there, and it had been done by well-dressed prep school boys in the men's bathroom of the high-class Fisher Building. He was still wary of groups of men, when he was out in the field locating people who had been sexual contacts of a person with positive blood, and he carried little money with him, but he wasn't scared anymore. Crampton, who had begun the job six months earlier than Dan, and who had grown up in Pontiac, still put off going into the field until another VDI could go with him.

"Dan are you going out into the field today?"

Dan swung around in time to see the glint of insecurity in Phil's eyes before he glazed them over with apparent nonchalance.

"Yes, you can go with me at two. I've got an interview with a guy at his house, and then I can go with you, and then go home from there, okay?"

"Sounds great."

Phil went back to his desk, walking with a bounce, his feet sticking out to the side.

Dan had three original contacts written up for Jerry Peters: Florence and Mary Watson, and June Berry; and one suspect: Lawrence

Mathis, whom Jerry thought had been having sexual relations with Florence, too. On the back of the form Dan wrote:

Had penile sore 10/69.
 Had palmer rash 12/69 to present.
 Patient cooperative. Quiet acting.
 Thinks he got it from one of the
 sisters, probably Florence. Also
 contact with a pro somewhere on
 12th above McGraw, January 2, 1970.

Dan glanced at his watch. It was five to eleven. He began putting the forms away in his desk to complete later. He got his notebook with the Venereal Disease Epidemiologic Report forms in it, which they called ER's for short.

"Hey Dan." Jack's voice was low so the others wouldn't hear.

"Yeah?" He moved over to Jack's desk, his notebook under his arm, running his fingers over his long hair to smooth it.

"Listen," said Jack, his brown eyes round behind his wire framed glasses, his forehead wrinkled upward. "Maybe you should keep this draft thing sort of quiet."

"You think?"

"Yeah, you know, these federal boys here are all pretty straight. Especially Harrison. He might fire you if he knew you were 1-A."

"He couldn't do it legally, Jack."

"Not for being 1-A, but he might cook up something else."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. So you think I shouldn't tell any of the guys?"

"It'd be safer not to. I'll keep it quiet too. And if there's anything I can do to help you out, just let me know."

"Okay, Jack. Thanks."

He went out into the dim hall, painted hospital green, and rode the large, lumbering freight elevator up to the third floor.

He wished he would have thought of Jack's precaution himself, and Colleen's ideas for learning all the laws. He felt he was being driven along in directions pointed out by others, and even though the directions were good ones, he was frustrated for not being in control. To others it must seem like he wasn't concerned about his fate, when he was. He was frantic inside.

His parents used to always be one jump ahead of him. His mother would have a marble bag sewn for his cat-eyes and boulders before he'd think to ask, or she'd buy him a yo-yo when that was what all the boys were getting before he'd worked up a desire for one. His dad filled out the applications for medical school for him, and mailed them off before Dan had thought about whether or not he wanted to be a doctor. He lived at home then, during college, and was only free of them when he entered Kirksville College of Osteopathy and Surgery in Missouri. Once there, the full responsibility of paying fees and buying books, and studying without being prodded, slowed him to a halt. He stayed away from classes for a week and found he wasn't sure he wanted to be a doctor. He wasn't sure what he wanted to be. He wasn't sure about anything. He didn't eat for three days until he was certain his desire for hamburger was his own.

When he returned to classes and listened closely during the lectures without taking any notes, he discovered that the emphasis on prestige and money that were wrapped around the words of the professors like slick cellophane repulsed him. He finished that year of school, but wrote to Jack, whom he'd known in college, asking about his job as a Venereal Disease Investigator in Detroit and if 2-A draft deferments were given for the job.

Working as a VDI, a job of his own choosing, and one which his mother was embarrassed to tell her friends about, Dan began to feel in control. Soon after he'd begun the job, he realized he was in love with a girl from his hometown whom he'd dated when he was in college, but had never had the courage to introduce to his parents, because she wore blue jeans and swore and got straight A's. His father seemed to like her right away, and his mother didn't refuse to come to the wedding, but she said, over and over, "what ever you want, Dan, is what I want for you. I've always wanted for you what you want," which made Dan suspicious.

The elevator stopped and Dan opened the gate on it and stepped up the two inch difference between the elevator floor and that of the building. The door across the hall to the interviewing room was open and he could see the patient sitting at the table, her legs crossed, her plaid skirt modestly covering her knees. She had her head bent as she filed her nails and her thick black curls had flopped forward, hiding her face.

Dan silently cleared his throat and walked into the room.

"Hi," he said as she sat across from her, opening his notebook.

She shook her hair back and smiled, her dark brown eyes warm, but narrowed. She uncrossed her legs and dropped her nail file into her purse.

"You're Rosa Michaels?" he asked, smoothing the form in his notebook with her name at the top.

"Yes."

"Okay. So your doctor has already treated you, right? Dr. Thomas Allen," he read off the form.

"Mm-hmm."

Dan nodded. Allen was one doctor who agreed that it was important to notify the health department after treating a V.D. patient. There had been many verbal battles between the health department and doctors who either felt it unethical to report their patient's disease, or were unethical themselves and wanted to keep the patient coming back for unnecessary penicillin shots at twenty dollars a visit, and knew the health department would tell the patients the doctors were gyping them.

"And this is your address here?" he asked her, turning his notebook around so she could read the line he pointed to. She followed it with her long, clear-polished nail and then nodded.

"Okay, so now I need you to tell me all the people you've had sex with so I can let them know they've been exposed to syphilis." He smoothed his mustache as he spoke and picked up his pen, glancing from it to her.

"How far back do you need to know?" Her eyes weren't embarrassed or defensive, but simply interested.

"You had a rash, right? Six months, then."

"Okay. That's what one of my friends said." She opened the large side-pocket of her shoulder bag and got out a book with red leather covers. Her eyes met his, the lashes moving up like the slow wings of a butterfly, as she laid the book before him. "Open it," she directed, twirling her finger a little. He did and saw it was full of names and addresses. "All those with a red star I've had sexual contact with," she said, putting her elbow on the table and her chin on the back of her hand, watching him.

Dan grinned at her, resting his eyes on hers for a long moment.

"God, I really appreciate this. You don't know how much time and work it saves me."

She flung her hand to the side and shrugged, smiling.

"Well, I figured why the hell not. I figured you'd think I was a pro anyway."

He nodded.

"What house are you with?"

"Golden Sun. You know her?"

Her shook his head. She pulled a small white card from a rubber-banded group of them in a small side pocket of her bag and gave it to him.

"Golden Sun - Business Consultants," it read, with an address underneath and two phone numbers in the lower right-hand corner.

"Thanks," said Dan, slipping the card into his shirt pocket.

"Listen, before I forget," said Rosa, her eyes earnest now, "Goldie asked me to ask if someone could come over to the house and take blood tests on all the girls. She said someone from here did it for a friend of hers, who's also a madame, and that it would be a good thing if you could do it for us."

"Sure. I'll give her a call and arrange it." He straightened in the old varnished chair. "Now I have to fill out a form for each of these names and I need you to give me descriptions and marital status and other details for whoever you can."

"Okay."

CHAPTER 4

Jack and Phil and Dan drove down to the Linwood Cafe at noon. They parked at a meter across the street and ran with their coat collars up against the sharp east wind coming off the Detroit River. The Linwood had a long window in front with the name painted on it in a semi-circle, the yellow letters grayish from the grime on the glass. Across the base of the store front was black stone that was supposed to be shiny, but with the mud and soot on it, it was dull.

Inside, the smells were of hot oil and fish and there was a T.V. up on a high shelf where everyone could see it. Policemen and several construction workers were at the formica bar, and many of the high-backed leather upholstered booths were filled by other manual laborers; most of them regular customers, Dan knew, because they were here every time he came in to eat.

"Hello, hello!" called Mrs. Ruskowski, waving her fleshy arm over the top of the bar, her gold front tooth gleaming in the yellow glow of the fly-filled globes that mushroomed on the ceiling of the bar. "My boys from the health department come for a good hot meal today!"

Dan beamed at her and avoided the eyes coming around coffee cups at them, as did Jack and Phil.

"Hello, Mrs. Ruszkowski."

"Have a seat, over there, see that booth?" She flung her fat finger down the wall to the booth with the painting on cardboard of a cabin and a pine tree with a cardinal in it, the perspective off. All

the booths had different paintings adorning the walls by them. Her daughter was an artist, had even lived in Greenwich Village for a year, but now worked in the Rapid-Fotos studio developing snapshots.

Joseph Ruszkowski came to take their order. He was a short man, a few inches shorter than his wife, with a rounded chest and a big grin that showed most of his gold teeth.

"How's this weather, huh? Pretty bad, huh? What'll it be for you boys today?"

They all ordered paprikash. Jack and Phil wanted iced tea with it and Dan milk.

"Do you want to go right out to the field from here?" Dan asked Phil when Joseph had gone.

"Sure. Okay. Listen, you haven't told us about the pro yet."

Dan leaned forward, grinning at Phil who sat by himself across from Dan and Jack.

"Listen to this, Phil. This'll make your mouth water. I'm supposed to go to the house she works out of and take tests on all the girls."

"Oh yeah?" He grinned and his blue eyes glittered. "Let me come with you, okay? You'll need some help."

Dan shook his head and glided his hand above the table, palm down.

"No way, man. This is all mine."

"So what about the pro?" asked Jack. "Did she look pretty good?"

"Beautiful. Part Spanish I think."

Joseph brought their paprikash, balancing the hot plates on his arms and carrying their glasses in his thick, hairy hands. They were

silent as they carefully tasted the dish to see how much red pepper was in it today.

Most of the other customers were paying their bills at the fancy, outdated cash register by the door since the lunch hour was over for them. In a few minutes they were the only ones left in the booths and there was one man sipping coffee at the bar, his thick neck as wide as his head, his shoulders rounded as he hunched forward, sipping and reading the sports page of the Detroit Free Press. Dan watched him and watched the Ruszkowski's wiping glasses at the bar as they argued in their own language, which he assumed was Hungarian, since the paprikash was. Jack and Phil were talking about a hockey game that had been on T.V. a few nights before between the Red Wings and the Montreal Canadiens.

The glass front door pushed inward, letting in a rush of the street air and two men came in with rich brown cabretta coats on and naturals close to their heads. Their high-heeled platform shoes clunked on the wood floor as they walked swiftly to the bar, scanning the room, both their gazes meeting Dan's and then sliding over him and his friends.

Joseph came up to the edge of the bar, smiling broadly.

"What is it you want? A nice hot meal on this cold day?"

Dan couldn't hear what the men replied, but the startled look on Joseph's face made him sit straighter and strain his ears.

"Shut up," he murmured to Jack and Phil.

"What's up?" Phil turned his head to look at the bar.

The man reading the sports page had his profile in view, his coffee cup just starting to his mouth, as he stared at the men and at Joseph.

"No," Joseph said softly, moving his head in tight, tiny shakes. Mrs. Ruszkowski came in front of him to face the men.

"You cannot have our money. That is the end of it. Go."

"Oh," said Phil in a kind of groan. Dan and Jack could see the guns now, as the men lifted them higher. Neither of them moved.

"Give it over, old man. We aren't afraid to shoot your old woman."

Joseph scurried to the cash register and pressed two keys, and the drawer opened, the bell jangling. Mrs. Ruszkowski ran after him.

"No, Joseph, no! You will not. It is our money. We have done the work."

Joseph was holding the bills out. She was not quite next to him, but was reaching to snatch the bundle back when she halted, making a concave movement, her side thrusting in and her head out. A cartridge from the automatic slanted out of the gun to the floor, bouncing and rolling on the wooden boards.

Dan wasn't sure, immediately after the shot, if he had ever heard the sound of the gun. It was like he knew it had happened, but had come by the knowledge as hearsay. The actual sound bypassed his ears and lodged like something solid and unwanted in his brain.

The money fluttered to the floor as Joseph let it loose and put his hands to his ears and screamed, and Mrs. Ruszkowski lurched to the side, and down, cracking her head on the edge of the bar.

Dan was aware of Phil moaning, and Jack asking him if he was all right, but he could not remove his eyes from where Mrs. Ruszkowski had disappeared behind the bar. Joseph fell down to her, tremendous, raging cries mounting up from where he was on the floor.

"Motherfucker! You motherfucker!" one robber shouted at the other who had fired the gun. They were both stooped, scooping bills into their

pockets with long, lean fingers. One of them picked the cartridge from under a stool, and then they were striding gracefully out the glass door, their heads high, their hands in the pockets of the sleek, cabretta coats.

The man who had been sitting at the bar, and who had crouched behind his stool after the shot, scrambled up over the stool and on over the bar, his gray working trousers giving way in the back seam, and yanked the telephone to his ear.

Jack slid out of the booth and Dan followed him and they ran to the door.

"Careful," said Jack, sidling along the edge of the entrance. He seemed pale, even through his black skin, but Dan was aware of his own blood rushing into his face and heating his brain.

They peered around the edges of the door, Dan straining to see down Linwood, and Jack up it. The men were out of sight.

"Damn," said Dan softly as they turned to go back in. "Can you remember what they looked like?"

Jack shook his head.

"Not all that well. I never saw their faces for sure."

"Yeah, I know. Just two tall black dudes. They'll never get them."

The sounds of Joseph's wails pulsed through the glass door. As they went in, the man who had been at the bar walked purposefully to them.

"Ambulance and police are on the way. I think she's dead. He won't let me get close enough to try for a pulse, though."

Dan and Jack nodded, and went around the end of the bar, past the cash register, and with careful eyes, looked down into the shadows at Joseph on the floor, clutching his wife close to his chest, her dark dress wet on the side, but not visibly red, and her fat arm, with a thin

gold band on the ring finger, flung out towards the floor with no tension in it. The arm was bright red on the underside, and splotched with blood on the surface. Her glasses were off center, since her head was pulled tight against Joseph, and there was only flesh of her forehead behind one lense, and gray hairs in back of the other.

Joseph was yelling prayers between his anguished cries.

"Listen, your friend's not doing so good," the man said, thumbing over his shoulder at their booth. Jack turned right away to look at Phil, but Dan couldn't loosen his gaze from Mrs. Ruskowski's eyeless glasses. There was the blood, too, that he wanted to see longer, but it was the glasses that transfixed him, still holding their grind to improve vision, when there was no more vision behind them.

Jack pushed past him to go to Phil.

"C'mon, Dan. Phil's throwing up."

"Okay."

"My opinion, she'd dead," said the man.

"Yeah."

"Dan!" called Jack from across the room.

He backed up and then turned and walked slowly to Phil, whose vomit he could smell already. He couldn't see Phil at all, and he sped up.

"You're the one who usually babys him," said Jack as Dan reached him and saw Phil curled tight on his side of the booth, his arms gripping his knees, his face pale and the lips in a grimace as his teeth clicked, and he shivered.

"Jesus," whispered Dan.

"He's in shock."

"Take me home," said Phil haltingly, opening his eyes to glare at his friends.

"You think we should?" asked Dan. "Or have him go to the hospital."

"Make me worse, worse," said Phil, jerking his head from side to side. "Sick people, hurt people, I get like this. Honest. Screwed up this way. Take me home. Call Delores."

"Listen," Jack said to Dan. "Go see if there's any coffee behind the bar, okay? We've got to get him in shape if we're going to take him anywhere."

Dan nodded and swung around.

"Here come the cops," said the other man, who was leaning out the front door.

Dan went on around the end of the bar and avoided looking at Joseph as he got a thick, tan cup and poured coffee in it from a glass pot on a hot plate.

"Thank you," said Joseph. "Thank you," nodding his large head as he reached up his hand for the cup. Dan took it to him. "I'm sorry, Mr. Ruszkowski."

"A little cream there, under the bar, and it will be fine."

Dan brought the square paper carton of cream and poured some in his coffee.

"To the brim, please, and it will be fine."

He thought he could smell Mrs. Ruszkowski's blood. He was sure it wasn't just perspiration he smelled, although there was that, but under that heavy odor, and beneath the fragrance of the coffee, he was

sure he could sense the smell of blood; salty, maybe, a dense smell, yet unoffensive, like the smell of earth when your nose was near it, only with that salty whiff in it, like maybe the earth by the ocean would smell, although he didn't know the smell of ocean earth since he'd never been further from Michigan than Missouri.

He stood.

"Thank you, thank you," said Mr. Ruszkowski as he sipped at the coffee, holding the cup in one hand and cradling his dead wife in the other.

Dan went to get Phil's coffee and wondered what he would be doing if it was Colleen shot to death. Not drinking coffee, that was for sure. Probably he'd take that long, sharp knife on the cutting board by the salami and chop his wrists and his jugular veins.

Jack was at the bar when he turned around and Dan handed him the coffee. Two policemen had come in and were striding towards the bar, with the sports-page-reader hurrying behind them. They filled the space around the end of the bar and Dan saw he couldn't get out down there without disturbing everyone, so he backed up against the edge of the bar and hefted himself up on it with his hands, and swung his feet over and dropped to the floor.

Jack had given the coffee to Phil, who was sitting up, huddled against the wall, his feet on the seat, clutching the cup, but not drinking from it. Jack was on his way to speak to the policemen, his head stuck out from his neck with determination and nervousness.

"Hey," said Dan. "What're you going to do?"

Jack stopped and adjusted one side of his glasses, shifting his eyebrows a little.

"I was just going to check and see what we have to do before we can go. Phil really wants to go home, and you have that interview, man. Did you forget about it?"

"Oh, yeah, thanks. Over on the west side. Some cat I haven't been able to get in touch with, he's always busy or not there when I go. Yeah, I'm supposed to see him at two."

"Life goes on." Jack was looking at the floor, his hands fiddling with things in his coat pockets.

Dan watched him, thinking about the phrase, never really having felt the significance of it before. The regular customers would continue to come, even though Mrs. Ruszkowski was dead. Food would be served. The T.V. would be watched. Flies would die in the lights overhead.

He glanced over the bar at Joseph who was standing now, staring at the lettering in the front window, talking with the cops, his white shirt red in front and stuck to him, his arms with the sleeves rolled up, gummed with clumps of blood and hair. Dan couldn't see Mrs. Ruszkowski, although he would have liked to look at her some more. He wasn't sure why. It seemed clear that she was dead, so it wasn't a desire to glimpse signs of life in her body. He guessed it was the blood--there was so much of it, and it had all come out of her veins. The cadavers at medical school had been drained of blood. When you'd cut into one and lay back the layers of skin, the veins would be flat, collapsed, and sort of grayish brown. He wondered if her veins were limp and empty yet--if she'd lost that much blood.

"We haven't got all that much to tell them" Jack said, as he started toward the cops again.

Dan nodded. They'd never get them, and this event, this death would stand alone, with no connection to any whole.

He looked over at Phil, who was dipping a spoon in the coffee and sipping from it, and then headed over to him, wondering why he himself, a pacifist, was not moved to retching at the sight of violence.

Dan gently bumped Calvin MacCurdy's thick, carved walnut door with the brass knocker, half hoping the man wouldn't be home again this time. He was late, for one thing, and he never liked to be late for an interview with a patient. And he was tired; he felt drained. The day had been too full already. He wanted to go home and lie on the bed with Colleen and talk about it. If they didn't have Ryan, he could count on being able to do just that, but probably he'd have to sandwich the conversation in around baby problems, or wait till Ryan was asleep, and by then the routines of home would have dulled the importance of everything he'd experienced today.

The door eased inward and a slim man in his late thirties, completely without hair, dressed in jeans and a faded chambray shirt, held the door for Dan.

"Mr. Bryant?"

"Yes. You're Mr. MacCurdy?"

"That's right. Come right in."

Dan stepped hesitantly onto the white shag carpeting, wondering if he should take his boots off. Calvin was barefoot.

"Don't worry about the rug. It's washable."

Dan was certain Calvin was HOR. Since he'd been working on this job, and in contact with homosexuals regularly, he felt he could distinguish them from straight people. All the VDI's claimed to have this

knowledge, and he had doubted their truthfulness and their accuracy until he realized he had the ability too. Colleen still doubted him. He didn't need to hear a lilting, lisping voice or see a swinging behind, and often men with those characteristics were not HOR. There was something in the face, in the eyes--a curious mixture of fear and defiance, generally all smoothed over with graciousness.

"Sit down, Mr. Bryant. Would you care for coffee, beer, pop?"

"No thanks. Nothing."

He sat on the edge of one white velvet sofa and Calvin sat across from him on an identical one. Dan put his notebook on the glass coffee table between them.

"Your blood test for syphilis was positive, Mr. MacCurdy, and I have to find out from you the names of all the people you've had sexual contact with since November of last year so they can be treated."

Calvin nodded and ran a hand over his bald head. Dan thought it looked as if the hair had been shaved off.

"Well yes, I understand, but you see, I'm in a difficult position. I hold an important job at Hudson's--I'm an interior decorator for them--and I wouldn't want them to know about my sexual contacts."

"Everything is absolutely confidential, Mr. MacCurdy." Dan popped open the rings on his notebook and took out a 9.54 form and handed it to Calvin. "See what it says down in the corner there?"

MEDICAL RECORD. This form contains
medical information the disclosure
of which is restricted by 5 U.S.C.
552, (b) (6): 45 CFR Part 5.

"Yes, well, this is good to know. Does this apply to the police, too?"

"Especially the police. Like the other day--no wait! It was

this morning." Dan passed a hand over his face, scratching his palm on the whiskers that were just beginning to grow up out of his skin. He raised his eyebrows and blinked, trying to feel less tired. "This morning I had an interview with a prostitute and I'm going to be taking blood tests on all the prostitutes in the place she works out of." Calvin was nodding, interested. "The police would love to know that house, but they can't get any information on it from us. If people knew we told the cops on them, like heroin addicts and homosexuals, and guys whose houses are filled with stolen merchandise, no one would trust us anymore. No one would give us any information about who they screwed, and we'd get nowhere with fighting syphilis."

"Yes. I understand. That's good to know." He worked a jack-knife out of his pocket and put his foot on the glass table and began paring his toenails. Dan watched the silver blade for awhile and then roused himself.

"Mr. MacCurdy, you're a homosexual, aren't you? Listen, don't be nervous about it. Just tell me the names of your friends so I can see they get treated, okay?"

"Yes. Fine. It's difficult to be gay you know." A whole crescent came off his big toe and fell to the floor. He leaned over and found it among the long fibers of the rug, and placed it in the center of the coffee table. "Things are getting less repressive, I guess, but there's still harassment and a general feeling of disapproval."

"Yes. There is." Dan leaned back and began plucking at his eyebrow hairs.

"Well! I don't mean to dwell on my problems. I'm sure you have problems too. Don't we all."

Dan nodded, remembering as if it were a dream his draft problem, which had been obscured in his mind by the murder of Mrs. Ruszkowski. It seemed almost of no importance now. People had no real control over their lives anyway, so why should he try to fight the draft? If he fought them off, there would be someone else ready to try to change the course of his life against his wishes.

With his right hand he began writing down the names and descriptions Calvin was giving him for the 9.54's, and with his left, he played with the B-B in his cheek, rolling it gently with his forefinger, and wondering vaguely if he was dying slowly from copper poisoning.

CHAPTER 5

Ryan turned his head and whimpered at his mother from where he bobbed up and down on his grandmother Bryant's knee. Colleen pushed herself up out of a deep soft chair that had once been a rich wine color but was not faded to the color a wine stain might leave on a yellow cloth. She went toward the matching couch where Evelyn, Dan's mother, bounced the baby.

"He's hungry. I'll feed him now," she said.

Evelyn pulled the tiny dark haired boy close to her, his small ear near her large one.

"You don't want to leave me, do you sweetie? You want to stay with Grandma." He reached for her red and pearl beaded earring and she snatched it off and gave it to him. "There. He's happy. I knew what he wanted, Colleen."

"Well, I'd like to nurse him pretty soon and get him to bed. If he gets too tired, he really gets grumpy."

"Oh, you're never grumpy, are you sweetness. God love you."

Colleen went out to the kitchen where Dan was seated at the yellow and chrome table, plucking at his eyebrows with his fingernails and studying a paperback book called Face to Face with your Draft Board. He looked up.

I'm just about done with this book. I want to study the Guide to the Draft some more, about the 2-A's."

"God, I can't wait to get home."

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing big. Just subtleties, you know. The tension builds."

"I know," he nodded. "But at least your tension comes from subtleties. Do you realize my whole future, the whole outcome of my life, depends on this personal appearance?"

"My future too, do you realize that? And I don't even get to argue my case before them. I have to leave it up to you."

He smiled.

"You think you could do it better?"

"You know damn well I could. I know all those books front to back and I don't get so uptight talking to people."

"You think I do? Maybe I'll be nervous, but who's had all the experience talking to people, huh? I talk to people everyday. I don't get uptight."

"None of your patients are controlling your future. These bastards are. You'll be so respectful and so meek, and they'll walk all over you."

"That right there shows just how little you know about the whole process. The whole secret with authoritative people is to be respectful and not flaunt your knowledge. If you'd tell these draft board guys off, if you were the one going there tonight, I'd be screwed for sure."

"Children, children," said Evelyn, coming to the doorway with Ryan in her arms. He was holding the earring and immediately dropped it. Several beads broke off and rolled about on the linoleum. "Oh, you bad boy," said Evelyn, without vehemence.

"Don't tell him he's bad," snapped Colleen. "If you give a

four month old kid something that will break, expect him to break it. You're responsible, not him."

"Just cool it, Colleen, will you?" said Dan. He leaned over and collected the beads from the floor. He stood and put them in a pink plastic cup by the sink and set the earring in it too.

Ryan was leaning out of Evelyn's arms toward his mother, waving his thin arms. Colleen lifted him away from Evelyn, convinced she was having to pry him from her mother-in-law's arms, and took him upstairs.

Evelyn sighed and went to the cup to inspect her earring. Dan began reading his book again.

"I guess I should throw these earrings out." She pulled the other one off and dropped it in the cup. "Your father never is good at fixing things like you are. I miss having you around to fix things."

"I'll fix it, mother."

"No, no, you haven't got time. You have to study that." She leaned against the edge of the sink, looking abstractly at her fingernails.

Dan began plucking at his eyebrows as he read.

"Don't do that, Dan. You ruin the fullness of your brows." He picked up a pencil and underlined a passage. "Just think, if you were going into the army, you wouldn't have to do all this studying. It would be a lot simpler."

Dan looked up at her, trying to appear merely interested, but his eyes narrowed anyway.

"The army does some good things, Dan, even if maybe some things aren't so good. It would make you a man. I mean sort of complete you. Your father was, well, immature, but when he came home from the army, he was a real he-man."

"Oh, Mom." His laugh was almost helpless. "I don't want to be a he-man."

She frowned and turned away to snatch up the cup and its contents again, poking at the beads nervously.

"That worries me," she said. She turned to face him again. "And another thing that worries me is that Colleen still wears jeans. She's not a school girl anymore. She's a wife and a mother, and she should dress accordingly."

"Oh, Mom, your ideas are so different from ours, you know? We don't try to change you, so why don't you let us look and do things like we want?"

Her eyebrows went up.

"I just want the best for you, Dan. You know I always have and I always will."

"But your idea of best might be different from mine."

"There can't be two sorts of 'bests.' I'm older, I've had more experiences, and I've learned what's best in a lot of things."

"And going in the army is best for me and wearing dresses is best for Colleen."

"If you want to be considered mature men and women, yes."

"Oh, God," said Dan with a laugh and a slow shake of his head. Then he slammed his book shut. "I'm going out for a walk, I guess. I'll be back at lunch time."

Evelyn set her lips and tossed the earrings into the metal waste can under the sink, where they rattled and clamored against the sides and left a ringing sound in the room after they hit bottom.

Dan walked up Grant street toward town, glancing at all his old

hide-and-seek spots and the houses where his friends used to live. Everything looked smaller and dirtier than the pictures of them in his mind. It bothered him that things did not remain fixed, so that they would always be perceived in the same way.

In Howard Robbins' steep driveway, Dan's father's rusted pickup was parked. Dan Senior worked as a meter reader for Consumer's Power Company.

Dan decided to wait by his father's truck and accompany him on the rest of the mornings rounds. He would be able to see townspeople he hadn't talked with since high school, and the thought of visiting familiar faces warmed his stomach like hot milk. If he ever got rid of his draft problem, he would consider finding a job in this community so that he could live in well-known environs among people who knew the whole of his life. Colleen would have to be persuaded first, though.

After ten minutes of waiting, Dan decided to knock on Dr. Robbins' door. He was a biology professor at the college, a bachelor who lived by himself in this huge, sandstone house perched twelve feet above Grant street.

Dan went to the back door, because he remembered Dr. Robbins' meter was down in the basement, which the back door opened into. No one came after he knocked. He vaulted up the four foot sandstone wall lining the driveway and went to ring the front doorbell. It buzzed loudly, so he knew they would hear it. Still, it took some time for anyone to come.

"Hi," said Dan, as Dr. Robbins, dressed in his bathrobe, pulled open the door. The man's face was blank. "I'm Dan Bryant. Junior."

"Oh! Sure enough. I haven't seen you since Freshman Biology."

"Well, I had Ver. Zoo. from you too, in my senior year."

"Oh that's right, that's right. What can I do for you, Dan?"

"Well, I noticed my dad's truck here, and I just thought I'd join up with him to finish his morning rounds."

"I see." He glanced back over his shoulder, "Well. Come in." His hesitancy made Dan feel as if he were intruding.

"I'm not interrupting a scientific discussion, am I?" Dan's father had always been interested in nature, and often quoted facts Dr. Robbins told him.

"Of course not. Come in, come in."

He hurried to the kitchen and Dan followed.

"Are you about finished, Dan?" Dr. Robbins called down the basement stairs. It sounded strange to hear his father's first name come from the professor. Dan Senior always referred to him as "Dr. Robbins" and Dan had assumed they addressed each other in those formal terms.

"I'll be right up."

"Your father and I were just going to have some coffee, Dan. Would you like some too?"

"No thanks."

They heard his father climbing the long stairs up from the basement and were silent, waiting.

"Hi, Dan."

"Oh, Dan." His eyes met Dr. Robbins' and then he smiled at his son. "What brings you here?"

"I saw your truck outside and thought I'd join up with you on your rounds."

"Fine. I'm glad to have you."

"Sit down, Dan. Both Dans," laughed Dr. Robbins. "I'll get the cups."

Dan noticed his father's eyes as he gazed at Dr. Robbins after they sat. There was a certain soft light in them that was not mild interest alone. It was an expression he would have been quick to say demonstrated a homosexual relationship if it passed between patients. Dan coughed suddenly as saliva he meant to swallow trickled into his windpipe.

"Are you all set for tonight?" asked Dan Senior.

Dan cleared his throat and cast a quick frown at Dr. Robbins.

"I've got more reading to do."

"Your father explained to me what you are doing," said Dr. Robbins.

"Oh."

"I would like you to know I admire you for your principles."

"Thank you." Dan smiled briefly at him, but could not bear to meet the eyes of either of them for long.

Dan Senior complimented Dr. Robbins' coffee, calling him Howard, and as they said other small things to one another, Dan decided it would be too hard on his emotions to accompany his father after all.

Two incidents of his childhood kept presenting themselves in his memory. He couldn't be sure how accurately he had perceived them at the time, or how accurately he was interpreting them now. But they seemed like indications of his father's homosexuality.

When he was about eight years old he and some of his friends, boys and girls, decided to dress up in one of the girl's mother's old dresses and shoes. When Evelyn happened to come outside and see them,

she tore the dress off him. He could remember the sound of the threads bursting on that old flowered house dress. Evelyn clamped him around the forearm and marched him into the house where she washed his lipstick off with such roughness that his lips swelled, and all the time saying nothing. She sent him up to his room, where he methodically kicked a hole in the plaster, which she never scolded him for, and which she mended herself the next day.

The other incident occurred when the three of them drove to Lansing to see the movie Ben Hur. As they were getting out of their car at the curb, a small, sprightly man dashed passed them on the sidewalk, his arms pulling at the air as if to speed him up, one glance he shot over his shoulder terror stricken. Along behind him, more slowly, and with laughter, a gang of boys ran.

His mother had said in a low voice to Dan Senior, "Stay by me, and they won't know."

"Of course they won't know," he had replied.

"Why are they chasing him?" Dan asked. They did not reply at once, and he was curious about the glance they exchanged.

"He must have done something wrong," said Evelyn.

"They're just bullies," said Dan Senior, straining to see down the street.

When Dan was older, he realized the man had probably been a homosexual, but he had never made any further speculations on his parents' comments.

His father stood up from his chair and pulled on his duckbilled hat.

Well, Danny, I suppose we should move along. Thanks for the coffee, Howard."

"My pleasure, Dan."

"You know," said Dan, "I'm beginning to get really nervous about the personal appearance again. I think I'd better go home and study some more."

"All right, son. I understand."

He felt their eyes on him as he went out the door. He sensed shame weighting him and he realized it wasn't so much for having met his father's lover, but for not being able to cope with the situation. He had prided himself on his unprejudiced attitude towards all people and their sexual lives, yet the blasphemous feeling he got when he considered his father as a homosexual let him know he was bound, still, with prejudices.

When Colleen came downstairs, Evelyn quickly tucked away the bit of hand sewing she was working on, her eyebrows high and her lips compressed, and Colleen thought she was still upset from her angry words. When she was in the dining room and could see that Dan was not in the kitchen, Evelyn called out from the couch that he had gone on a walk.

"Oh no!"

"What's wrong?"

Colleen went back to the living room.

"I wanted him to listen for Ryan while I took a walk." She let herself fall into an easy chair.

"I'll do it dear."

"Oh, no, I can't ask you. You're busy, you'll want to be fixing lunch."

"He's asleep now, isn't he? Will he sleep long, do you think?"

"An hour. Maybe more."

"You go on out, then. I remember how it is, with being responsible for a baby all the time. I spent more time crying, day and night, that first year with Dan."

Colleen had heard the stories about Dan's sleeplessness countless times. She wasn't interested, but more than that, she was bothered that her mother-in-law and other people told the same stories again and again, as if the incidents had lasting significance, as if the past had some bearing on the future. It seemed to her that once a day was lived through, that was enough. Reliving it in the mind would only make the next day a more difficult maze to get through.

"Go on," urged Evelyn. He'll be fine here with me."

"All right," said Colleen. "Thanks a lot. I really appreciate it."

Her mother-in-law did not reply. She had closed her face again as she rummaged in her sewing basket.

Colleen walked quickly through Dan's neighborhood. She had spent little time in this part of town while growing up. Once or twice she had delivered papers for one of her brothers when he was sick, and she had hurried through these unfamiliar streets, most of them oiled gravel instead of concrete, and with the smell of the river so heavy in the air. She avoided going downtown, where she was sure to run into someone she didn't want to see. She walked to the end of Maple street where it ran into College, and took the weedy path at the end of College across the railroad tracks and through the old coal yard to Downie. As she neared her own neighborhood, she walked down the alleys that ran behind the large yards, moving briskly so that anyone looking out their window and recognizing her wouldn't have time to run out and call.

She opened the low, morning glory-vined gate to her mother's yard and stepped carefully through the sodden grass. The last spring snow storm had melted only a day or two ago.

No one came when she knocked at the back door, but that wasn't unusual. Often her mother did not hear. Her ears had been checked by hearing specialists many times, with no apparent anomaly in them, but still her mother missed the punch lines on jokes, or thought she heard somebody say one thing when they had said something quite different.

Colleen tried the door, found it unlocked, and went inside.

"Mother?"

"I'm upstairs!" Colleen smiled wryly at the weak, sing-songy tone. "Who is it?" came as an afterthought, down the stairwell.

"Colleen." She took off her shoes and went upstairs to where her mother was ankle deep in things from the spare room.

"I hope you'll pardon me if I don't talk, but I'm in a rush, I'm taking my botony class to Vestaburg Bog in half an hour, and I wanted to wear my old hiking boots--you know, the ones I had at the biological station, because it's so muddy, isn't it, and the bog will be even worse. I'd prefer my new boots to remain nice if I can. I didn't give my old ones to you, did I?"

"You offered them two or three times, but each time they didn't fit."

"They must be here somewhere then."

"Maybe you gave them to the Salvation Army."

"No, no. They were in such good condition."

"Let me help you look."

"No, no, just keep the baby out of all this."

"Mother, Ryan's not with me."

"Oh!" She straightened suddenly, laughing briefly. "Imagine that. Here, let me give you a hello kiss."

"Did you look in the basement for them?" asked Colleen, as her mother stooped to search in more boxes.

"Oh, I doubt if they're down there. I just store things we don't use anymore down there. You know, sleds and B-B guns. Things from the childhood years."

"Would you like me to go check?"

"Well, all right, dear. That would be nice."

Colleen knew her mother was happy to have her out of the room, because talking always distracted her, even from menial chores.

"Oh, here they are! Colleen, come back, I found them."

"I'm right here, Mother." She had gotten as far as the hallway.

"Yes, they were right here, in this box that I was looking in. I must label all these boxes sometime, so I don't have to search."

She carried the boots downstairs, and Colleen followed.

"I'm sorry I don't have time to talk with you dear. Come over on Saturday."

"We'll be gone by then. We're just here for Dan's personal appearance."

"Oh yes. Tonight, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Well, I've been praying for him. I put his name in the box at our prayer group, too. That's on Monday evenings."

Colleen nodded, saying nothing. The idea of a roomful of women holding hands around a box, like witches around a brew, throwing their incantations up to heaven, disgusted her.

"Louise has joined a prayer group too," said Colleen. "She's in the Church of the Nazarene now."

"Is she? Do you get together often?"

"No. She hits Tommy so much, I can't stand to be with her."

"Oh, that's a shame. But have you made other friends down there? How about your landlord and his family? Do you go downstairs and visit with the wife?"

"Mother, I've told you about those people. They fight, they're drunk most of the time, they can't be trusted. They aren't the sort of people you can be friends with."

"Oh, of course not. You wouldn't want to become involved. But maybe if you made friends with them they'd be happier people."

"I doubt it."

"Well, I must buzz on up to the college. If you had some boots and a raincoat, you could join us."

"I have to get back to Ryan."

"That's right. I forget sometimes that you're nursing him. If he were on a bottle, you could leave him with Dan's mother and come. Do you want to try that?"

"No. When he's bigger, I'll come sometime and bring him in the backpack. I love the bog."

"Yes. Well, I must be going. Why don't you look up some of your old friends? Carol and Linda are still living in Newberry Hall, as far as I know, or some of your high school friends might be around."

"No."

"Well, you do as you like. I'm sorry I'm so rushed."

"Could you give me a ride as far as Superior street?"

"Surely. But let's hurry."

All her life her mother had been in a rush, and she hurried every one else along, too. Even when she decreed a family day, she would rush Colleen and her three brothers from one activity to the next. In compensation, Colleen had decided to raise Ryan without the pressures of time schedules. She also had so many memories of lonely struggles with homework, or sewing button eyes on a Teddy bear, or deciding whether or not to try out for choir when her mother was in too much of a rush to give advice, that Colleen wanted to be close by all the time so Ryan could turn to her for help whenever he needed it.

All during lunch, Dan was struggling in his mind with ways to word what he had found out about his father so Colleen would be convinced. It was a chief disagreement between them, sometimes a joke, sometimes not, whether it was possible for Dan to be able to determine a homosexual by observation and conversation.

When the baby cried, Dan rose to go with Colleen.

"I want to tell you something," he said in the living room.

"I thought so. You don't usually leap to take care of Ryan."

"Listen, Colleen. This is something very serious. It's blowing my mind."

She glanced back at him as they climbed the stairs, frowning with concern.

"What is it?"

Ryan let out another yell from the bedroom.

"Get him quiet," said Dan, "and then I'll tell you."

As she changed his diaper, the baby smiled at them and she returned it, but Dan surveyed him with a worried frown.

"It's my dad. Colleen, I don't know how to tell you so you'll believe me. You always ridicule me when I say it."

"Listen. Look at me for a second."

She stood straight, her mouth curved down with exasperation. His pale cheeks sobered her.

"Listen. My father is HOR. I swear it. He is. And it's blowing my mind."

She searched his expression for several seconds, believing in his feeling, but not in the fact.

"He's married, Dan." She said it gently, and then quickly interrupted him when he began to dismiss her statement. "I know, I know, there are bisexuals. Switch-hitters, don't you call them? AC-DC."

The common terms brought pain onto his face.

"You really are convinced?" she asked again.

"Yes."

She picked Ryan up and settled herself on the edge of the bed to nurse him. Dan eased down beside her, and then lay back across the bed.

Ryan began to suck and then pulled away as if he wasn't getting any milk. She tried to push the anxiety out of her mind and muscles so her milk would let down.

"There, there," she said, as his full lower lip began to tremble. She closed her eyes and right away felt the prickle behind her nipples as her milk ducts relaxed and the liquid began to flow.

Carefully she turned her head to look at Dan. He had his eyes closed and she was startled to see that his lashes were wet.

"Dan?"

"God, Colleen, all these years I think I see him as he really is, and then all of a sudden I find out he's different."

"Just in this one respect."

"Yeah, but now I'm wondering if I'm wrong in other respects, too. It's like that earthquake they had when I was in Missouri. Ground that you count on to be solid suddenly shakes and moves. I'm dizzy from it, I'm shaken up."

She nodded and wished she didn't have the baby in her arms so she could hold Dan. Every now and then he became so vulnerable, so frightened, so grave, and all she could hope to do was to reason him out of it, and then clown him back to his half-smiles.

"How did you figure this out?" she asked. "Just by his expression?"

"Yeah." He was defensive. He sat up. "His expression when with his lover."

"His lover!"

"That's right."

"Well who is that?"

"Dr. Robbins. The biology prof."

"Oh. Well, I've known he was a homosexual for years."

"You have not."

"Yes I have. My mother has said it for years."

"See, she can tell too! You're always telling me I can't tell by looking and talking with one."

"Oh Dan, he's so obvious, though. The way he shrugs his shoulders around when he talks, and he walks with his ass stuck right up in the air."

Dan's eyes dulled.

"I guess he's bottom man, then, and my dad is top man."

"Oh, Jesus, don't talk like that about your father."

He lifted his head back up, nodding.

"See? That's how I feel too, and that shows, despite our good intentions, we're still prejudiced against homosexuality."

"I suppose."

Ryan was heavy in her arms, and sucking only intermittantly. She pushed down on her breast near a corner of his mouth and the suction was released. Slowly, she stood, keeping the baby as motionless as possible. She carried him to his crib and lowered him onto his stomach. He pulled his knees up under himself and smiled in his sleep. Colleen smiled back as she covered him.

When she sat again beside Dan, she tried to push him down onto the bed, but he resisted.

"What's wrong?"

He was peering steadfastly into her eyes, and she sighed at his seriousness.

"You're going to worry now, aren't you," he demanded.

"That you're gay? Sure. Whenever you're gone doing your volunteer work at the Open City clinic, I'm going to worry you're with another guy."

"Hey, I'm serious."

"I know. You're always serious. Listen. I don't care who you screw with, male, female, beast or bird. Just so you keep loving me. Okay?"

He smiled and let her kiss his mouth. But when she tried again to get him to lie down, he stood.

"I've got to study some more," he said.

"Oh, come on."

"And you've got to help my mom with the dishes or she'll get down on you again."

"Yeah, yeah."

"And I think you should cut my hair shorter before I go to the draft board tonight."

"Why?" No wait, I know why. So no one will think you're gay, right? But just remember Calvin MacCurdy."

"Who?"

His eyes were brightening, and she felt gratified to have raised his spirits.

"Calvin, the interior decorator for Hudson's. The HOR guy you saw about a month ago. Bald. All his hair shaved off. So see, long hair is a good disguise."

He snorted and pulled her up off the bed.

"C'mon, let's go downstairs."

CHAPTER 6

Dan sat alone in the waiting room of Local Board Number 30. A hand-printed sign on the door leading into the secretary's office read, "Please be seated. We will call you when we are ready." The language of it represented the one-sidedness of the whole draft system, Dan thought, and he, like the machine he was considered, obeyed. Colleen would ignore it, probably. She would march in there and demand an immediate hearing, and at this moment, with his stomach riled with frustration, he thought her method might be better than his.

He began to unbutton his suitcoat so he could slouch more on the bench, but remembered the belt he had on and stopped. He had forgotten to bring a belt narrow enough for the loops in his suitpants and so borrowed one from his father. It was maroon and navy blue elastic with interlocking metal pieces in front. Probably at another time, the style and colors would not have bothered him, but tonight he did not want to have to worry about conveying a false impression.

The door that led into the secretary's office had a mirror on it that Dan believed was two-way. On the door of one of the interviewing rooms at his job they had a two-way mirror, so he recognized the dull dark depths of the glass on this door. He wondered how long they watched him, and what they were looking for.

Across from him on the wall was a bulletin board with two small posters--a U.S. Navy "See the World" and "The Marine Corps Builds Men," and two lists. Dan decided he should give whoever was watching him a

a more interesting spectacle, and he rose and went to read the lists.

One was the month's quota. He didn't recognize any of the names. Most of the inductees were nineteen or twenty and so would have been five or six years behind him in school. On the other list, labeled DELINQUENTS in red, he recognized the name of Jason Brown, who had been three years behind him, in Colleen's class, and a friend of hers. He was in Canada, and had a job in some catalog store like Montgomery Wards. And farther down the list was Leon Krause, who had been in Dan's class, the valedictorian the year Dan graduated. He was the son of the high school principal. He had gone to Canada too, and last Dan knew, was enrolled in graduate school at the University of Toronto. None of the other names was familiar to him, but he thought Colleen might recognize some of them.

He took out his pen and some folded notebook paper from between the pages of his Guide to the Draft and, with a brief glance at the two-way mirror, began copying the list of delinquents.

The door opened before he'd finished the second name.

"Daniel Bryant?" The secretary stood there, very tall with thin legs, but heavy from her shoulders down through her hips. Her dark gray hair was cut at the base of her ears and the bangs were brushed to one side. She looked like a draft board secretary, Dan decided.

He smiled carefully, and she turned her lips up at the corners.

"The board members will see you now, Mr. Bryant." Her resonant voice, slightly nasal, reverberated off the hard walls of the waiting room.

"Okay."

She held the door and he went through into her office which had an olive drab desk in the center of it and filing cabinets the same color backed straight against the walls all around it. As a teenager, Dan had been subjected to a recurring nightmare of faceless bullies surrounding him and he knew he'd have to fight, but he didn't want to, and he wasn't sure he'd be beaten, but the odds were indicative that he would, and he realized he'd have to use his brain, not his muscles, if he was to escape, and his brain would throb and the throbbing would awaken him and he'd find he had hidden himself under his blankets down near the foot of the bed, and the wooden end piece and covers were trapping him, and the sweat on his body was so wet he'd have to dry himself on his sheet and then wrap himself only in the blanket for the rest of the night. Nothing ever happened in the dream. Nobody made a move. But now, here in this office, fenced in by files, he felt he was finally making the first move and relief mingled with his true fear.

"In through that door, please," said Mrs. Peck. He remembered her name. Colleen would refer to her as Impeccable Peck, or Mrs. Impersonal Peckable.

Seated around a long table were members of Local Board Number 30. Their faces were a mere blur down the length of the table. One man had on a lime green knit shirt so he stood out from the others. Dan focused on his face and saw it was old Mr. Boston who had been chairman of Local Board Number 30 for eleven years. He was in his seventies but still had a thick clump of white hair that stood straight up. The sides of his head had been shaved high, with no sideburns, but his cheeks and chin glistened with white mica-like slivers of whiskers.

"This is Dan Bryant, gentlemen," said Mrs. Peck.

Dan nodded and the men murmured unintelligible greetings, their eyes turning from him to papers in front of them or cigarettes they were smoking. Dan stayed attentive at the foot of the table, expecting Mrs. Peck to introduce the men.

"Sit down here, Dan," she said, putting a chair behind him. She went with a long, graceless stride to the other end of the table and sat by Mr. Boston, putting a green paged shorthand pad on the table before her.

Dan sat, keeping his Guide to the Draft in his lap. Without thinking he undid the button on his suitcoat. Remembering the belt, he began rebuttoning himself and was working at getting the slippery button through the hole with his fingers which felt thick and clumsy when Mr. Boston said, with an upheaval of impatience in the center of his sentence, "Well boy, what's your problem?"

Dan kept his eyes on his button a moment longer than he needed to, in order to rearrange the lights in them.

"I don't have a problem," he said, running his eyes down each row of faces before settling on Mr. Boston with what he hoped was a pleasantly neutral expression. "I would just like to discuss why I think I should have the 2-A job deferment."

"Well you see then, there is a problem," said Mr. Boston, "because we can't give out any more 2-A's. President Nixon has struck out that deferment."

"But I had a 2-A already. I had it before he said no more should be given out. It was just revoked last month."

He spoke patiently, although he was beginning to feel frantic inside from their visible obtuseness.

Mr. Boston leaned forward, bumping Mrs. Peck's shorthand pad, and not noticing that he caused her pen to make a mark up the page. Dan wondered if it would mean a word that hadn't been spoken. Mr. Boston hacked a tight cough to the side.

"It's as simple as this, Mr. Bryant. 2-A's are not to be given out anymore. You are 1-A, same as all the 1-A's everywhere, and no 1-A is eligible for a 2-A anymore."

"Well," said Dan, shifting a bit to relax. "Maybe we should discuss how I got to be 1-A. Why was my 2-A revoked?"

"All 2-A's were revoked, isn't that right, Mrs. Peck?"

She nodded, a big going up and coming down of her head, like a horse in slow motion.

"But why was mine revoked?"

Mr. Boston shrugged, his white eyebrows halfway up his forehead. He looked at Mrs. Peck for the answer, as all the rest of the men did.

"We do not need a specific, unique reason for each young man, Mr. Bryant. We are in charge here. We have revoked all the 2-A's."

"Yes," Dan said, nodding. "I understand that all 2-A's have been revoked. I won't argue with you on that point. And I will concede that you are in charge. Still, there is a law pertaining to deferments being revoked, and I understand it to mean that you must give me a reason--that you must give a specific reason to each registrant when you revoke a classification."

"You have misread the law," said Mrs. Peck, not bothering to look up from her shorthand pad as she copied what he had said. Dan wondered if she amended things as she wrote. There was silence around the table after her blunt statement, and Dan got the impression that

none of them, except Mrs. Peck, was at all familiar with the law. He began calmly to rephrase his point.

"By revoking my 2-A, you are saying that you believe my job is no longer necessary to the maintenance of the national health, safety or interest, which is part of the definition of the 2-A deferment. You are saying that you believe venereal disease is under control and so there will be 'no material loss of effectiveness' to the United States Public Health Service's fight against V.D."

"Now just a minute, young man," said Mr. Boston.

"What's your job, anyway?" asked the man sitting just to the right of Dan. He had blondish hair, moist with hair cream, combed closely to his head, and thick glasses rimmed with black.

"I'm a Venereal Disease Investigator with the U.S. Public Health Service."

"Oh, is that right? And what all do you do?"

The other men were gazing at him, but Dan kept his attention on the blond, hoping he might persuade him so he'd have someone to argue with him against the others.

"I take blood tests on people who have been exposed to syphilis and I interview people to find out who they've had sex with so we can find them and eventually eradicate this disease." He looked down the table again to include them all. "Another thing you might wish to consider is that since Nixon's hiring freeze was put on the U.S. Public Health Service, there have been no new VDI's hired or trained. So you see, if you remove me from that job, no one can replace me."

"You do this job here in town?" asked the blond.

"No. In Detroit."

"Oh."

"You see, then," spoke up Mrs. Peck. "It's not in the national interest, but only in the interests of Detroit. You aren't serving this community like you would be in the Armed Services."

Dan frowned, puzzled by her logic.

"Of course it's in the national interest," he said. "Detroit is part of the nation, and anyway, we get cases referred to us from the whole country."

"But I still don't see how that serves this community."

Dan looked down for an instant, weighing his thought, and then put his eyes directly on hers.

"Well, Mrs. Peck, V.D. is everywhere. I'm sure there are even cases of it in this community."

Her cheeks seemed to darken, but it was hard to be sure in the pale, fluorescent flow. She moved her head and the rhinestones in her glasses dripped light.

"Why couldn't you do this job in the military?" demanded Mr. Boston. His brows, half-inch white hairs that bushed out, were like awnings over his eyes.

Dan smiled and shook his head.

"There couldn't be a job like this. Not one that would serve the national interest."

"Have you checked into any of the Armed Services?"

"No, but that's not what I meant. What I mean is it would have to be an international job. I would take blood tests on soldiers, and if they had syphilis, I would interview them, and then track down the women they had sex with, and treat them, and so on, and I'd be

serving the interests of, say, Viet Nam, or Germany, as well as the United States."

"I see," said Mr. Boston, and the other men were nodding. "So that wouldn't do at all."

Dan looked down so no one would see the cynical shine in his eyes.

"Well, Mr. Bryant," said the blond. "It seems to me your job is important for the country. But of course there are a lot of other important jobs you can do for your country, too, including the military."

"Yes," agreed the others, some of them just nodding.

"Well, it doesn't look like you'll get another 2-A out of us," said Mr. Boston. "But we'll send your file on to the State Appeal Board. Let them worry it out."

They were finishing up, and Dan was trying to maintain a placid demeanor as he urged his mind to discover new angles with which to persuade them about his 2-A.

"It may give you a precedent to work with to know that most of the other men I work with in Detroit have 2-A's."

"Well, maybe Detroit boards do things differently than us," said Mr. Boston, leafing through Dan's file on the table in front of him. "We do things the way we think we should up here."

"Most of those men are also from small communities," said Dan, sensing he was pressing the issue too far. "Only one of them is with a Detroit board, and there is one with Pontiac."

"Well, we don't need to know any of that. We don't follow along after what someone else does, but we work out what we think is right, Mr. Bryant." He looked up. "If that is all you have to say, you may go now."

"Well, I think we should discuss my 1-0 now."

"Your what?"

Mrs. Peck pounded her index finger on something in the file.

"Conscientious Objector," she said.

"What's this, you just handed this in or something?"

"No. It's been in there since I was twenty."

"1965," he read off the top of it. "You don't still believe all that you wrote down here, do you?"

"I am more firm in my beliefs now than when I wrote it."

He felt the lingering eyes of many of the men on him, and began to hope that maybe this classification request would be granted.

"You're against violence? You've never been in a fight?"

"Never. I have always refused to be pressured into fights."

"It's hard for me to believe," said Mr. Boston. Mrs. Peck was pointing out two letters of reference to him, and whispered that they should be passed around to the other men. Mr. Boston shook his head.

"Have you read my Form 150?" asked Dan.

"At one time or another, all the men have read it," said Mrs. Peck.

"Which would you rather have?" asked the blond. "The job deferment or the 1-0?"

Dan sat still, having difficulty focusing his thoughts as the frustration expanded inside him. He spoke quietly.

"The 1-0 is a way of life with me. The job I'm working on reflects my beliefs--I am helping people--and I'm working on a personal level with them. These are consistent with my beliefs."

"So which classification would you rather have?"

Dan closed his eyes for a moment, knowing he'd have to choose for them.

"I believe I should be placed in the lowest classification for which I am qualified, as the law requires you to do. Being a conscientious objector is a way of life with me though, as I said."

"If we gave you that, you'd have to do alternate service," said the blond.

"Yes. But my job would qualify as alternate service."

"I doubt it," said Mr. Boston. "It pays you a good salary and lets you live where you want and you're too close to your family. It wouldn't be fair to the military men if you CO's didn't have some hardships too. You'd probably have to go work up to the Traverse City Mental Hospital."

Dan said nothing.

"Is there anything else you'd like to bring up?" asked Mrs. Peck.

"Just that I hope you will reconsider me for a 2-A, now that you know the importance of my job. And I hope you will all re-read my Form 150--especially the letters of support."

"So you've got a baby son now, huh?" said Mr. Boston, still leafing through the file. Even though it was probably just interest, or even light-heartedness on his part, Dan was aware of a protective attitude rising in him, as if Mr. Boston was calculating how long until Ryan was old enough to draft.

"If you want to send us anything else about your beliefs or your job, we'll hold the file for a week before we send it to the State Appeal Board," said Mrs. Peck. "If you mail things as soon as you get home, they'll get here in time."

"I'll mail you an up-to-date letter explaining my pacifistic beliefs," said Dan. "By certified mail."

"Oh yes," said Mrs. Peck. "I notice you always do that. I have to sign for everything you send."

"Well, you may go now," said Mr. Boston.

Dan grasped his Guide to the Draft and stood. They all began to talk among themselves, about the clear evening weather and the slow pace of the meeting, and the crop of winter wheat.

"You can find your way out, can't you Dan?" called Mrs. Peck from the end of the table, and Dan nodded.

In the waiting room were two other young men on the bench, watching Dan with eager, nervous eyes. Dan pointed at the mirror on the door.

"Two-way mirror," he said.

"Oh yeah?"

Their faces showed they hoped he would tell what the ordeal was like, but Dan didn't want to have to put it in words yet. When he got home he would type the dialog and mail it here to be included in his folder so the State Appeal Board could see the attitude and the errors of Local Board Number 30.

He went to the bulletin board and copied the rest of the names of delinquents. Under the last name, on his own list, he printed darkly, 'Daniel Bryant.'

He sat in his car in the parking lot struggling to quell the desire in him for violent revenge. Yet even when the rage was at its peak, it wasn't the individuals he wanted to destroy, but the system that would put other people in charge of his life.

When he parked on the dirt in front of his parent's front lawn, he caught a glimpse in the dim evening light of Dan Senior, bent over, planting seeds in the garden out back. The sight, so familiar, calmed

Dan until he remembered his father was a homosexual. The scene shifted in his perception, and he hurried out of his car and in the front door.

"How did it go?" Colleen asked instantly.

He handed the list to her and then took off his suitcoat and unbuckled the belt and snapped it out of the loops. Colleen looked at him a second longer, her unanswered question still loud in his ears, and then read over the list as she followed him out to the kitchen.

"Jason Brown. I already knew he'd be on here. Hey, here's Carl Kramer! I never knew he'd have the guts to refuse." Evelyn moved behind Colleen where she could get a look at the names. "Carl was a year behind me, do you remember him?"

Dan shook his head and turned the cold water knob at the sink and let the water rush over his fingers, soothed by the flow, even though the water was numbing his flesh.

"He was short, pudgy, glasses, very mild, very sweet. He sat behind me in study hall and he'd let me read these fragile little love poems he wrote."

"To you?" asked Evelyn.

"To the universal lover. Male or female. I wonder where he is now."

"Leon Krause," read Evelyn. "That was a sensation when he lit out. I saw his parents a month or so afterward at a party our church had for a missionary. Someone mentioned Leon and they wouldn't talk about him. Said they'd 'prefer not to discuss him.' But I was in Betty's Lingerie and Apparel a few weeks ago and Marie Miller who works there--she's Toby Miller's mother, Dan--Toby who's training to be a dentist at the University of Michigan. Well, anyway, Marie said Mr. and Mrs. Krause are on good terms with Leon now. He's got his Masters

degree and is teaching at the University of Toronto, and he married a girl who's working on a Ph.D., can you imagine that?"

"That's a lot of school," said Colleen, softly.

She folded the list. She had kept her thumb over Dan's name at the bottom of it so Evelyn wouldn't see it, Dan had noticed.

"Let's see if I know any of those other names," said Evelyn, reaching for the piece of paper.

Colleen turned and faced her and read them off, one by one. Dan leaned against the edge of the sink, sipping cold water out of a cup, pleased with the balmy wind coming in under the window he had pushed up an inch. He watched Colleen's back, her long red hair, freshly brushed, giving off sparks, the belt on her low jeans slanted up as she stood with one leg pushed out to the side.

"No, none of those names ring a bell," said Evelyn.

"Let's pack," said Dan. "Let's go home tonight."

Colleen turned, frowning slightly, but with a merry light in her eyes.

"Tonight?" said Evelyn. "I understood you took tomorrow off from work too, so you could stay overnight and then go in the morning."

"Yes, Mother, but I'd rather travel home tonight. I think the traffic will be lighter."

"Oh, you're too tired. He's too tired, Colleen. Stay the night and then go after breakfast."

"No, I think we should go tonight," said Colleen, holding Dan's eyes with her own. He looked down as he felt passion move onto his face.

"Well, what about your dress? You haven't even tried your dress on yet?" Evelyn fluttered around to where she could see Colleen.

"What dress?" asked Dan, turning to close the window. The air was getting cold.

"You mean he hasn't seen it yet? You didn't tell him Colleen?"

"Your mother very kindly sewed me a dress, Dan. A Vogue original. At Sue Brennerman's suggestion. Isn't that nice?"

"Sue Brennerman? My old girlfriend? Isn't she married yet? She's been trying to get a husband since the ninth grade.

"She married that nice Tom Dailey," said Evelyn, her eyes droopy with reproach. "I wrote you about it."

"What's Tom doing?"

"Farming. They have a nice place out on Luce Road."

"Oh yeah? That sounds great. I always liked him, even though he is gullible."

Colleen gave a raucous laugh.

"Now Dan," said Evelyn. "Sue is a remarkable young woman. She sews all her clothes and she's very charming. She visits me at least once a month, as well as many other people in the town."

"I'm sorry, Mother. I remember you always liked her. And I'm glad she's finally married and not to some clod, either. Tom's a nice guy. I imagine he's got a 2-C and that's how he's avoided the draft. Maybe I should become a farmer."

"Well, that certainly sounds like a silly idea--all your God-given medical talents wasted on plants and animals."

Dan shrugged and looked at Colleen.

"Well, maybe you should try the dress on before we get packed."

She narrowed her eyes at him and stuck her tongue out just far enough for him to see it, and not his mother.

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"Yes, get it on, Colleen," said Evelyn. "And Dan, you didn't answer when Colleen asked how it went tonight."

"There's not much to answer, except they're all a bunch of ethnocentric sticks-in-the-mud and there's no way I'm going to get a 2-A from them. No way."

The back door opened quietly and Dan Senior moved in, getting out of his cracked, muddy shoes by stepping on the backs of them. He glanced at each face, smiling.

"Farmer's Almanac said tonight was the night to plant my above ground vegetables, full moon and all, so that's what I've been doing. The moon's coming up just now, and it's a sight to behold, if any of you would like to behold it."

"In a minute, Dan. Colleen's going to try on her new dress," said Evelyn.

"I'll do that afterwards," said Colleen, and she grabbed Dan's hand and pulled him out onto the concrete slab back porch with her.

The horizon was hazy and the moon was huge and pink, like a bubblegum bubble, and Dan felt a curious fear that it might pop and be gone from them forever. Usually he could view the moon and the sun and stars with confidence, certain they would remain in place. Colleen always watched for falling stars, but Dan kept his gaze on well known constellations and missed seeing most of the streaks of light that Colleen exclaimed about.

Dan Senior and Evelyn stepped out onto the porch.

"Beautiful, Dad," Dan murmured, as if the older man had made the moon bloom by himself.

"It's hard to believe men have been there and back," said Colleen.

The others agreed with her, but Dan said nothing.

"C'mon, Colleen, try on your dress," said Evelyn.

"All right."

Dan went with her upstairs and helped her slip it on.

"I hate this damn dress," Colleen said in a whisper before he could comment.

His spirits were rising as they usually did when she was fierce in her humorous way.

"Why it's adorable, Colleen. You look so charming in it."

"Shut up."

"My, even a bow in back. A Shirley Temple original is it?"

"I hate it. This is the only time I'll ever wear it. Then it's going to the Salvation Army."

He laughed.

"Hey, I've got a better idea," he said. "When I burn the draft board down, we'll use it as tinder. Soak it with gas."

She grinned at him, standing still, biting her lip as she surveyed his face.

"We'll have the whole day together tomorrow," she said.

CHAPTER 7

Colleen stood in the hot sunlight coming in the kitchen window, watching the Weber's horse search for the break in the fence. At first she had been unable to see it, she was too high and far away. But with Dan's binoculars she found where the strand of electric wire missed a link between the weathered posts and lay hidden in the tall grass.

Ryan was busy with pans, having learned to sit up so that his arms were free for making noise. The clashing and grinding of metal lids and pots and the clunk of the spoon she had given him as he beat an overturned frying pan filled Colleen's ears as she followed Pony with the binoculars. The noise released her mind from worry about Ryan while her eyes were occupied.

Pony ran up and down the acre long stretch of pasture, tossing his head so that his burr-tangled mane flopped on his neck. Dust rose from the path he had worn. It was as dry as August and they were only into June.

Colleen willed the horse to see the break and dash out into the yard, lush with foot high grass and clover that the landlord, Talbert Weber, had not yet mowed this season.

"Slow down, slow down, slow down," she murmured, hearing her voice occasionally between crashes and scrapes and squeaks of aluminum.

Last winter Pony had escaped and she looked out just as the small rusty animal, half horse, half pony, ran up the hill across the road and through the snow drifted fields to Barney Cole's place, where he stayed

with Barney's three geldings for several weeks. She had laughed, hugging herself, as she watched him go. The Weber's consistently forgot to give him hay and let his water sit frozen for days. Dan had begun making late evening excursions to the barn to care for the horse while the Webers were busy with their FM radio vibrating the walls with bass and their voices screaming fun or rage. When the hay ran out altogether in March and several days passed with the horse getting nothing, Colleen took a box of oatmeal out to the open, icy barn and put it in the twenty pound lard can that was Pony's feeder. The next day Pony escaped.

After twenty-five minutes of running, Pony gave up and went to the southeast corner of the pasture and dropped to his knees, rolling heavily onto his back and thrashing his bottom and back and neck in the loose dirt, his thin legs waving grotesquely above his belly.

Ryan crawled to the wooden chair in which she sat. He grasped an orange rung, examining it for a moment, his blue eyes wide and darting, and then picked at the cloth of her jeans and made pleading sounds.

"Okay, little boy," she said, leaning over to lower the heavy binoculars onto the table. She hefted Ryan and they both watched Pony resume his running.

"Horsie. Horsie," said Colleen as Ryan pointed carefully, his small finger pressed against the glass, bent backwards at the first knuckle. She smoothed his soft, glossy hair, reddish in the sunlight. "Well, I think we'll tuck you in now." He didn't nurse before his nap anymore. A week ago he had begun turning his head away from her breast at that feeding time. He ate mostly solids, now, and nursed only before bed at night. Colleen was looking forward to when he'd be finished with it altogether so that her breasts would return to their normal size and

so her shirts would never have wet spots from leaks. At the same time, she tried to appreciate in these last few weeks the joy she felt when she nursed, knowing it would be years before she did it again, if ever.

Colleen carried Ryan to the bedroom and laid him on his stomach on the double bed so he could play with his squeaky puppy while she changed his wet diaper. Before she was finished snapping the legs of the cotton overalls, he had put his head down to rest.

"C'mon, let's put you in your nice soft bed, little bear."

The crib was at the end of the big bed. She lifted him into it and covered him and kissed him.

"Sleep tight, little one."

Usually she went to the living room and read while he slept, but today she settled herself by the kitchen window with the binoculars. The summer breeze and warm sun coming in stretched her emotions up to excitement. She was careful not to think about being excited. If she thought about it, she'd realize this day was like any other, like all the others, and there was nothing happening yesterday, today, or tomorrow that would warrant such a frenzy inside her. And if she thought about her excitement she'd remember days such as this one when she could do something properly thrilling to celebrate the day. This last spring she had spoiled many pretty days by thinking.

Pony had slowed to a brisk walk, but still tossed his head with frustrated excitement. His chances were better for finding the break at this pace, and every time he neared the opening, Colleen held her breath and called to him in her mind to turn and come out.

She was tempted to go outside and lure the horse out of his pasture. The Weber's weren't home, so no one would know.

Wanda Weber and the kids were gone every day except Sunday, but Talbert often stayed home. Every morning Colleen checked to see if his car was parked three-fourths of the way into the small pole barn. He drove a red and white rented Ford with white wall tires and a tall, thick ham radio antenna on the rear which kept the car from going into the barn all the way. He had no ham radio in his car, but one day Colleen watched from the window as he drilled a hole in his rented automobile and installed a fancy, flashing silver antenna. There were many days when the car sat in the barn until noon while Talbert slept or listened to WJR on his FM radio. Especially since spring had come. Last Colleen and Dan knew, he was working as a magazine salesman for some firm out of Detroit.

Colleen always checked for his car so she would know whether or not to watch for the mailwoman and rush down as soon as she came. When Dan's new 1-A had come from Local Board Number 30, a month after his personal appearance, it too looked as if it had been tampered with. There had been no word from the State Appeal Board.

Unlike her husband, Wanda Weber was a steady worker. She'd yell hoarsely from her bed at the two younger children, Joellen and Butch, to get up, to eat, to get their coats on and get out to the school bus, and then soon after she'd be running the shower and flushing the toilet and Talbert would be yelling at her from the bed, and the word "bum" would pulse regularly in both their voices. Then Wanda would slam out the door and race the motor of her white Chevrolet, several years old, and roar around the circular drive, kicking gravel into the tall grass, and speed to her job at the Sail-In bar in Brighton. Now that summer vacation had begun, she and the children rushed in and

out of the rooms together, while Talbert yelled from the bedroom, and then the three of them drove off together. Joellen, the ten-year-old, had told Colleen they stayed with a sitter in Brighton who had seven of her own children, including a new baby, and watched ten more children. Colleen shook her head, numbed by the thought of it. One child weighted her with cares and chipped at her time until there weren't many minutes in a day she felt were her own. With seven children, or seventeen, there would be no chunks of time, no splinters, for solitary indulgences.

Pony was never going to find the break. Colleen put her binoculars on the table and frowned at the horse as he went to take another dust bath. The day would be unlivable if he didn't get free.

She went to the refrigerator and carefully pulled it open, holding the door as she pulled the handle so the noise of the catch wouldn't waken Ryan. The crisper drawer squeaked slow, high, harmonizing sounds. She took out two small Jonathans and pushed the drawer in again and soundlessly latched the door.

Pony saw her coming down the shaky, outside stairway. He stood in his dust hole, his ears forward and moving as she came.

"Apples, Pony," she called as she waded through the shin-high grass. She stood at the opening and he came and stopped at the spot where he should if the fence had been there. Colleen made her hand flat and he nuzzled the apple into his mouth with his soft, pliant lips. His square teeth showed for a moment, and the juices ran out of his mouth as he chewed. She stepped back and offered him the second apple. He tilted his ears forward and waited for her to come closer or throw it. His tail, full of burrs, swung rhythmically around and under his legs and onto his back.

"C'mon out, Pony. The fence is gone."

He blinked one eye as a fly crawled into it. She walked into the pasture and held the apple out near his side. He turned and came for it and she walked backwards, using it as a lure, and went out the opening with him following. When they were well away from the fence, under one of the pear trees, she let him have the fruit. He chewed it with the same signs of relish running out of his mouth.

"Well, Pony. You're free."

He watched her to see if she were going to feed him more, and then lowered his head and began eating the thick, moist grass as if it had been at his feet all along.

"Run away, Pony. Go to Barney Cole's farm."

He walked an aimless step this way or that every few chomps. Colleen went warily behind him and smacked his rear, leaping to the side as she did it. He looked up at her and then continued eating.

"You dumb horse. You stupid bum. You're free, don't you know? You should run away and see your friends. You might never get another chance."

He moved a foot or so more, his clump of a tail swinging up and whisking down.

She watched him for a few minutes, with an ache of the disappointment out of all proportion to the cause. She crossed the yard to the stairs and went up.

From inside the house, Colleen watched Pony as he moved about the yard, still hoping to be able to see him realize he was loose and run. She moved from the kitchen window into the living room and finally into the bedroom as Pony moved to the north side of the house. He stood

blinking flies out of his eyes under the hickory tree, finished with eating the tall grass around his feet.

Colleen gave up and decided to sunbathe on the small wood porch, the size of a beach towel, at the top of the outside stairway. She figured she had an hour before either Ryan awoke from his nap or any of the Webers arrived home. They began gathering at four, if the older boys came, four-thirty if the boys stayed away all night.

At the first squeak of the drawer as she tried to get out her bikini, she decided it was too much trouble to quietly get ready. She moved gently over the rug so her sandals wouldn't scuff it, past Ryan's crib and out to the kitchen.

Last spring she had begun reading romantic suspense novels and she got the one she was half-way through off the top of the refrigerator and carried it out to the porch.

She sat on the top step and took her sandals off and shut her eyes as she slowly rubbed her bare soles on the worn wood step. The sunlight was rich yellow and the breeze cool, and she thought her joyous feeling might return.

She heard the rush and muted thumps of a car coming down the gravel road and she looked under the railing at it, hoping it was Dan coming home early, knowing it wouldn't matter, nothing would change, if he did come early, knowing that the hoping was just a habit to be gotten rid of.

It was a white car, Wanda's. Colleen heard it skid into the driveway and come grinding up the hill. The car had dents in both front fenders from times Wanda misjudged the opening for the driveway between two maples at the bottom of the hill.

Colleen stood, snatching up her book and sandals and went quietly into the house. She didn't care to have Wanda, most often drunk, strike up a conversation with her.

She heard a shout from outside just as she was closing the screen door, and she winced, certain Ryan would awake.

"Pony! came Wanda's heavy, hoarse voice, louder now that the motor was shut off. The kids began screaming his name.

Colleen went to the living room window and could see the horse's rusty shape against the green hay fields across the road, a half mile away. She smiled briefly, but felt no real joy.

Another car came into view--red and white with a flashing silver antenna stuck straight up. With overdone caution, Talbert slowed till he hardly moved and took fifteen or twenty seconds to negotiate his car between the trees at the bottom of the hill.

Colleen snorted derisively and stored the scene away in her head with other details of the day to tell Dan.

Talbert crept up the drive, his car looking like some huge, bright fish lazily gliding upstream. And Talbert himself was the fish's eye. That's how he seemed to Colleen - flat-faced, dull, with thick, black rimmed glasses that sat too low on his nose and were tilted so one eye looked out of the center of a lense and the other sort of out of the top of the other lense. He had sideburns, though, with his flat-top, to show he was hip and still a good catch.

Colleen tiptoed to the bedroom door, avoiding the squeaks in the kitchen floor, and peered in through the crack at Ryan. He was sleeping soundly on his back with his arms thrown up above his head. That was supposed to be a sign of a well-adjusted child, according to the books, and Colleen always checked for it when he slept on his back.

The voices were shooting back and forth between alto and bass downstairs with an occasional child soprano thrown in. The FM radio came on so loud the treble notes hurt Colleen's ears, and the floor buzzed from the bass. Ryan's arms came down and he rolled over onto his stomach.

"Oh God damn them" Colleen said soundlessly, her stomach hot with anger. Ryan relaxed again and she moved away into the living room and stood staring at the closet door.

Dan had installed an FM wireless microphone in there, running a wire up into the attic and wrapping it around a bolt that held Talbert's FM antenna to the roof. By tuning the FM wireless microphone to the station Talbert was tuned to, Colleen and Dan were able to shut off the sound. Usually Talbert just tuned to another station, so it wasn't a remedy, really, but it eased their frustration to give him a hard time and to keep him wondering what was wrong with his radio. He'd had repair men out two times to check it.

Colleen stood, debating whether or not to turn it off. Sometimes Talbert just turned it up louder, either because (Dan's theory) he suspected them and retaliated that way, or because (Colleen's theory) he was stupid enough to think he could keep the station tuned in better with extra volume.

Colleen opened the closet door and stepped in and carefully turned the plastic tuning tool inserted in the microphone. Right away the station blanked out. She waited for him to turn to a different station, leaning on the door jamb close to five minutes. She wondered what they were arguing about that had them so absorbed so as not to notice their background music had vanished.

There was an attic off the bathroom that was right over the Weber's kitchen, the room they usually congregated in. They had no furniture in the dining room and only a couch that folded out into a bed in the living room where Talbert sometimes slept. Colleen often crept out into the attic to listen to their arguments, as if they were radio dramas.

She opened the low, wood door and stepped down onto the slats and rafters. The room was too low to stand in and on another occasion she had fixed a seat by putting an old quilt over a splintering wood box she stored out there, knowing it would be neat for something, someday.

"Listen, you son of a bitch, I do what I want and you damn well keep out of it. Quit calling George and quit dragging me home from the bar at three in the afternoon."

"I'll call him, dammit, and I'll keep dropping in on you, when I feel like it. You're my wife and I keep tabs on you."

"I say no."

"I say shove it. I'm letting you work and I want to know just what kind of work you're doing."

"Letting me work!" She laughed one high derisive shout. "If it wasn't for me bringing a check home every week these kids would have starved and you too, you worthless bum."

"Well I know one thing, your check's not big enough to feed all us and keep you in new clothes, too. I believe George that you're whoring on the side."

"And so what if I am." I know you screw around too. At least I make some money at it."

There was a low sound from him and the table scraped and there

was a cracking sound that must have been a slap, and the two kids began screaming and crying.

"Leave her alone, Daddy!"

"Whore! Slut! Bitch!"

Then he screamed a terrible, strangled, animal sound, and the screen door slapped shut as someone ran outside, and the inside door slammed shut, the glass rattling. Colleen stretched her eyes wide even though there was nothing to see but the dim attic shapes.

"You stabbed me, goddamit!" came Talbert's raging voice from outside. "Goddamit, I'm bleeding, I'm going to die."

"Good. Die."

"Mommy, he's bleeding all over your car," came Butch's voice.

"Good, I hope he dies."

"Let me in! Jesus Christ, Wanda, I'm going to die!"

She was opening and shutting the refrigerator, slamming pans onto burners and lids on pans.

Colleen stepped out into the bathroom, listening briefly for Ryan and, hearing nothing, hurrying to the bathroom window, standing in the tub, and peering cautiously out the window.

Talbert's hand was red and dripping. He was clinging to the wrist and purposefully letting the blood color Wanda's white car. Then he disappeared under the overhang of the roof and began methodically kicking the door.

Colleen slipped back out into the attic.

"Keep it up, Talbert, just keep it up," came Wanda's low voice. "I'll come out there and cut off the only part of you that matters. Dirty son of a bitch. Pimp. Gigolo."

"Mama, you better call a doctor." The kicking had stopped.

"Just shout out there for him to go to the hospital. The alcoholic hospital in Brighton, I mean. Comes home drunk, can't even hold his liquor. If it wasn't for you kids, I'd of left him long ago, believe me."

"He's taking his shirt off, Mom. He's wrapping it on his hand."

"First smart thing he's done in a month."

"He's getting in his car."

"Good. I hope he bleeds to death on the way there."

"He's going to be mad when he comes home, Mom."

"So, I'll stick him again. In the stomach. Maybe in the eye."

"There he goes down the driveway."

"I hope he hits a tree."

"Daddy never hits the trees."

"Ah, shut up, will you? Set the table. We're going to have these hotdogs. Get the milk out, Joellen."

Colleen climbed out of the attic and shut the door. Ryan was making small sounds and squeaking his rubber puppy. A surge of frustration came into her chest thinking how she'd wasted her free time when he was napping, but she gave him a calm smile when she picked him up, not wanting to taint his life with her anger.

CHAPTER 8

Colleen pushed the stroller down the edge of Van Amberg in the loose gravel, sweating already in the heat of the humid, hazy morning. The mailwoman sped by in her custom painted Rambler, black with lacy white bands of trim, her hand waving over the top of the car at Colleen from out of the right window. Colleen smiled and waved and then grew grim. She pushed the stroller further into the road where the gravel was packed from the weight of cars, where she could make better time.

Talbert's car had been squatting in the barn when she left for her walk, and now the mail would be in their box for him to peruse. They had not yet received a decision from the State Appeal Board. Whatever it was, good or bad, they didn't want the Weber's to know it. Dan said he expected a 1-A, but Colleen, having noticed his averted eyes as he spoke, was sure he really expected his 2-A back this time. She had no expectations in her brain, but her nerves were geared for the 1-A and a quick move to Canada. Having to move would at least release them from the same dusty cobwebs the Webers were struggling in.

Finally she reached the top of the last hill and had a clear view of the mailboxes. Talbert came striding down the lawn from the house, his shirttails flapping, his untied tennis shoestrings dragging and hopping. Colleen saw him shove several envelopes into their box.

Her mouth went dry and her heart, already beating hard from exertion, sped faster. She wanted to race down the hill, waving her fist, yelling her rage, but she felt rooted in the road. Her fear was

incomprehensible. She had never been one to be shy or slow to act, but today she simply wanted to pretend she had not seen. It came to her that lately she had been fearful of other encounters, too, like at the grocery store when she had to hand the correct change to the clerk at the check-out counter. In fact, Dan had bought the groceries the last two times, because she told him her head ached.

Slowly she went down the hill, gazing across the rolling fields at Barney Cole's farm. From the corner of her eye she watched Talbert Weber as he threw some beer cans that someone had heaved onto his lawn back out into the road. She decided that if he was still within speaking distance when she reached the mailboxes, she would confront him. The muscles in her legs were weak with trembling, and her palms were sweating on the handle of the stroller.

He saw her coming and leaned on the mailboxes, grinning. She stopped yards away from him, realizing she didn't fear violence from him, but instead felt as if she were meeting someone important, coming face to face with a music or movie star. The realization sickened her, and in retribution, she made her voice harder, uglier than she might have otherwise.

"What were you doing in our mailbox, Mr. Weber?"

"Your mailbox? Not a damn thing. Believe you me, that's a federal offense. You wouldn't catch me in anybody's mailbox, except my own."

"I don't believe you. I saw you from the top of the hill."

"You don't have to believe me. It's a free country."

He hiked up the hill to the house, bent at the waist, and then vaulted onto the concrete porch that used to have a railing around it, but had only the supporting posts now. The FM radio blared suddenly.

Colleen pulled open the mailbox. There were two letters from Michigan Local Board Number 30. She held one in each hand, staring at them, forgetting for a moment about Ryan and forgetting to inspect the letters to see if they had been opened. One envelope had been expected, not two.

She put the one in her right hand back in the box and tore the end off the other one. She pulled out the sheet of paper and with shaking hands, unfolded it. It was a brief letter from Mrs. Peck saying "We are enclosing SSS Form 110 notice of classification having been classified 1-A by the Appeal Board vote 4 to 0," and signed "For the Board, Helen Peck." The Form 110 was the draft card to be folded in half, and the 1-A, the x in the 'by Appeal Board' box, and the vote were typed in red. The color burned through the buzzing numbness that Colleen was muffled in and sparked some anger in her. But the other envelope was waiting.

She set the first letter in the mailbox so the breeze wouldn't whisk it down the dusty road and picked up the second letter. She remembered Dan hated the ends torn off envelopes and pried the flap up on this one. The paper she pulled out fluttered in the wind and she clutched it tight, feeling the perspiration on her fingertips soiling it.

Across the top, in capital letters, was printed "ORDER TO REPORT FOR INDUCTION." Colleen couldn't remember for a moment what induction was and was thinking vaguely maybe a physical, but she forced her mind to comprehend, yelling internally at herself to face up to it. "The President of the United States, To Daniel Kelly Bryant, Jr., 4141 Van Amberg Road, Brighton, Michigan 48116, GREETING: You are hereby ordered for induction into the Armed Forces of the United States."

A buzzing, like a mild, steady electrical shock started in her heels and traveled to her hair, making it feel prickly on her head. She did not know how many times she read the notice through, or how long she remained standing by the mailbox, but Ryan was shifting in the stroller, beginning a fussy cry.

With the papers firmly pressed between the thumb and forefinger of her right hand, she pushed the stroller up the driveway. She tried to rally her spirits by swearing in her head at the draft board, but the only words she could shape were "Order to Report for Induction," as if it were a profanity more shocking than any other. It was the word "order" that bothered her, that gave her a lack of control, so that she felt as if she were elevated a few inches off the ground and could get no traction as she trudged up the hill.

She decided she'd wait until Ryan was settled for a nap before calling Dan. Maybe she could sort out her own feelings by then so that he'd get a sense of direction from her words when she gave him the news. It would frighten her to see the vacant look that came onto his face in times of stress, or his silence or hollow words on the phone. She was used to being stronger than him, but it was still a heavy burden. That thought brought her closer to tears than any other.

Jack Mason answered.

"Hi, Colleen. How you doin'?" His voice was like a roller coaster, up and down and twisting around, and Colleen didn't feel up to the ride.

"Is Dan there, Jack?"

"Certainly. I'm looking at the back of his shaggy head right now."

"I'd like to talk to him."

"Okay."

She rubbed her fingers back and forth across her forehead, feeling the dents of her frown. She had the notices laid out on the table before her, because she knew Dan would want the details.

"Hi, baby."

"Dan, bad news."

"1-A?"

"Yes."

"You got it right there? Read it to me."

It was like a litany now.

"We are enclosing SSS Form 110 notice of classification having been classified 1-A by the Appeal Board vote 4-0. For the Board, Helen Peck."

"Well. Very interesting."

"You're taking it better than I thought you would."

"I told you I expected it."

"Yes, I know. Listen Dan, Impeccable Peck sent an extra surprise, too."

"What do you mean?" His voice was lower, thinner.

"An order to Report for Induction" There was silence this time.

"Dan?"

"I'm still with you. It's two now. I better get moving."

"Where? What do you mean?"

"I'm going to try to get Lafferty to take my case."

"Oh. That's right. You think it will do any good?"

"It's worth a try. If I can't get him, I'll find some other lawyer. Don't worry, baby, we're not beat yet."

When she hung up she sat slumped at the table, staring out into Pony's empty pasture. There were shards of thought sticking this way and that in her mind, but she couldn't organize them. She wasn't listening to Talbert's radio, but the bass kept thrusting itself into her brain, seeming to bypass her ears, and keeping her thoughts from cohering. She wished Dan were here so that she could lean into his arms for awhile. Finally she rose and went into the bedroom where the sounds of the radio were fainter, and stretched sideways across the double bed on her stomach. The window was open and she could see a robin out in the hickory tree, his markings darkened from being against the brilliant blue sky. Every now and then his chirp was spaced just right between the notes of the music downstairs so that she could hear it.

Dan handed the phone back to Jack and then leaned forward over his desk.

"Got the 1-A, man, from the Appeal Board."

Jack shook his head solemnly as he finger combed his full black natural that sat back from his high forehead and bald spot like a hat.

"What are you going to do, man?" His eyebrows were high above his rimless glasses.

"Get a lawyer. Lafferty or one of his associates if they'll have me."

"Oh, yeah, he's the guy who led the anti-war demonstration down Woodward Avenue."

"Yeah. Their firm is rated one of the ten best in the country as far as draft resisters go."

"Really fine, man. I bet it'll cost you a bundle, though."

"Yeah. I hope they let me spread the payments out." He stood up and gave his chair a shove so it rolled back to his desk. "So anyway, that's where I'm going now. I've got an interview upstairs at three, so could you take it for me?"

"Sure, Dan."

"Thanks Jack." Dan smiled at him and then went to put the papers away on his desk.

A strange sort of frenzied excitement was roiling in him. The center of it was in his stomach, but it crawled out into his limbs, too, and up into his head, until his skin, when he looked at it on his finger, seemed to move by itself on top of the bones. He was scared, but he was pleased to be faced with a danger. The feeling was new, and he didn't understand it, but he liked the strength it seemed to give him.

He took his notebook with him so the other guys would think he was going out into the field.

Lafferty, Reosti, Jabara, Papakhian, James, Stickgold, Smith and Soble were located on Pallister in a renovated Victorian house, three stories high. A receptionist was in the first room, with glossy red filing cabinets against lemon yellow walls.

"Can I help you?" She was smiling. Her hair was loose and soft, her face young, and Dan made a comparison in his mind with Mrs. Peck in her olive drab office.

"I need a lawyer, if they'll take my case. I just got an induction notice."

"Sit down please. What's your name?"

He eased into a chair painted the same yellow as the walls, and realized the muscles in his legs were trembling.

"Dan Bryant."

"Okay, Dan, basically outline your problem" She opened a pad of green shorthand paper and poised her purple, felt-tipped pen.

"Well, I had a 2-A and then my board sent me a 1-A and I went for a personal appearance, and they wouldn't give me a reason for revoking the 2-A..."

"Ah."

"...and we never talked about my C.O. beliefs, and then I got another 1-A from the local board and then one from the State Appeal Board too."

"They're supposed to give you a reason when they revoke a classification." She regarded him with intent eyes and small nods.

"I know."

"Well, this looks good. None of the lawyers are free right now, but how 'bout I give you an appointment for tomorrow morning with Mr. Stickgold. Are you working?"

"Yes, but I can come. What time?"

"Ten o'clock?"

"Okay."

"And bring all your correspondence with your draft board and whatever else seems pertinent to you."

Dan nodded, smiling, and stood to go. He knew he should ask about the cost, but he felt, irrationally, that he would find a way to pay any price, as long as they would have him.

It was five after three when he got back in his car. It would seem a letdown to return to work, and he didn't like to get home too early. Colleen would pester him to go for a drive to get an ice-cream

cone or to feed the ducks in the Brighton Mill Pond. After commuting two hours, plus driving around in the city locating syphilis contacts, he had no desire to go anywhere when he got home. He wouldn't mind so much going out with her alone, but Colleen was nervous about getting a babysitter and hadn't done so yet. Ryan went with them if they went anywhere, and Dan always worried about him fussing and drawing attention. Occasionally they drove into Detroit to visit Jack and Anna Mason, but they never stayed long because of the baby.

Golden Sun's apartments weren't too far away. She had said to come again to take blood samples or just to visit the last time he'd been there. He looked in the zippered pouch in his notebook and counted six each Vacutainer tubes and needles.

It gave him a giddy, enchanted feeling to be friends with prostitutes. The last time he had been there several had been sitting around with only bikini underpants and T-shirts on. He hadn't been sexually excited as much as he was excited in his stomach, like when he was a child on Halloween night, and he knew he was being included in something special.

Goldie called out the door in her rich melodic voice, her eye evidently at the magnifying peep hole.

"I don't remember who you are, although you look familiar."

"Dan Bryant, from the Health Department."

"Oh yes! How nice!" She flung the door open, the breeze moving the flowered material of her long, sleeveless dress, and stretched her hand out to him. "How nice to have you come back, Dan." She shook firmly. "Come in, come in."

He followed her to the green and gold brocade couches and nodded to the three young women sitting around the room.

"Hi, Dan." It was Rosa Michaels. "How's everything down there in that dismal building where you work?"

"Just the same."

"What brings you here, Dan?" asked Goldie, sitting down by Rosa on a couch opposite Dan's chair and pushing at her mound of beige hair.

"Well, I was in the neighborhood and I decided to drop in. I wanted to make sure you haven't been busted."

"No, not us. Michelle was, though. Some of my girls were working for her that night and I had to pay to get them out of the clink. That vice squad--morals squad they call themselves now--they get hot and bothered every now and then and have to break someone's house to get their sort of depraved satisfaction.

Dan nodded.

"Morals squad, huh?"

"Yes, isn't that the limit? And they've painted "Protectors of Liberty" on the back ends of the cop cars, have you seen that?"

"Yes, I noticed that. I got a good laugh out of that."

"You know what Goldie told them that time a year ago when we got busted?" spoke up Rosa, leaning forward, her brown eyes dancing, her black curls swinging near her cheeks. "She told them to come and buy some decent moral behavior from us instead of resorting to immoral violence."

Dan laughed.

"Beautiful. What a good line."

"Yes, but it kept me in an extra night and cost me five hundred extra to get out."

"Was it worth it?"

"Well, I have to admit I enjoyed saying it. I'd thought it up in advance just in case we got busted."

"Like a drink, Dan?" asked a tall, thin Black with a seven inch natural as she headed out to the kitchen.

"No thanks. Except if you've got some orange pop."

"Orange pop. Well, I'll have to check on that."

"Go buy some," said Goldie, "if we don't have any."

"No, no," said Dan. "Any kind of pop is okay."

"Did you bring your needles, Dan?" asked Goldie.

"Yes. You want another blood test?"

"Not me, I'm clean. But Jeanne here--" she nodded her head at a white girl with long brown hair sitting in a chair with her back against one arm of it and her feet slung over the other--"she wasn't here the last time you came, and neither was Ellen, out in the kitchen."

"Okay. I'll be glad to do them."

"Do me how?" asked Jeanne, flipping her legs over to the floor and sitting up.

"A blood test for syphilis," said Goldie. "For free."

"He's from the U.S. Public Health Service," said Rosa.

Dan smiled at Jeanne and smoothed his mustache.

"Last blood test I had was before college," said Ellen, bringing Dan a tall, fizzing glass of gingerale.

"Where'd you go to college?" he asked, looking up at her as he took the glass.

"Michigan State. I graduated last year. Never thought I could get such a good paying job with my college education."

They all laughed and she bent her legs like supple grass and sank to the floor to sip her beer.

"Is that exceptional?" asked Dan. "Have many pros been to college?"

"Oh, there's a lot of them," said Goldie. "You know, in the better houses. Not a whole lot of graduates, but a lot have gone one or two years."

"Me," said Jeanne. "Two years at Wayne State. I intend to start back fall term. With this as a part time job, I can afford it."

"It's a full time job," said Goldie. "It's just that our hours are different."

"Yeah. I figure I can get all morning classes, and then come over here at noon and nap or study between tricks and go home at ten or eleven."

"Sounds good," said Dan.

"Well, I'm one of your more stereotyped prostitutes," said Rosa, looking at her toenails as she smoothed them with an orange stick. "Underprivileged, broken home, didn't even finish high school, walked the streets till Goldie found me." She let her eyes come up to Dan's and they were warm and she was smiling, and he smiled warmly in return.

The doorbell buzzed. Goldie stood and shook the back of her long dress to get the wrinkles out of it. She checked her face in a mirror by the door before she peered through the peep hole and then opened the door. A man in a blue and white sport coat and white pants stepped in, smoothing his hair often as he spoke with Goldie.

"Oh, it's Matt," said Rosa, straightening and putting her file on the end table. "He's one of mine."

Dan glanced at her and then sipped his gingerale, nervous suddenly.

Goldie brought the man over and Dan nodded to him, as did the other prostitutes.

"Won't you sit down and have a drink?" asked Goldie.

"No thanks, Goldie. I'm in sort of a hurry today."

"Well, all right then. Rosa?"

She stood up and Dan thought she seemed smaller than he had remembered. Her eyes no longer danced playfully, but were cool and deep like wells that might have water in the bottom of them or maybe only moss.

"How are you, anyway, Matt?" she asked the man as they moved off toward the bedroom.

"Fine. And you?"

Dan's stomach was acting up. He burped behind his hand and decided to not drink any more of the gingerale.

"Well, Dan, how about sticking these girls with your needle?"

"Sure." He picked his notebook up from the end table.

"Let's go in the other bedroom," said Goldie, rising to lead the way. "So that if any customers come, they won't get shocked. I don't want to turn away trade, thinking I've got girls with bad blood. Come on Ellen and Jeanne."

They went into a dark, satiny room, sweet from incense burning on a dresser. Goldie flung open the glossy, purple drapes and raised the dark green shades so that sunlight could stream in.

"There, that improves the light. Now you can see their veins."

"Thanks, Goldie."

He took a needle from his pouch and tore the paper off it.

There was a blue plastic cover over the point. The other end he screwed into a large, clear plastic sleeve.

"Who's first?"

"Jeanne is," said Ellen, reclining on the bed, her head with its floating hair resting on her hand.

"I don't mind," said Jeanne, sticking her arm out. Dan wrapped the gray tourniquet snugly around her arm, above the elbow, pressing the Velcro together so it fastened. He rolled his thumb over the median cubital vein in the elbow, nodding.

"A good big one."

"Do you ever have trouble sticking veins?"

He nodded, slipping a glass tube with a red rubber tip into the plastic sleeve so that the hole in the tip just started onto the needle.

"Sure. Like with people that shoot up, sometimes I have to get an ankle vein. And sometimes I have them put the needle in themselves."

"Oh yeah?"

He swabbed her arm with an alcohol wipe he had torn out of its plastic wrap and then, with the bevelled side of the needle up, he slipped it into her vein, rounded and blue from the pressure of the tourniquet. He pushed the tube further onto the needle, breaking the vacuum seal in the tip, and the glass filled with warm, red blood.

"Ugh," said Jeanne.

"Oh no, it's beautiful," said Dan. He whipped the tourniquet off her arm and drew the needle out, and then bent the arm up tight.

"What are you, some kind of government inspected vampire?"

"Maybe so," he said as Goldie and Ellen laughed. "Maybe I'm just posing as a VDI and really I drink the blood when I'm alone."

"Ugh. Shut up."

"Okay, Ellen, you're next."

"Do my ankle vein, would you honey?" She stuck her foot out at him.

"Why?"

"I think I could ignore the pain better down there."

"Well, I guess I could do that. It might bleed more because you can't bend it up tight like your elbow."

"I could just hold that alcohol thing on it longer."

"Okay. All right."

"You're really weird, Ellen," said Jeanne.

When they were all going out into the living room Dan glanced at the other bedroom door, still closed.

"I thought he was in a hurry," he said in a low voice.

"Shh," said Goldie. "In a hurry to get started doesn't always mean in a hurry to finish."

Dan nodded, smiling, but feeling a strain about his mouth and eyes. He looked at the door again and then at his watch.

"Well, I better get back to work. Thanks for the extra bloods. They keep track of how many we examine, you know. The more people we get to treatment, the better it is for our records."

"Huh. Well, anytime you can, stop by. There's a new girl every so often, and we like to get rechecked by a reputable person--and for free. Those doctor bills, even if you can find a reputable doctor, are hardly worth the price."

"I know. Yeah." He headed for the door and she followed him.

"But just come for a visit or anything else any time. We're always glad to see you."

"Okay. I will. Bye now."

"Bye Dan," called Jeanne and Ellen.

"Say good-bye to Rosa for me."

"Sure Dan. Take care now."

Jack Mason looked up as he came in. All the other VDI's were gone.

"I've been sending telepathic messages to you, man. I was afraid you'd gone on home. Did you get Lafferty okay?"

Dan eased down in his chair and turned to face Jack.

"Well, the receptionist thought my case sounded good and I have an appointment with Stickgold for tomorrow morning."

"Great. That's great."

"So how come the telepathic message? You must have gotten through, because I had planned to just go home."

"Listen man, I'm not saying a word, okay?" His hands were spread over the desk top. "I'm making no judgments, recommendations, or anything at all. I did something this afternoon and that's where my part of it ends, okay?"

"Sure Jack." Dan leaned forward, one elbow on a knee, his fingers picking at his eyebrow.

"Okay. So this is what I did."

He pulled a long, white envelope out of the bottom drawer of his desk and stretched it out to Dan. Dan stood and came slowly to get it.

"It came in the afternoon mail and I slipped it out, and that's all I'm saying, one way or the other. You decide what you should do with it."

It was addressed to Roger Harrison, Head of the Venereal Disease Program, and it was stamped, with purple ink, in the return address corner: Michigan Local Board Number 30. Dan stared at the eagle in the righthand corner in place of a stamp and noticed how square its wings were, how immovable its head. It looked like an insect, dead, dried and pinned with spread wings.

"Aren't you going to open it?" asked Jack.

"Maybe I should steam it open at home in case I have to close it up again."

"Yeah. Right. If you think you might want it to reach its destination."

"Yeah. Well, I guess I don't want it to. It can't be good news."

He took his Swiss army knife out of his pocket and used the blade to slit the envelope. The printed form inside had "1-A by Appeal Board" typed on it in red. He didn't need to read the rest of the words.

"Jack. What can I say."

"Nothing. Nothing. I told you I didn't make any judgments when I swiped it out of the mail. You could have been mad at me, I didn't know. But anything else I can do, ever, to help out, let me know."

"Sure. Okay."

After Jack had gone Dan leaned back in his chair and stared out the high slot of a window at the piece of sky that was in view and the

bricks of the incinerator smokestack, hoping that these two pieces of good luck--easily getting a lawyer, and Jack saving out the letter--were indications that the whole would be good; that the draft problem would end well.

CHAPTER 9

Colleen willed her eyelids up for a glimpse of Dan, who was standing by the bed in jeans and T-shirt with an unbuttoned flannel shirt hanging loose on him, and then let her eyes close again.

"C'mon, get up." He pushed on her shoulder.

"What time is it?" She could make her voice sound coherent even when she was on the edge of sleep.

"It's quarter to six. The alarm didn't go off. Thank God I woke up anyway."

"There is no God."

"Listen, open your eyes. I don't think you're awake."

"I can hear you. I'm awake, even if my eyes are shut."

"Well, get up. I'll go get Ryan ready, okay? And you get dressed. We have to leave in fifteen minutes."

"I'll be ready."

She could get dressed in ten minutes. Five for that matter. A few more minutes of rest wouldn't slow them down. From the living room, where Ryan now slept, since the books recommended babies sleep out of the parents' bedroom after the age of six months, came the squeak of Ryan's toy puppy and the ringing of his bell and Dan's low murmurs as he talked to the child.

A tremendous sadness welled in Colleen and she opened her eyes wide, not understanding why she should be stricken with such a feeling. She glanced at the clock and saw she had eight minutes.

Her hands shook as she dressed and the sadness wound itself around inside her chest so that her breathing was short. Dan was going to refuse today, but there was no reason for sadness in that. Tonight she would curl up behind him, just the same, her hand on his stomach, which was firm in the daytime, but soft and pliable when he relaxed at night.

"Colleen?"

"I'm ready."

She whisked the brush through her hair and went out into the kitchen.

"Here, take him."

She held out her arms for Ryan, who was drooling around the edges of a strip of wholewheat toast. Again the sadness hurt her as she took the baby from Dan's arms and held him snugly on her hip. Dan had gone fast to the refrigerator, his high, black boots thumping the linoleum.

"I keep feeling bad," said Colleen.

"Here, drink this milk, and then you'll feel better." She took the cold glass from him and drank. Half was all she could swallow. "Have you got your driver's license and keys and everything?" She nodded and handed the milk back. Ryan protested, pointing at the glass, and Dan gave him a drink.

"There you go, little boy. Tastes good, hmm?"

Colleen smiled, watching them and felt sharp pricks in her eyes as if she were going to cry. She frowned down at the floor.

"Okay, let's split," said Dan, striding to the door. Ryan started laughing and bouncing on Colleen's hip.

"This is fun, huh, little boy?" said Dan, grinning at the baby as he held the door for Colleen to walk through. Then, softer, "Jesus, I hope he never has to go through this."

"I know. It's taking ten years off my life just with you. With him too, it would do me in."

The clouds were low and a wind was rushing them across the sky.

"I hope it doesn't rain tonight," said Dan. "I want to change the oil in the car if I get home in time."

"Good."

They got in their '63 green, salt-eaten Chevrolet that listed to the right and headed down the hill.

"Wanda just peeked out at us," said Dan as they went by the bedroom window.

"Oh yeah? They probably think you're going into the army today and are worrying if they'll get their rent."

"Maybe so."

He turned the car onto Van Amberg and went slowly down it, careful to miss the deep holes and high ridges.

"I feel like it's for real," said Colleen, staring at the chip out of her side of the windshield, and wondering if the little lines spidering out from it were going to travel the width of the glass.

"You mean like I'm really going in the army?"

"Yes. I can't shake it off."

He turned onto Spencer, a blacktop road, and reached over to put his hand on her leg.

"I hadn't thought about it that way. It makes me feel sad. Lonesome." She nodded. "To be gone from you and Ryan two years. He'd be two and a half." He shook his head. "He wouldn't know me."

They drove down I-96 towards Howell. Dan had gotten his Order to Report for Induction transferred to the Howell board so he wouldn't have to make the two hour drive to the Gratiot County board and then come back down on the bus to Fort Wayne in Detroit.

He went 55 miles an hour down the expressway where a speed limit of 70 was legal, and they held hands beneath Ryan's car seat. They took the Grand River exit which led into Howell and was the main street of the town.

"I just hope they don't give you a hard time," said Colleen in a low voice, fierceness rushing underneath the words.

"Well, if I don't call or come home by night time, call my lawyer."

"Yeah. Okay. This day is going to be endless."

He pulled in close to the curb by a parking meter. The street was empty of parked cars, and there were few driving through - more pickups than cars, and an empty school bus. The Old Howell House, the small restaurant where the inductees were supposed to meet, was the only brightly lit business on the block. The car idled as they gazed at the restaurant.

"I'm going to hate that place the rest of my life," said Dan.

"You said it." She had begun to shiver even though the air was warm and humid. She ran her eyes over him as he looked out the window, his arm propped on the steering wheel, and his fingers busily smoothing his mustache and plucking at his eyebrows. "I don't know if you should have dressed freaky," she said.

He shrugged.

"I'm not going to be the All-American hypocrite and wear what's

considered proper. What is considered proper, anyway, for being inducted into the army?" He turned to look at her, his eyebrows up. "I don't even know."

"Me neither. What time is it?"

He looked at his watch.

"Six twenty-five. I guess I'll go in. I hope there's a john in there."

Just then the idling engine began chugging loudly and missing. Dan leaned forward and then held himself still, giving the motor a little more gas.

"Good God, what's happening?" said Colleen.

Smoke began pouring from the exhaust pipe and the wind blew it in wisps around the car. Dan threw off his seatbelt and got out to put up the hood. Colleen shifted around Ryan and sat in front of the steering wheel. She rolled the window all the way down and leaned out, watching Dan's long, jeaned legs as he bent over the side of the engine compartment. He ducked out from under the hood and slammed it down and came to the window, shaking his head.

"God, I can't believe this. We haven't got any extra money or extra time, me that is, and now our car goes out on us."

"What's wrong?"

"A valve maybe. I don't know. I hope it's not a piston. I've got to go, dammit. You can make it home okay, but take it slow, and try to borrow somebody's car so you can come and get me."

"Who? Who do we know around here?"

"I don't know. I've got to go. Do what you can."

"Dan, wait! What am I going to do?"

"Call your mother, maybe. Maybe she can come down in her car."
He kissed her fast on the lips. "Think about me. I'll see you tonight."

He strode off across the street, his hands in his pockets, his loose shirt billowing out from his back in the moist wind.

She drove home at forty miles per hour, feeling apologetic, yet trying to maintain a stoic expression while shiny cars curved around her, their people turning to see who was driving the slow, smoking old Chevy. She had split herself into two people, one who thought angry, frantic thoughts about the car and Dan, and one who chattered brightly to Ryan, reciting "Humpty Dumpty" and "Hey Diddle Diddle" and other rhymes that took no thought so he'd stay awake and then sleep at home while she tried to track another car by telephone. The older Ryan got, the more often it was necessary to divide herself into the bright, cheerful mother who kept everything on an even keel, and her own confused, dark, and stumbling self. She tried to keep from thinking about the division. When she had tried in the past to analyze how cutting herself in two made her feel, her confusion became desperate and her strength seemed halved. It was safer to simply make the division and not think.

She chugged up the hill to the house, her body heating and sweating from knowing the noise would call the Webers' attention to her return. As she lifted Ryan out of the car, she let her eyes dart to the house and there were Joellen's and Butch's faces at the window in the back door, watching her.

She walked fast to the outside stairway, but they opened the door and called to her through the screen before she could get past.

"Hi, Colleen!"

"Hi."

"What's wrong with your car?" asked Butch, digging a finger into his ear.

"A valve, we think."

"Is Dan going to fix it tonight?"

"I hope so."

"Can we watch?" asked Joellen, grinning shyly and glancing at Ryan.

"I guess so."

"Where'd you take Dan this morning so early?" asked Butch, scratching his cropped hair.

"Into Howell. Ryan's pretty tired from the ride, so I want to put him to bed now."

"He just got up!" said Butch.

"Babies sleep a lot, Butch," said Joellen.

"C'mon kids," called Wanda. "Eat up your Cheerios. We've got to go."

"See ya, Colleen."

"Okay."

The stairs were like an escape route, the upstairs apartment a sanctuary, but only for a few minutes. Soon she felt trapped. The FM stereo was on, and it aggravated her, but it wasn't that alone that brought on the confined feeling. The very smells of the place, the texture of the atmosphere, laden with the remains of all the days when she had felt confined; it was this that trapped her now. Not as a fence confines, because the air in a fenced field is unburdened, but as if the air in the apartment were made of heavier molecules and it was harder to move in it, harder to breathe it in.

She opened the kitchen window and some of the gray humid air from outside pushed its way in. She watched Ryan pull himself up to the low sill so he could see out. His balance was good. He didn't need her any more to help keep him from sitting down hard on his bottom and maybe falling over backwards and hitting his head.

She was sick of being left out.

The thought moved into her mind and she decided to think about it since she was already depressed. She riveted her eyes on the furthest point she could see, which was a gravel company with hills of rocks and a water tower about seven miles away, and thought maybe Dan might be that far by now as he rode the chartered bus full of inductees down into Detroit.

She was sick of being left out, of being left behind, of being left day after day while Dan drove off to be with other people and she stayed home with no one to talk with, to think with, other than a seven month old baby.

There was a thump and a metallic rattle behind her and she jumped, unaware that Ryan had moved away from the window. He was by the cupboard now and had pulled the portable mixmaster out and the beaters and was holding the white cord.

"I'll have to keep that somewhere else," she said, as she gathered it up and put it on the counter. He began a wail, but she swooped him up high over her head and he laughed instead, his two teeth, on the bottom in the center of his gum, gleaming like stalagmites.

While she waited for Ryan to get into a deep sleep before calling her mother, Colleen sat at the desk in the living room and made a

list. At the top she wrote

POSSIBILITIES	CONSEQUENCES
and then: Part time job	Baby sitter, probably crummy a major influence in R's life.
Go back to college	Same as above plus no money.
Make some friends	How?
Join some club or church	Oh shit, Colleen.

She wadded the paper up, making more noise than was wise and threw it across the room at the closet door. It ended its flight short of the door, hitting the rocking chair and sliding down the back side of it to the rug where it rustled as its creases began to come apart.

"Hello, Mom?"

"Colleen! How nice to hear your voice on this sunny morning!"

"It's cloudy here. It looks like rain."

"Oh, I'm sorry. We have cumulous clouds that could build up to a thunderstorm, but right now, it's wonderful weather. Warm, but breezy. I just finished hoeing around my herbs--still got dirt on my hands, in fact. I'm holding the phone with a paper towel."

"Mom, we've got problems."

"Oh dear."

"You know, today's the big day."

"Yes, I've got it right on the calendar here. 'D.R.' Dan refuses. I hope it's going well."

"So do I. But our car is suddenly out of commission. Something went wrong with it this morning. A valve or something went out."

"Oh dear. And you want me to bring my car down, and I just can't. I've got Book Club today, dear. I'm giving the report on a very inspir-

ational story of a young, handicapped mother. She has no arms, can you imagine that? She combs her hair by holding the comb with her toes."

Colleen said nothing, feeling rebuked, having all her limbs and still not being able to cope.

"Well, I don't know how to help you," her mother said. "I just can't this time. Any other day and I could have. How about the people downstairs--the Webers--couldn't they help you out? They have two cars, don't they?"

"Mother, you know how I feel about those people. They can't be trusted."

"Haven't you any friends to help you out?"

"No. Possibly Jack and Anna, but they're in Detroit and they both work."

"It worries me a little that you haven't struck up any acquaintanceships yet."

"How about Tom. Could he possibly bring the car down?" She didn't like her brother, the only one who lived nearby, but she was desperate.

"Oh, he's so busy. And you know how he feels about Dan doing this."

"Yeah. Okay, Mother. I better not run up the phone bill."

"If you could get up here somehow, I could ride with Rebecca Walsh to the meeting. I don't really need the car itself."

"Okay. I'll try to work something out."

"Let me know in advance if you're going to come for the car."

"Yes. Good-bye, Mother."

"I hope it all works out well, dear. Good-bye now."

Colleen put her head on her arms. There was no one else to ask, except Dan's folks, and Evelyn couldn't drive and Dan Senior never trusted his pickup for long trips.

A panicky feeling was rising in her throat, and she worried suddenly that the phone, too, would malfunction, and then she would be completely dependent on the Webers.

Maybe she could hire a babysitter and take a bus up north to get her mother's car. She'd never yet gotten a sitter for Ryan, and she wasn't sure how to go about finding one when she knew no one.

She took the latest copy of the Brighton Argus out of the sack of trash under the sink. It was already opened to the classified ads because she had been searching for houses to rent. Most of the child care ads said "will care for children 2 years and up in my home," but one said "will care for infants and children in my home, by hour, day or week."

Her fingers trembled as she dialed the numbers on the wall phone. There was a rushing sound in her head and she pressed the receiver close to her ear so she'd be sure to hear.

"Hello, I'm calling about your ad in the Brighton Argus."

"Yes."

"Well, my name is Colleen Bryant and I think I'm going to need a sitter today."

"Oh, Fine." The voice seemed light and young. "What time do you want to bring your child? Boy or girl?"

"A boy. I don't know for sure. I have to arrange some other things first. But I wanted to find out if you were available."

"Sure, I'm here. I can take kids from 7 A.M. till 7 P.M. I

like to have my evenings free, when my father comes home. You see, my baby and I are living with my folks because my husband is serving in Viet Nam." Her voice settled lower for the last sentence and rang with pride.

"Oh. I see."

"So my dad appreciates quiet evenings."

"Yes. Well, this would be late this morning or this afternoon, for four or five hours."

"Okay."

"I'll call you back if I'm coming for sure."

"All right then."

Colleen hung up, overwhelmed with prejudice, knowing she'd be unable to leave her child with a woman who was pleased to have a husband in the army, when Dan was going through hell to remain with his wife and child.

The phone rang and she bumped her elbow with a sudden reach for it so that it wouldn't wake Ryan with another ring. The pain spidered up her arm, weakening it, when what she needed was strength.

"Colleen, I've been trying to get you. What the hell's going on?"

"What do you think? I'm trying to get a stupid car so I can come and get you. Are you all done? Have you refused?"

"No. They'll keep us waiting as long as they can, believe me."

"Oh, no."

"But I called the bus station and I can catch a bus home, so you won't have to come."

"Oh thank God." She drew a deep breath, relieved to be free of the responsibility.

"Well, I gotta go."

"So what's happening?"

"Nothing special. We go through the physical pretty soon. We better not run up the phone bill."

"Okay. I want you to know I'm proud of you for refusing."

"Yeah. I gotta go."

The rain came soon after lunch. It had grown darker all morning and cars drove down Van Amberg with their headlights on, which bobbed like lanterns as the cars went in and out of holes in the road. A wind with a chill in it pushed through the kitchen screen and lifted a pile of old letters and scribbled notes and the classified page from the newspaper off the counter and scattered them on the floor. Colleen shut the window and, with Ryan on her hip, watched the cars and the flattened grass and tumbling clumps of dead weeds, and scanned the sky for funnel-shaped clouds. It was an even colored sky, nearly black, with a thin layer of wispy clouds scuttling underneath the dark--changing patterns of white--moving lace, or webs. Colleen's heart raced, but she tried to keep her fear to herself so Ryan wouldn't learn to be afraid of storms. The rain came densely, coating the window as if with clear oil, and running in lively streams down Van Amberg.

Ryan wriggled to get down and she set him on his hands and knees and watched him crawl to his brightly colored toys in the living room. Colleen was bothered by the garish colors in the house and returned her gaze to the light drained scene outside. She too felt

drained. Idleness and waiting had never been required of her as a child, and she felt she was better suited to action. At the same time, the cowardice that had been accumulating in her system since Ryan's birth made her doubt if she would ever be able again to act decisively.

Dan called later to let her know he'd be riding with someone in a red V.W. At least she had something definite to watch for. Still he did not come home.

At seven in the evening, after she'd tucked Ryan in, she tried to call Dan's lawyer, but there was no answer. She let the phone ring twenty times while her eyes peered down at Van Amberg almost mechanically, on the lookout for the red V.W.

The sun was going down. The cloud cover was still thick after the storm, but it ended somewhere in the west, and the sun was shooting its light out like a beam from a headlight under the clouds, giving an artificial brightness to the wet foliage and the muddy road.

She hung the phone up with her ear harboring a shrill sound in it, and right away a moving red patch came into view. She leaned on the window and squinted her eyes, realizing the car was too big, but watching anyway. Then, catching sight of the gleaming silver tail, she turned away, nearly nauseous.

Soon the Weber's back door opened and shut. Colleen, out of habit and boredom, moved to the bathroom and opened the door to the attic, listening to the details of the Weber's day. There was no mention of herself or Dan, and she felt desolate.

After awhile she climbed out of the attic and resumed her watch at the kitchen window.

CHAPTER 10

Dan assumed the small, pert woman sitting near the door of The Old Howell House restaurant was the draft board secretary for Local Board Number 49. She put a brilliant red check by his name with her felt-tipped pen when he came in and showed her his Order to Report for Induction. She nodded and smiled.

"That will be all, Mr. Bryant."

He went to a vacant, high backed booth and sat down.

A man in his fifties with slick dark gray hair and a fat face with a nose that was nearly round, sauntered, with his hands in his trouser pockets, over to the booth.

"Good morning, son." His voice came out coarse and he coughed to one side.

"Hi." Dan had been slouching and he straightened a bit.

"The name's Al Bates, veteran of World War II, a sergeant." His hand came at Dan, the fingers spread and stiff, but when Dan shook it, the muscles went limp. Al sat across from him, his elbows on the table, and his head stuck forward. "Me and the other VFW's," he nodded about the room, "are here to give you fellows a good send-off. We been through it, we know what it's like, and we want to show appreciation."

Dan nodded, keeping his eyes cool.

"Well, they'll be tough on you, no doubt about it." Al's eyes, like black coal stuck in a lumpy snow head, shone at Dan. "But you'll end up with appreciation." He shifted his buttocks a bit and glanced

around at the other booths where men were talking seriously or joking with inductees. Dan looked too, to see what the other guys were wearing. Most seemed to have school clothes on--colored jeans and striped, long-sleeved shirts, and there were a couple with ties on. Altogether there were about fifteen inductees in the room.

"Yes, you'll be glad you went in, no doubt about it," Al continued. "Now I have some friends who never served and when we all start swapping war stories, I feel sorry for them because they don't have stories to tell. Nothing to contribute." He shook his head, staring at Dan.

Dan looked away and his eyes met those of a young man whose face was bony and whose arms were thin. Dan thought of pictures he had seen of people in Auschwitz.

"Cigarette?" asked Al, shaking some unfiltered Camels out of a pack.

"No thanks."

Al fired up a large, silver lighter and briefly touched the flame to the tip of the cigarette, and with a flourish, flicked the lid of the lighter shut. After inhaling deeply, he said, "I didn't smoke either before I went in. You'll probably pick it up. A man's got to have some pleasures in that outfit." He picked a piece of tobacco off his tongue.

"Well men!" came a loud voice from near the cash register. Dan looked up and Al, too short to see over the top of the booth back, swung his feet out into the aisle and leaned on his knees.

"Well, gentlemen of Local Board Number 49," said the robust man at the front of the room. His garrison cap, too small for his

enlarged head, peaked across it like a roof on a bird house. "We have some presents for you, how 'bout that! Fellow veterans, will you assist me in passing them out?"

Al jumped up and mashed his half-gone cigarette on the floor.

"This you're going to like," he said over his shoulder to Dan as he started to the cash register, following the group of six or seven other men.

Dan looked over at the emaciated boy whose eyes, large and round and close together, were resting on Dan's face. The kid was sitting back against the wall, his narrow legs in pants that were too short, stretched along the seat of the booth. He had on Wellington boots that came just above his ankle bones.

Dan looked down at his watch, pushing the cuff of his flannel shirt back so he could read the time. He was thinking about the boy, wondering why he was watching him, trying to recall if he knew him from somewhere.

"Here we go!" cried the robust man in the army cap, coming out of the kitchen, three flat cans stacked in his hands. His squadron followed him, each with two or three tins. "Hams!" said the leader. "One for each of you. Virginia smoked. Our gift to you," and they began passing them out among the inductees.

Al brought his last one to Dan and set it in front of him with a flourish.

"What do you think, huh? Pretty nice."

Dan gazed at the lettering on the top of the tin and, with a quickening of his heartbeats, decided now was the time to begin refusing. He lifted his face and looked into Al's eyes.

"I don't want it."

The fleshy grin slid off Al's mouth and the fat came up closer around his eyes as he narrowed them at Dan.

"You don't want it?"

"No. Thanks."

"It'll be a nice treat for you. Or send it home to your family. You married?"

"I don't want it, Al. Thanks anyway."

Al hunched one shoulder up to his ear and let it drop. Then, looking over Dan's head, he dug in his shirt pocket for his cigarettes. He got one burning and, after sucking in the smoke, stood and said,

"You're starting off on the wrong foot, boy."

Dan smiled to one side and raised his eyebrows, keeping his gaze connected with Al's.

The man turned and sauntered slowly away to a booth where one of his VFW buddies was sitting with a grinning inductee. Al sat down with his back toward Dan, hidden from him by the tall booth.

Dan pushed the ham away, and then moved the napkin holder and sugar jar so there was room for the ham, and pushed it up against the wall. He set the salt and pepper shakers on top of it. He looked over at the thin kid who was sitting alone with his can of ham in his lap, watching Dan. Dan thought maybe he should walk over there and sit down and get to know the kid, but he'd had an image in his mind of being the loner in this venture of refusing induction and he hesitated to alter it now.

The chartered Mercury bus huffed and squealed up to the curb out front and all the heads of the inductees turned or peered over and

around booths, and then they scrambled to their feet, hefting their gym bags containing their extra clothes. Two young men who seemed loud and boisterous swung army duffle bags to their shoulders and strutted outside to the bus.

Dan sat still, wanting to be the last one on the bus so he could choose a seat away from the rest of them. The bus had already made stops in small towns and Lansing and was half full.

The thin kid was also waiting, watching Dan. He didn't have any belongings with him, either, Dan noticed.

"Come on, come on," said the woman near the door, smiling tensely, and clapping her hands.

Dan slid out of the booth and waited a second, but the thin boy didn't move. He was staring at his ham. Dan walked out the door, ignoring the draft board secretary's cheery "Good luck!" and climbed on the bus. He went slowly down the aisle, looking for a vacant seat. Very few inductees were doubled up. Most seemed to want to be alone.

Dan sat in the back half, on the right. There was no one behind him or directly across the aisle. He put his back to the window so he wouldn't see the VFW's and the draft board secretary wave.

The driver let out the clutch and they began rolling forward, and then the brake came on. Dan turned his head and saw Al and the robust VFW each holding an arm of the thin boy and leading him to the bus. A third VFW followed, carrying the ham.

The kid came on the bus. Dan could see Al and the other man step back and make way for the man with the ham, who stretched it out.

From the front of the bus came a shout and all murmuring ceased

as the thin boy cried,

"Fuck your ham. Fuck it, fuck it, fuck it!"

The VFW's, grouped on the sidewalk, all widened their eyes and then all shrugged and squinted, as if they had been drilled to do it in unison.

The driver let out the clutch and they rolled away. Dan gave the peace sign to the men on the sidewalk, looking straight at Al, who was shaking out another cigarette and gazing over the top of the bus as if it were of no importance.

The room was large and lined with metal folding chairs. Dan had his hands in his pockets as he followed the two inductees with the duffle bags down the row of chairs. He was conscious of eyes on him. The inductees already seated were sizing him up, from his long hair to his flannel shirt and jeans to his empty hands and down to his boots. Before he sat down, he swung his gaze to the front of the room where a small, uniformed man stood leaning forward on a podium that was placed on a raised platform. Their eyes locked for a second and then the officer turned his head away and began drumming his fingers on the front of the blond wood podium. Dan sat down and stared at the man, systematically moving his eyes from the thin, sandy hair down the sharp nose and to each eye, and then down his shoulders to his hands. The rest of him was hidden by the podium. The fingers jiggled rhythmically again and then the officer ran a hand over his hair.

"Okay," he said, straightening, setting his shoulders back.

"Men, you are here to be inducted today." The last murmurs stopped, and soon the chairs stopped squeaking and the feet on the floor quit scraping and shuffling.

The officer began again, resetting his shoulders, his expression blank. Dan wondered if he was trying to be a good example of a soldier.

"Men, today you will be inducted into the United States army, according to the Military Procurement Act." He put his hands behind him and spread his legs a bit. "My name is Foster. I hold the rank of Sergeant, and I am here to explain procedures and orientate you. Now," he leaned forward with his elbows on the podium and drew a rigid index finger from one side of the room to the other. His eyes seemed to be trying to touch on each face in the room, of which there were one hundred or one hundred fifty. Dan glanced at the duffle-bag inductee next to him who was watching Sergeant Foster with wide eyes and a mouth that hung slightly open. "Now, back there," his finger shot over their heads and held steady at a point behind them. Dan watched the heads in front of him, but no one turned to look. "Back there is a room where all you boys who are planning to refuse can go. Right now!"

The confidence and feeling of control that Dan had been nurturing fell away from him. He hadn't expected the army to separate him out. He had expected to separate himself out at the induction ceremony.

Sergeant Foster's pale, narrow eyes connected with his, and Dan looked down so his agitation wouldn't show, and rose to his feet. There were a few other refusers walking along the sides of the room toward the back.

As Dan began to move out of his row, working his way around knees and feet and gym bags, he glanced back at the duffle-bag kid who was watching him from the side of his eye, his mouth still open, and at the thin kid, who was at the other end of the row. He thought the thin one might be refusing too, but he was still seated. His eyes came up

to Dan's, and were like empty holes, and then there was a light in them and he began scooping his skinny, white arm through the air as if he wanted Dan to come and talk to him. Dan stepped on a foot and looked down.

"Sorry," he said as he moved on down the row to the aisle by the long, uncurtained windows. He ran his eyes back to the thin kid, but he was no longer looking. He was bent over in his chair with his fingers stuck in his ears.

Dan went past the soldier who was holding the door to the back room. There were thirty or so men seated already on the old, wood folding chairs. Most had long hair and wore casual clothes. His mood shifted upward and a smile kept moving onto his face, which he tried to conceal by smoothing his mustache with his thumb and forefinger.

The soldier waited a few minutes more and then shut the door firmly, his dark gaze sliding over the top of the refusers heads, sternly, yet without interest. Dan was sure he wasn't older than twenty or twenty-one, and he vaguely wondered what sort of background he had come from to end up here, a soldier in the Fort Wayne Induction Center, on the edge of the Detroit River.

The soldier strode to the front of the room and said, with almost no inflection in his voice.

"Sign your name on this sheet and your Selective Service number."

He handed the sheet to a pony-tailed man in the front row. As the yellow, legal sized tablet passed slowly about the room, the soldier rocked up and down on his toes, his hands clasped behind him, his frowning eyes directed out the window, across the river, at the Canadian shore on the other side.

Finally the tablet rustled its way to the front again and the soldier took it, his hands shaking just a little.

"All right," he said, still not looking at anyone, "once we get your folders sorted from the rest of them, we'll talk to you."

He paced slowly to the door, and Dan could see that his neck, naked of any hairs, was deep red.

The door shoved inward and thudded shut.

Murmurs and low laughs came from here and there behind him and the hard breathing, heavy man next to him with huge, high moccasins laced nearly to his knees, leaned closer.

"You got a joint man?"

Dan shook his head.

"Not here, man."

"Yeah. Sure. I understand. I'm nervous as hell, though. I sure could use a jay."

Dan nodded.

"Did you know they were going to do this?" Dan asked him.

"Separate us out first like this?"

"No. Blew my mind." He took off his thick, blue-lensed glasses and breathed air on them, watching the fog evaporate without wiping it off. "What a trip, man," he said, and Dan didn't know if he meant refusing the draft or his game with the glasses. He nodded anyway.

Walking up the side of the room was a short, bearded refuser with long, thin rolls of paper under his arms and a ring of masking tape clutched in one hand.

"Gentlemen," he said, at the front of the room, giving a little bow and a big grin. "I have here something that might interest you."

He dropped all the rolls on the floor and then picked one up and unfurled it. It was a poster of a child in a field, picking flowers and the words underneath said, "Wars are bad for children and other living things."

"Beautiful," said the fat guy next to Dan, and there was low-key cheering and clapping around the room.

"So what say we adorn these drab walls with a little good cheer," said the man with the posters, and he began hurling the rolls like lances at the other refusers.

Dan leaped up and caught one, and opened it to see brilliant pink and purple paisleys with the words, "Make love, not war."

"What a trip, man," said the heavy refuser, fitting his glasses back over his ears.

Dan went to the front of the room and got a strip of tape from the bearded man, and stuck his poster between the windows, directly across from the door, so when the soldier came in, ten minutes later, intent upon keeping his eyes up from where the refusers sat, his straight ahead gaze struck Dan's poster.

Dan looked down, uncomfortable at the man's red-faced confusion. His voice was weaker, and closer to a monotone.

"Those of you who have not had a physical in the last year may proceed to the locker room to commence your physical examination."

Fresh depression was moving in on Dan as it occurred to him that this young soldier would probably be held responsible for the postered room. All the others had seemed to have lost their gaiety too.

"You may follow along behind me," said the soldier, turning to face the door even before he had finished speaking.

CHAPTER 11

Dan handed his sheet to the doctor who seemed the friendliest. He was a small, white-haired man with interesting creases in his face. Dan didn't really expect leniency though. He felt he had come to know the basic nature of all doctors while spending the year at medical school, which was an attitude of impatience, disinterest, with patronizing psychological remarks always in their minds if not actually spoken.

The doctor adjusted his bifocals as he read through the list of illnesses that Dan had checked, while Dan stood before his desk, rubbing his palms lightly on the hairs of his bare thighs. The doctor cleared his throat and began to frown, and Dan watched the creases deepen in his face. He had thought laughing had carved the upward lines in the man's face, but he could see now that frowning drew them perfectly.

"You've marked on here 'frequent nosebleeds,' 'frequent earaches,' and 'frequent diarrhea.' How frequent?"

Dan shrugged.

"Nosebleeds, every couple weeks, Earaches, every couple months. The diarrhea comes in week long spells, every now and then."

"You have letters from your doctor verifying this?"

"No. I don't have a doctor."

One white eyebrow shot up.

"You say you have slight curvature of the spine. A letter for this? An x-ray photo?"

"No. Can't you take an x-ray here?"

"You're supposed to put out a little effort, young man, and have these things checked before you get here."

He scribbled his name on the bottom of the sheet and checked the box marked 'none pertain.'

"Go on to the next station." His eyes were focused on the person behind, waiting with his list, and Dan hesitated, staring at the doctor, trying to force him to look at him. The man looked down instead and began clicking his red ballpoint pen open and shut.

The man at the next station wouldn't look at him either. He watched the weights as he manipulated them and observed the numbers on the scale, keeping his back, or at most his side, to the inductees as they approached one by one for weighing and measuring.

"Lousy weather we've been having, isn't it?" said Dan as he shifted his bare feet on the vascillating metal platform of the scale.

"Yes, it is," said the man, turning to write the measurements on the proper form, and then handing them out behind him when he was finished.

At the next station, an angry lab technician was holding an empty bottle out to an inductee who was wearing red, white and blue underpants, and a braid down his back.

"Back in there, mister, and give us another sample. The amount of sugar in the other one just indicated you were dead. Go on." He turned to his assistant who was sticking Labstiks in the bottles of urine to determine sugar and protein content. "Go with him to make sure he doesn't put any more sugar cubes in," he said.

"Shoot, what's with all you long-hairs, anyway?" he said as he handed a bottle to Dan.

"What's with you, man?"

The man's eyes came at him like sudden bright lights, and Dan was startled by the head-on response.

"Once you're inducted, you won't be talking like that," he said.

Dan smiled and said nothing. The man turned away.

He filled his bottle and was moving on to the next station when the inductee in the red, white and blue shorts caught up with him.

"That was beautiful what you said to that guy back there," he told Dan.

Dan flashed him a smile.

"He's the first armyman here to speak conversationally to me."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. And this is all so stupid for me, anyway, because I'm refusing induction." He glanced sideways at Dan.

"So am I," replied Dan.

The other refuser's face beamed.

"Beautiful, man. Wow. Listen, what a waste of taxpayer money, right? Taking the physical when we're going to refuse anyway. Where you from?"

"Brighton."

"Oh yeah? My folks live out by Hartland, you know where that is?"

"Sure. Up by M59 there."

"Yeah, right. So you're with the Howell board? Livingston County?"

"No, Gratiot County, but I came with the Howell guys. I got my

induction order transferred there." The other man nodded. "I don't remember seeing you on the bus," said Dan, scanning his face.

"No. I drove down myself. I wasn't going to ride some funky chartered bus."

"Yeah. It was really depressing."

"Listen, I'll give you a lift home if you want. I go right by Brighton."

"Sure. Thanks."

"Okay. If we get separated, I'll meet you at the end of this ordeal, wherever it is, okay? My car's a red V.W., just so you'll know."

"Great."

"What's your name, anyway?"

"Dan Bryant."

"Okay. I'm Roger Richards."

They shook hands, grinning, and then Dan went first to the machine into which he had to look for an eye examination. He had a desire to cross his eyes, or to keep them closed, to see if whoever was observing would even notice.

He stepped into the hearing booth and put on the earphones and heard instructions to push a button as soon as he was aware of a tone. The tone came, a high, thin sound, gradually descending, and he let long seconds pass before pressing the button.

"That's all," said the bodiless voice in the earphones.

On the paper for hearing was a red plus mark and scribbled initials.

"All right, men," said a uniformed man at the next station, who

flanked by two men in white lab coats. "All right. Line up in a U-shape, on that tape. U, as in the U.S. of A."

Dan and Roger snorted as they took places on the soiled strip of masking tape.

"All right. Shut your eyes."

"Reminds me of a firing squad," said Roger.

"Okay, put your arms out in front of you. Now to the back. Now up, over your head. Higher. Higher. Now put a leg in front of you. Okay. Behind you. Okay. Now with the other leg. In front. Behind. Okay, open your eyes. That tested your motion and you all passed. Now stand in position and these doctors will check your eyes, ears, hearts, lungs and anuses."

The doctors started at opposite ends of the U, probing their lighted metal instruments into ears and peering into eyes, averaging one person every five seconds.

"Shit," said Dan. "What can they see going that fast?"

"They don't care," said Roger.

"That's for sure."

Next they moved around the U with their stethoscopes, one man listening on the front of an inductee, the other on the back. Dan blew out air again and again, keeping his eyes on the doctors as they moved toward him. His heart was moving the skin on his chest with its frenzied beating when the metal circles were thrust at his chest and back, but they spent no **more time on him** than anyone else.

On the doctor's third round, the inductees were required to drop their shorts, bend over and spread their buttocks as the doctors paced by behind them.

"Are you checking for syphilis chancres or just hemorrhoids?"

Dan asked as the doctor stood behind him.

"If you have syphilis in your ass you can bet the army doesn't want you," said the doctor as he moved on.

"Hmm," said Roger. "I wish I'd known it sooner."

Before the U was allowed to disband, the doctors came by once more, taking each inductee's form onto his clipboard and dashing checks and initials onto it and then handing it back.

"This is it, I think," said Roger. "The end of the Physical. Listen, after you're done refusing, meet me out in the parking lot. I'm right near the door on that end. A red V.W."

"Fine. Great. Thanks a lot."

They headed off in different directions toward their lockers. Dan had just leaned over to get his boots out of the bottom of his locker when someone snapped the elastic on his underpants. He straightened and turned, expecting to see a friend, and was shoved roughly into the door of his locker, the catch cutting into his back.

"Hey, you commie freak. You a Quaker pacifist?"

"He's a quaking pacifist!"

Dan stood against the door, his hands in fists, ready to leap out of the way if they tried to touch him again. He recognized them as two who had ridden the bus down with him, although without their clothes on, and without their duffle bags, it took him a minute to realize who they were.

"You a pacifist, kid? Can I hit you and you won't hit back?"

They both gave nervous laughs, their mouths tense, their eyes

bright. Dan could see the pulsing of the jugular vein in the largest boy's neck, the one who had shoved him.

The boy made a sudden swipe at his face, a clutching movement, as if he were trying to snatch Dan's nose. Dan ducked and whirled away, cutting himself on the door latch again. He stood in the center of the hall, and they began to circle around him.

"You a homo?" the big kid asked. "We enjoy rolling homos, don't we Ken? We like to roll homos and make pacifists fight."

Dan's mind raced, but only re-asking himself their questions. Was he really a pacifist? He wanted to kill them. Was he potentially HOR?

His boots were standing at arm's reach in the bottom of the locker. He edged over that way. Suddenly they rushed him, and he caught a blow in the stomach and a kick on his tailbone, but he got a boot into his right hand, and he crashed the heel of it into the smaller boy's cheek, and whirled and cracked it over the back of the bigger boy's head as he covered his face and crouched.

A high-pitched squeal descended from the ceiling as a loud-speaker came on, the microphone overloaded.

Dan stood by his locker, the heel of his boot cradled in his left palm, ready to strike again, as the two glowered from across the hall at him, the bigger one's lip raised in a sneer, the smaller one wiping blood from his nose with the back of his hand.

"Men! May I have your attention please. Attention!" came an urgent voice out of the ceiling. "We have received word that there may be a bomb in the building. This is undoubtedly a hoax, but we will take all precautions. Walk calmly and directly to your locker and

dress. Keep all your papers with you. Once you are dressed, get outside, well away from the building. Please move now."

The hall began to fill with other people, and the two boys moved away to their own lockers. Dan watched them for a long time, scared that they would rush him again, wanting only to hurry and dress and escape their narrowed, bitterly gloating eyes.

He dressed and went out to the front of Fort Wayne where he sat on a pipe rail fence, far down the sidewalk, keeping his senses alert for a second attack from the duffle bag boys. He felt a strange exhilaration for having fought them off, but at the same time felt damned. He tried to rid himself of both feelings for the time being.

A clump of dandelions that the mower had missed grew near an upright pipe of the fence, and Dan popped a flower off, the hollow stem dripping white fluid. He touched the broken end of it to his tongue, repulsed, yet interested in the bitter, puckery taste.

Someone sat down next to him, too close for the amount of rail that was left. Frightened, Dan glanced up into the dark, hollow eyes, burning deep inside, and recognized the skinny kid.

"Hi," Dan said, relaxing.

The kid stared at him, clutching the pipe on either side of his bottom, his shoulders hunched to his ears. A gust of wind came from the river and rustled his shock of pale hair.

Still in the mood of exhilaration and damnation, Dan stared at the kid and took a big bite of the dandelion stem, chewing it slowly, willing his mouth to stay relaxed, although the alum-like juices made his lips want to draw up. The kid dropped his gaze to Dan's mouth, watching intently, as if Dan were doing something significant, and then offered a smile as Dan swallowed.

"I called in the bomb threat," he said in a low, cautious voice. There were other inductees sitting on the grass and the fence, but none closer than ten feet.

Dan watched the kid's thin face, saying nothing.

"Now I can escape," said the kid. "It's a real prison in there."

Dan gave a small nod.

"I'm going to Canada," the kid said.

"How?"

"I called my sister. She's going to come down and take me across the Ambassador Bridge. I told her I'd escape somehow and meet her by the bridge."

Dan looked down at the dandelion in his hand and twirled it between his fingers.

"That sounds good," he said. "But why don't you just refuse induction?"

There was a long silence, and Dan thought the kid had retreated again. He was tempted to look at him, but was afraid the kid would misinterpret his glance.

"I don't know how to refuse induction," the kid said finally, his voice barely audible above the street sounds and the gusts of wind. "Nobody would tell me how."

Dan's feeling of guilt intensified, remembering the two opportunities he had let pass when the kid's eyes met his.

"I'll tell you how," he said, still not looking at the kid. "All you do is tell the man no. They have a ceremony where you're supposed to step forward and if you don't, that means you refuse."

He lifted his face to look at the kid now, whose eyes were widened so far that the long lashes made lines on the skin above his eyes.

"God, I couldn't do that." He shook his head, hard and fast, and then stopped shaking it midway in a shake so that his head was turned away from Dan, but his eyes were on him, peering from the edge of his face. With a jerk he brought his face around to confront Dan's. "I'd be up there, and I'd try not to step forward, but my feet would do it anyway."

"Oh, I don't know," said Dan, turning back to the flower. "You refused that ham from the VFW's. It would be like that only a little scarier. Not much."

"No. One thing I know for sure. I'm a chicken, but I don't care."

"I don't think you're chicken. Going to Canada takes a lot of guts."

"No." He swung his thin neck again. "Going there is running away, and refusing induction is shirking responsibilities. I'm a chicken and so are you."

Dan shook his head.

"Not me, man. I'm doing the bravest thing I know how."

They sat still for awhile, Dan picking the tufts out of the dandelion, and the kid watching him. Suddenly the kid stood up and shoved his hands in his pockets. Dan squinted up at him.

"Good-bye, chicken," the kid said, and struck off down the sidewalk, scuffing the rundown heels of his Wellington boots.

"Hey, wait!" called Dan, rising. "What's your name?"

The kid turned, his eyes as haunted as ever.

"You'd report me."

"No, I'd just like to keep in touch. I'd like to know how everything works out."

"You can't ever know how everything's going to work out till you're dead," the kid said, and turned away. A little farther down the street, he began whistling, probably trying to waylay suspicion, Dan thought. But whistling cheerily was the most suspicious thing that kid could do.

Dan sat in the back of the refusal room and closed his eyes. The excitement of refusing had worn away except for a little, thumping nugget of it in his stomach. One by one the refusers were taken from the room by Sergeant Foster to a Colonel's office where they were finally allowed to refuse induction.

He hadn't been surprised to see the posters all gone when he returned to the room, but he had thought there might be some tape stuck here and there on the beige walls, and a corner or two of the poster paper. The walls were blank, and it bothered him to look at them, so he kept his eyes shut. The cuts on his back from the latch of the locker were pulling and hurting, and he thought ahead to a warm bath at home as he wearily recounted the day's adventures to Colleen.

"Daniel Bryant, 29-30-44-14," boomed a voice from the front of the room.

Dan stood, stretching his eyes a couple times to make sure they were open all the way. He didn't want to look as if the day had been exhausting when he confronted the Colonel.

He followed Sergeant Foster out into the main room where the metal folding chairs stood in empty rows, some slightly askew. When they reached the hall, the Sergeant asked,

"Are you a C.O? Is that why you're refusing?"

Dan avoided the man's sharp eyes.

"My lawyer told me to say nothing except to refuse induction."

"Oh, listen, I'm not asking as an army Sergeant right now. I'm just interested. I tried to get out on a C.O. too, you see, so I'm just interested."

Dan glanced over at the smaller man's face as they walked abreast down the dim hall, and this time the Sergeant kept his eyes busy elsewhere. Dan decided to not reply at all. Sergeant Foster cleared his throat quietly and also remained silent.

A man's loud voice was coming out of the room they were approaching and Dan looked in the double doors as they went by. There was an American flag on the platform at the front of the room with a uniformed man near it, and five or six civilians before him, listening, their eyes intent.

Dan wished he had remained with the other inductees instead of letting the army separate him out, so that he could have refused in front of them all on that stage with the American flag.

Sergeant Foster opened the door of the Colonel's office and leaned in with the knob. Dan stepped in and the Sergeant followed him, shutting the door.

"This is Colonel Harrington," he said, after saluting the officer himself, and this, Colonel, is--" he glanced at his paper-- "Daniel Kelly Bryant, 29-30-44-14, from Gratiot county, although his induction orders were transferred to Livingston county."

The Colonel stood behind his desk and opened a book with his large fingers and read some words, following them with his finger, that had to do with the fact that Daniel Kelly Bryant was now entering

military service and that he must take one step forward when his name and branch of service were announced. Dan tried to follow the words so he could remember them, but his brain felt hard and slippery and the words wouldn't adhere. He thought briefly about the thin kid saying he knew his feet would carry him forward against his will, and experienced just the opposite feeling--his feet felt heavy, immovable.

"Okay," said the Colonel, his black eyes touching Dan's for a moment. "I am required to read this again to give you another chance." Again his sonorous voice droned the words and Dan remained where he was.

"Okay, young man. I take this to mean that you are refusing induction into the United States Army."

"That's right."

"Well," he eased himself down in his cushioned chair, his palms on his desk for balance. "All I can say for you is you better have a damn good lawyer."

"I've got the best."

"But we have the law on our side. Remember that. Refusing induction is a crime, a felony."

Dan said nothing, keeping his eyes connected with the Colonel's, aware that Sergeant Foster was scrutinizing him.

"Okay, Mr. Bryant. Get out. We don't want you on military property at all anymore."

Dan turned around and flung open the door before the Sergeant could reach it. He strode off down the hall, not looking back.

His spirits were beginning to rise once again. He hoped Roger

was still waiting for him out in the parking lot, in his red V.W.

He was eager to exchange stories with him about the Sergeant and the Colonel, the VFW's and the thin kid, and refusing induction into the United States Army.

CHAPTER 12

Colleen eased down, cross-legged, on the living room rug to watch Ryan fit colored wood circles on a peg that made a bell ring. She had finished wiping the wheatgerm and honey and orange juice off his high chair and the toast crumbs from where Dan had sat at the table. She had no appetite lately and drank only milk in the morning.

From the room directly below, which the Weber's usually didn't use, came an exclamation from Wanda and then the woman said,

"Oh my God!" and each word was a separate shout. "Talbert!"

"That?" said Ryan, his eyes wide.

"It's okay, sweetie." Colleen glared at the floor, frowning fiercely, straining her ears. She was disgusted with the quarrels downstairs. Each time they seemed to cause Ryan more distress. She and Dan kept their quarrels from him, but their caution seemed defeated when he was exposed to anger anyway from the Weber's.

"Talbert!" Wanda's voice was huge and rough with outrage. Soon the indistinct voices of Joellen and Butch joined hers, and then a tremendous bass noise rumbled up through the floorboards and Colleen recognized it as a dog's bark.

"Talbert Weber, get your ass in here before I murder this animal!"

"What is it, dear," came his grinning lighthearted voice. "Oh, my new pet!"

"Yeah, sure, get off it, buster. No full grown fuck ass St. Bernard is going to live in my house. Not even in the barn. Get rid of it."

"It's a very valuable animal, let me tell you. A lot of people would give a lot of money for that dog, Wanda."

"Yeah? So sell it."

"In due time."

They moved out to the kitchen to fix their breakfast and Colleen, as always, was relieved to have the shouting stopped, yet annoyed to be unable to hear what was happening anymore. When she thought about living somewhere without the Weber's under her, she was sure her days would be dull and lifeless, and the thought worried her, but she carefully put aside any analyzations of it.

Ryan was busy pulling toys out of the bottom drawer of the desk. The three drawers above it were taped shut, so he wouldn't be able to get into them while she was gone.

She walked quietly through the kitchen to the bathroom attic and leaned her head out there as she knelt on the small oval rug.

"So now you're a thief," came Wanda's voice, sounding more disgusted than angry.

"I guess you could say that. But I mean to give the dog back if they put up a reward."

"Somebody's pet," came Wanda's mumbling voice. "Jesus. Maybe I'll just return it on my way to work."

"You touch that dog and I'll lay you out on the floor." Talbert's voice had slid down to seriousness.

"Oh, I'm really shaking in my shoes, Talbert." The refrigerator thumped shut.

"Listen, I mean it."

"Let go of me."

They said nothing for awhile and Colleen could hear the click of spoons in plastic cups and on the table.

"Where's my socks?" came Joellen's high voice from the bedroom.

"In the dryer," yelled Wanda. "Hey. What are you doing." She spoke sharply. "Get out of my purse, Talbert. Hey!" Her chair scraped on the floor. "Give me my keys, you son of a bitch thief!"

"In due time."

"Give them to me now!"

"Let go of me! I'll tell you why I've got them"

"I don't care why. Just give them back."

"Listen. When you're in the car and ready to go, I'll give them to you."

"Listen, I've cut you before, I'll do it again."

"Wanda, for crissake, put it down."

"You give me those keys, buster, or you bleed."

"I said you'll get them"

"So give them to me now."

"Kids! Your mother's going crazy again. Stay in your room so she doesn't hurt you."

"Oh shut up you no good bum." Colleen could hear the kids' tennis shoes come slapping down the linoleum hallway. "Give me those keys, Talbert."

"Mommy, don't hurt him."

"Shut up. Give them to me Talbert."

"Give her the keys, Daddy."

Talbert was whistling and Colleen burned with the rage she was sure Wanda was feeling.

"No!" one of the kids screamed and the table and chairs squealed and thumped as they were shoved around.

The dog barked again, a coarse, reverberating sound, and then Wanda yelled and began screaming,

"Get him! Get him!"

Talbert began to laugh, a high brittle sound, but it was shot through with Wanda's screams.

Colleen's skin grew tight and cold and she cracked her head on the low door as she backed out.

She had written the police number on the front of the phone book soon after they moved in, and she had used it then when the first violent fight was going on downstairs, but the police told her they never interfered with "domestic quarrels." There hadn't been a knife involved then, though.

She dialed the number and then hefted Ryan onto her hip when he crawled to her, whimpering.

"Michigan State Police," came a tired, tenor voice.

"Yes. I know you don't like to get involved in domestic quarrels, but there is a fight going on in the apartment downstairs and she'd got a knife, and a dog that he stole is hurting her."

"A stolen dog?"

"Yes."

"Well, if there's stolen property involved, we'll send a car out." Your name, please? And the address."

"Colleen Bryant. 4141 Van Amberg Road. It's an old farmhouse up on a hill. White, with a big pine tree outside."

"Do you know the names of the people downstairs?"

"Weber. Talbert and Wanda."

"Oh yes. Talbert Weber. Okay, Mrs. Bryant, we'll send a car over there. Good day."

Colleen could still hear Wanda's hoarse yells and she was tense, her muscles throbbing with a desire to descend the stairs and fling words at them both so that the yelling would stop. She went instead to the north window to watch for the police car.

Ryan pointed at the ample spruce that stood taller than the house and at the blue sky and at maple leaves whisking across the grass. noded, saying the names with false enthusiasm.

The police came sooner than she thought they would. The clean, bright blue car with a red flasher and the number 32 painted in white on the roof, travelled slowly down Van Amberg and drew up between the trees and climbed the hill.

Colleen wondered vaguely if the Weber's saw them coming, but she really felt no more temptations to go to the attic to listen. Her stomach was riled from the emotions that had been flooding through her.

She carried Ryan to the bedroom and concentrated on being relaxed as she changed him, tickling him and exclaiming about the two teeth jutting from the bottom of his jaw. She read him an animal book and laid him in his crib with his flannel blanket that he enjoyed rubbing on his cheek.

The door to the attic was still open and she stepped into the bathroom to shut it. She felt a sort of relief, an emptiness, that was most likely good, to have lost her interest in the Weber's.

As she fit the low wood door in place, booming laughter reverberated in the kitchen below. It wasn't just Talbert's laugh, but the combined sounds of two or three men. Colleen hesitated with the door partially open, and then shoved it shut.

In the kitchen, she set the stainless steel teakettle on a burner and turned the electricity on. Tea, she thought, might settle her stomach, which felt heavy and tight. It would be nice if she could visit with someone while she drank it, like her mother often did with her friends. She had ridiculed her mother's teaparties all the time she was growing up, but now longed for friends and easy conversation.

When the kettle was nearly at the whistling point, she lifted it from the burner to prevent the shrill sound from disturbing Ryan's sleep. She took her mug of steaming tea to the table and dialed Dan's number.

Dan answered because Jack, he said, was upstairs doing an interview.

"So what's up?" he asked.

"Talbert stole a dog and Wanda was going to return it and Talbert took her keys, so she got out her trusty knife, and the dog attacked her."

"Oh yeah?" He didn't sound as impressed as she thought he should be.

"So I called the police," she said, with less bounce in her voice.

"Oh shit, Colleen." His voice was low but emphatic.

"What's wrong?"

"Haven't you got anything better to do than meddle in the Weber's fights? Listen, don't call me anymore unless something comes in the mail about the draft case or something else important. Whenever you call, I expect something important, and then all I hear is gossip."

She was silent for a long time, fighting the urge to hang up on him, wondering if the stuffy sensation in her chest would rise up to tears. She had never been able to cry easily and hadn't cried at all in months, maybe years.

"How come the sudden outburst?" she asked, finally.

He spoke with less anger, but more coldly too.

"I guess it seems sudden to you, but I've been thinking about it for a long time. It just bugs me, you eavesdropping on them so much. And it bugs me having you call here. All the other guys' wives are working and hardly ever call. I'm doing important stuff here, you know. I'm not just sitting around waiting for a cozy chat."

"Well, you just get back to your important work then, and we'll argue or whatever when you get home." It wasn't her tone of voice, but Wanda's, yet she didn't know how to say it in any other way.

She put the phone up on the hook without waiting for him to reply, and then sat still at the table, trying not to disturb her body in case it was going to produce tears.

Whenever Dan, her only close friend, turned against her, she became ridden with desires to flee, of going somewhere with Ryan and starting out fresh, on her own. She never came close to thinking out details as to where she would go or what she would do. Before she could

get to those considerations, she would begin to think about her departure from Dan's viewpoint and would be overcome with sadness and remorse, knowing his anguish at losing them. He had even said once, soon after they were married, that if he ever lost her he would consider suicide.

She stood now and paced to the window, wishing she didn't have Ryan to worry about so she could take a walk to the woods, and wishing the Weber's weren't there to observe her if she could take the walk.

She paced back to the table, her eye on the phone, half-hoping Dan would call back, angry with him already if he should.

The tea was still steaming, the slow wisps of white rising effortlessly from the brown liquid. She lifted the mug from the table and took it to the sink where she dumped the tea, all at once, splashing it over the white porcelain, knowing it would leave a stain.

Dan had been gathering up his notebook and forms and checking his supplies of tubes and needles and alcohol wipes when Colleen called. Golden Sun had called earlier, telling him there were two new girls working for her, wondering if he could test them for syphilis. Dan was preparing to go over there right away.

When Colleen hung up on him, he put his phone down and hurriedly got his things together and left.

He went up the stairs to the main floor and down the dark hallway lined at one end with chairs in which patients sat waiting, most of them women since the clinic's hours for women were scheduled from eight to nine-thirty. Dan darted his eyes from face to face feeling tense, as he always did when he came through the waiting area, trying to keep his eyes on the faces long enough so that he didn't appear austere and aloof, but short enough so that he didn't seem curious or judgmental.

Outside, as he strode down the ramp from Building #7 to his car, he glanced at the hazy blue sky and the yellow and red leaves on the few maple trees near the cyclone fence. He whistled a bit as he crunched over the cinders of the parking lot, even though he didn't really feel like it. He had been eager to go to Golden Sun's until Colleen called. Now there were thin bands of guilt keeping his lungs from expanding all the way, and he didn't understand why he should feel any guilt at all.

Rosa opened the door for him, smiling widely, her teeth brilliant white in her olive skin. When he saw her, he realized he had been anxious as to whether or not she would be there this morning.

"Hello, Dan. It's nice to see you."

"It's nice to see you."

"C'mon in. Goldie's in the other apartment right now, getting the new girls up."

He nodded, and then said,

"So how've you been?" as he started across the living room to the brocade chair he tended to sit in every time he came.

"The same as ever, I guess. How's your dull, dark clinic?"

"The same as ever." He smiled and met her eyes as she gave a brief laugh. She stood before his chair, her hands clasped in front of her on the short skirt of her printed dress that seemed to be made of some silken material. He had a desire to rub a bit of the fabric between his fingers.

"Do you want any coffee?" she asked.

"No thanks."

"God, no alcohol, no caffeine, aren't you hooked on anything?"

She was walking out to the kitchen and talked louder so he'd hear her.

"I don't think so."

"That's incredible. I think I admire that."

"You only think so?"

She came back, with a thick tan cup and saucer, the sort that restaurants use, and sat on the couch across from him, keeping her knees together so that the saucer could rest on them.

"I only think so because it's hard to believe drinking coffee isn't good. It tastes good."

"It tastes bitter to me."

"Really?" Her thin, dark eyebrows rose and then she shrugged.

"Well, I've been drinking it since I was a kid, so maybe that's why I like it so much."

Dan eased back in the chair and watched her sip, her lips pursed a bit, yet open.

Goldie came in, closing the door with a dramatic flourish. She had on a deep green velours gown trimmed with embroidered satin. Her beige hair was stacked perfectly in layers on her head and looked immovable.

"Dan! How nice to see you." She glided across the thick gold rug with her hand extended. He stood and grasped it.

"Hello, Goldie."

"Well! I'm so glad you could come. And so soon!"

"Well, it happened to be a free morning."

"Wonderful! Sit down, sit down. Would you like some coffee?"

"No thanks. Rosa just offered me some." Rosa's eyes met his for a warm instant.

"Oh fine!" said Goldie. She reached out an affectionate hand in Rosa's direction, and then moved toward the kitchen. "Excuse me a moment while I get some of the wicked brew for myself. The girls will be here in just a minute or two," she called. "They only just began working for me last week and they are still very foolish about staying up late at night." She glided back in, her long, pearly nails studded around the cup like jewels.

"How late do you stay open?" asked Dan.

"Oh, we have customers from noon till six. But we have friends come and party at night quite often."

"You mean you aren't open at night at all then?"

"Oh Lord no. Six hours a day is long enough to work." She paused and gave him a slight frown with her smile. "Were you interested in coming at night?" she asked.

"Oh. No." He gave his head a quick shake and looked down.

"I was just curious."

"Well, you know, you are certainly welcome anytime. Listen!" She sat forward suddenly and clasped her hands on her knees. "Let me give you a standing invitation now to our Thursday night parties! Would you like that?"

He shrugged, grinning, his eyes darting from the floor to her face to Rosa's and back again to the floor. "Sure."

"All right. Any Thursday night. We always party on Thursday nights. I'll go fill out a card for you. We have special cards so you will be sure to be allowed in." She rushed into a bedroom.

"I hope you'll really come," said Rosa, her large eyes wide and serious.

Dan looked at her, holding her gaze longer than he was usually able to hold someone's.

"I'll be sure to come sometime," he said, smiling to one side. She smiled too.

The front door opened and the two new girls came in, both of them tall and slender, one of them blond and in a dress similar to Rosa's and the other with reddish hair with her hands in the pockets of her blue jeans.

"Where's Goldie?" the blond asked.

"She's getting a party card for Dan here."

"Oh yeah?" They both looked at him intently and he smiled and ran his eyes away from them.

Goldie returned, holding the card before her with two pink tipped fingers.

"Here you go, Dan."

"Thanks."

It was a plain white card, three inches by four, with a gold sun embossed in the upper lefthand corner. In thick, black ink, slanting backwards, Goldie had written his name.

Dan nodded as he looked at it, and then slipped it in the back of his notebook.

"Donna, Cindy," said Goldie. "Did you meet Dan?"

"No."

He stood, feeling embarrassed for not having stood sooner, and she made introductions.

"All right, then," said Goldie. "Let's all retire to the bedroom so Dan can get some blood."

"I'm so glad you can do this for us," she went on, as he wiped the tender skin on the inside of elbows and slipped the needles into the rounded blue veins. "You should consider setting up your own clinic to check prostitutes. I'd help with the capital. And you know, pros would pay high for someone so kind and competent, someone they could trust."

Dan looked at her, surprised and pleased.

"That's a neat idea, and I really appreciate your offer," he said. "But you have to be a doctor to have your own clinic or lab."

"But why? You know how to take the tests."

He shrugged as he labelled the blood samples in their tubes, and then looked at her.

"It's the law."

"Well," said Rosa. "Maybe you should go to medical school."

Dan laughed and then shook his head as he tucked the tubes into his pouch.

"Maybe I should have stuck it out. I don't know." He raised his head and glanced around at them. "I went to medical school for a year, and then dropped out."

"You did!" said Rosa, and he nodded, looking at her. "Was it awful hard?"

"Oh. Not really. Just a lot of memorization, you know, of muscles and nerves--the whole body. I just decided I didn't want to be a doctor."

"Because of having to memorize so much?" asked Rosa.

"No. It was just the whole atmosphere. I felt like I didn't fit the doctor mold--you know, success, making lots of money, putting

people on sugar pills when maybe there really was something wrong with them."

"Ah," said Goldie, holding up a finger. "Now we know what you are talking about. This is why we hate to go to doctors."

Dan nodded.

"But you wouldn't have had to be like that," said Rosa.

"No."

They were all quiet for awhile, and Dan glanced around at them uncomfortably.

"Well!" said Goldie, brightly, her pale, pink lips spread in a smile that was careful as always not to go too wide. "Thank you so much for coming over to test Cindy and Donna."

"Anytime." He picked up his notebook from the dresser. "I'll let you know the results as soon as possible."

"Fine. Wonderful." She led the way out into the living room.

"And be sure to come on Thursday night sometime."

"I will. I'm looking forward to it. About what time?"

"Oh, come early. Eight or so."

"Okay."

"Dan," said Rosa, hurrying up beside him. "Are you heading back to the clinic now?"

"Yes." He stopped to face her. "Can I give you a ride?"

"Oh, if you would, it would be great. My mother lives quite near Herman-Kiefer Hospital. It's my day off, so I want to go see her."

"Sure. I'll take you there."

She ran to get her coat and bag while he said good-bye to Goldie and the two new girls.

When they were in his car, driving away, he said,

"I was under the impression that you didn't have a family."

"Well, all I've got is my mother. I didn't even have her around here until recently. She had been living in Texas, but I saved up enough money to get her moved up here into a flat. She complains about the weather a lot, but she likes having a home."

Dan nodded, wanting to ask her questions, but finding it difficult to phrase them in his mind.

"Did you grow up in Texas, then?" he asked finally.

"Oh no. I grew up everywhere! My family is all migrant workers. We used to follow the harvest season from Michigan to Texas and then back again for planting."

"Oh." He nodded, thinking back to his junior high school days and the brown faces he'd see in the halls for a month or two and then, usually, never again. "I used to envy the migrant families," he said. "You know, I'd see them in their trucks at the supermarket, or barreling down the highway in their loaded station wagons, and I'd envy their being able to travel everywhere, and how the families were so big and all talking in their language that no one else could understand."

He gave her a quick glance, afraid he might have offended her, but she was smiling with her large eyes fixed on him, shining warmly.

"Nobody's ever said that before," she said. "Nobody. I always thought we were the only ones who did the envying. We envied your houses, your having the same friends from year to year who had a house for you to go and stay all night with." She gestured her hand. "I'm talking about girls. Slumber parties."

He nodded.

"There's no money in following the crops," she said after awhile.

He was going to say "so you got into a more lucrative business," but he was afraid it would sound as if he were making fun of her, and he didn't want to do that at all. So he said nothing.

"What town did you grow up in?" she asked.

"Alma. Up in Gratiot county."

"Sure! I've been there. A long time ago. Cucumber crop, pickles. Horrible work."

"I bet. So you went to Alma High School some?"

"No. I'd quit school by then." She was silent until he parked by the curb in front of her mother's flat. "You really should go back to medical school," she said as she hiked her bag up onto her shoulder. "You've gone to school so long already, a little more wouldn't be so bad."

"Maybe not," he said, not wanting to quarrel with her.

"Well, Dan, I'm looking forward to seeing you again. Anytime. Not just on Thursday nights."

"Okay," he said, looking down, feeling his face heat.

"Thanks for the lift."

"Anytime, Rosa. Bye now."

He had forgotten about his harsh words with Colleen until he was driving up the hill by the farmhouse. In fact, he'd not thought about her at all since the telephone conversation. He had been warmly absorbed all day in considering everything Rosa had said from all angles, trying to ascertain if she was interested in him as a person

or just a source of profit, but unable to reach any firm conclusion. He avoided considering if he was interested in her, although it was difficult to ignore his quickening heartbeat and the tingling of his skin.

When he remembered his quarrel with Colleen, a dullness overcame his senses and he trudged tiredly up the outside stairway to the apartment. Through the small, curtained window in the door he could see Colleen, her back to the door, her arm high as she helped Ryan get the cup to his mouth without spilling it. Dan paused, waiting to be warmed by the scene, but feeling nothing but dull dread.

As he went in the door, she turned and looked straight into his eyes, but didn't speak. He ran his gaze over Ryan, who grinned and laughed at him, pointing his messy finger. Dan glanced at the stove, which was empty of any pans.

Colleen followed his glance with a quick, flitting look of her own, and then turned around to face Ryan again.

"We're going out to eat tonight," she said.

Dan leaned against the counter and rubbed his eyelids with his forefingers.

"Colleen, you know as well as I do that we can't afford to. Don't put me in this position."

"You know as well as I do that I've got to get out of this apartment now and then."

"So go take a walk. I'll watch Ryan and try to cook us up something."

"Really?"

The honest surprise on her face made him feel a rush of benevolent love.

"If you hurry, you can catch the sunset."

She bounced out of her chair and threw herself against him in a frenzied hug, her head banging his chest and her thighs pressing against his. His arousal was immediate and made him feel less heavy-hearted.

Colleen dashed to the closet for her jacket.

"Mama?" asked Ryan, his eyes wide with worry.

"Better cool it," said Dan, "or you'll have him crying when you go."

"Okay."

She came back at a moderate pace and kissed the top of Ryan's head, avoiding his food smeared fingers, and gave Dan a sedate kiss on the mouth.

He closed the door and watched her dash down the unsteady stairs and across the yard. He thought she might wave after she ducked under the wire around Pony's pasture, but she ran toward the woods without looking back.

CHAPTER 13

Dan got up from his desk without putting papers away or shutting a heavy file drawer, hoping that no one would see him going to lunch by himself. He left his chair out thinking the other VDI's might assume he was just going to the bathroom and would be right back.

Jack met him in the hall.

"Wait up for me, Dan. I'll go with you."

"Listen, Jack." Dan hesitated. He didn't want to lie, but it would be too risky to tell the truth.

"Yeah?" Jack was frowning, scrutinizing Dan's face. Dan shook his head.

"I can't tell you, man. But I want to go by myself today."

Jack's gaze pulled back and his frown shifted from one of concern to curious mistrust. Dan shook his head again, upset by Jack's expression, and looked down.

"I'm sorry, man."

"Oh. Well," said Jack. "I'm not down on you, man. It just seems out of character for you to have a deep dark secret."

"Yeah."

"Well, I'll see you after lunch, then."

He moved his stooped, lanky body into the VDI room without turning his head again.

Dan stood still a moment and then strode down the hall. Today he kept his eyes directed at the linoleum as he passed through the

waiting room, too upset over Jack's reaction to care if the waiting patients thought he was aloof. He drove cautiously and without spirit to Rosa's mother's house.

Rosa was standing on the sagging porch of the frame house when he pulled up to the curb, her bag looped over her shoulder, her legs primly straight and together. Her mother, a short woman, layered with extra flesh, came out and waved to Dan, grinning and nodding, as Rosa came down to the car.

Dan leaned over and opened the door and Rosa peered in with a smile before sitting on the seat and slamming the door.

"Bye-bye, Mama. Yes, yes. Next week. Adios, mi corazon."

She smiled again at Dan. "Where are we going?"

"Well, there's a Chinese restaurant over on Six Mile--Kim's Gardens. Would that be okay?"

"I've been there. I like their food very much."

"Good."

He drove with great care, spending a lot of time looking at each dog or cluster of children or stop sign. He was anxious to look at Rosa, but didn't want to appear anxious.

"This is so nice of you to ask me out, Dan," she said finally.

"You know, I don't have dates very often."

"You mentioned that at the first Thursday party I went to. Do you remember?" He glanced at her. "You were a little depressed about Goldie's daughter having so many dates and going to neat places, so it gave me the idea for taking you out to lunch."

"It's so kind. I don't remember what I said that night. I was probably drunk. There's where your not drinking pays off. You can remember things like that."

Dan grinned and gave a small shrug.

"Well, so anyway," she said. "A real date. I appreciate you taking the trouble."

"It's no trouble, Rosa. I really wanted to do it."

She flashed him a pleased smile and nestled back in her seat.

She seemed to have a slight accent at times, Dan thought. Her consonants were more precise, some of the vowels shorter. But not all the time. It seemed to be an accent that she could pick up or lay down, like Jack's Black talk. He wondered what determined her use of it-- what sort of things she talked about with the accent, or what situations she was in when she used it.

In the restaurant she said she wanted whatever he wanted, so he plucked at his eyebrows and took what seemed a long time to decide while the thin Chinese-American stood with her leg jutted out, waiting to write down his preference times two. For a moment he was angry with Rosa for not picking something with positive zeal as Colleen would have, but then he felt a small glow to think that she would leave the whole decision up to him. He ordered egg rolls, chow mein and milk.

"My tastes are plain," he said. "So feel free to get something different."

"No, that's great." Her hand moved evasively over the table.

"Only I'd like green tea instead of milk." She said it to him in a low voice instead of to the waitress, so he had to say it again directly to the oriental woman.

They talked about the cold, crisp November weather they were having, about Goldie, and other things Dan wasn't interested in right now. He wanted to ask more about her family and her migrant worker days,

but didn't know how to bring it up. He felt restless and rather depressed with the conversation. Rosa, too, seemed to want to talk of something specific. When the food came, she plunged right into her topic, forking up mushrooms and water chestnuts without commenting on their flavor.

"Have you thought anymore about going back to medical school, Dan?"

"No, not really."

"You know, Goldie brings it up quite often that you should be a doctor."

"Does she? God, she offered me that loan to set up a clinic. That really-well, it surprised me, but made me feel good, too."

"Sure." She ate three more rapid bites and sipped her steaming tea from its small, round cup. "But for that you need to be a doctor, right?"

"That's right."

"Well? Why not become one?"

Dan frowned as he rested his fork on his plate and ran the fingers of his other hand up and down the cold glass of milk.

"I don't think I could stand four years of medical school, Rosa. But also, with a family, I don't think I could support them and go to school."

"A family? I knew you were married, because you have on that ring, but children too?"

"One child. He's nine months now."

"Does your wife work?"

"No."

"She should get a babysitter and a job."

"Well, she thinks it's important to be with the baby."

"Oh sure. But all day? How about a part-time job?"

"I don't know. We don't talk about it anymore."

"Hmmm." Her eyes narrowed to slits suddenly and she gazed at him, and then attacked her food once more. "You know," she said with her mouth full, "you shouldn't let other people control your life."

Dan raised his eyebrows tiredly and forked up some rice.

"It's a good thought," he said quietly.

"No, really. You know, I don't know how you feel toward this wife, but maybe leaving her would be the right thing to do. Lots of times people do the wrong thing by staying married. "Do you feel trapped?"

Dan shrugged.

"Oh, yeah." He was thinking it wasn't just being married that made him feel trapped, but the draft, too, but he didn't know how Rosa felt toward the army and refusing induction, so he didn't mention it.

"Well, then?"

"It's not that easy, Rosa. At least for me."

She was silent as she finished her food and he was feeling more depressed, afraid that he had contradicted her too strongly. He had desires to be away from her and her troublesome ideas, and yet desires to be with her longer.

"Why are you so interested in me? he asked finally, smiling to soften the question.

She shook her head.

"You are so kind. But, you are too kind. You will get hurt so much." She paused and looked directly into his eyes. He received her gaze without turning aside, and felt his eyes soften with vulnerability.

"Are you finished?" she asked briskly, searching for her bag on the seat beside her. "You can take me to Goldie's now. I'm sorry if I upset you."

"Rosa." He reached a hand across the table, as if to lay it on hers had hers been there. She was busy slipping it into her coat. "You're right, I guess, about upsetting me, but I'm not sure it's bad."

"Ahh." She stilled herself and gazed at him again, her eyes lit with knowledge and yet a question in them too. "You know, Dan. One more thing. I make lots of money. Tax free. I could give you some to help you go to medical school, if you decide you want to go."

He sat back and gave his head a single shake.

"I don't understand why you are so helpful. You and Goldie. Why me?"

"I guess the reason is because we think you'd make a good doctor. We think you aren't exactly wasting yourself in this job, but not doing as much as you could."

"Well, I don't know. I'll have to do a lot of thinking."

"Sure."

She stood and he did too.

"Back to Goldie's?" he asked as he held the door for her, after paying the bill.

"Yes. And would you like to come up with me? No charge of course."

He walked beside her to the car, amazed that his legs hadn't given out, hesitant to trust his voice.

"No, Rosa. Thanks."

"Okay." He opened the car door for her and she got in and looked up at him. "You know, it doesn't hurt my feelings to have you say no. I think you worry too much about that. I like to see that you're strong and have principles and stand up for what you believe."

He nodded and gave her his one-sided smile and then shut the door.

On the drive back, he still could not seem to get control of the conversation, and they spoke of trivialities all the way to Goldie's.

Before Rosa got out, she asked,

"Will I see you again? Have I ruined things today?"

"I'll be back, Rosa."

"Okay." She leaned over and kissed his cheek lightly, but without hurry. His muscles strained to pull her close and kiss her mouth, but he gripped the steering wheel firmly as she moved over and got out her side. "Thanks again, Dan. Bye now."

He watched her walk up the short sidewalk to the yellow brick apartment building, her skirt short and flicking about beneath her leather, fur-trimmed jacket.

Dan knew Colleen would be excited, and on another night he would feel some of his daily oppression lift to see her eyes glimmering and her cheeks flushed. She so rarely showed any signs of spontaneous joy anymore, and that was one of the important things in his attraction to her back in college. But tonight he knew her excitement would bother him, and that thought weighed on him more heavily than all the rest.

She would be leaping and laughing and hugging him, and he would try that much harder to seem depressed, and that would lead to further depression inside him, and he didn't want it to be that way.

The apartment was quiet as he came in. He looked quickly in the kitchen and living room and then strode into the bedroom. Colleen was brushing her hair as she sat tailor fashion in the center of the bed, clad in her underpants and a pullover sweater of reddish brown. Her skin seemed whiter after having thought about Rosa's olive flesh all day. There were pale freckles on her knees which he usually enjoyed seeing, but today were like blemishes.

Ryan was climbing up the foot of the bed and falling headfirst onto the mattress, and then scrambling over to the edge to let himself down to the floor to repeat the process.

"I didn't hear you come in," said Colleen.

"That's bad. Anybody could come in here." He pulled on his tie and turned away from her.

"If they had a key, I suppose they could."

"Aren't you ready yet?" he asked.

"Oh yeah. I just have my pants and shoes to put on. I'll put them on when you go to get the babysitter."

"God, I've been driving all day. An hour in, an hour back, fifteen minutes to get her, and fifteen back, and then an hour into Detroit again and back."

"I'll drive to Detroit. I never get to drive anymore."

"No thanks. I get sick when you drive."

"Well, it hasn't got anything to do with my driving."

He pulled on his jeans and tucked his sweater down in them.

"Why aren't you all excited? I expected you to be all excited."

She shrugged.

"I knew you'd get down on me if I was. So I'm not. But you're down on me anyway. Fuck you."

"C'mon, cut it out, will you? You want him to learn those words?"

"Oh, my God, you mean you really noticed he's here in the room with us? You didn't speak to him when you came in."

"So? He didn't speak to me."

"Oh, Jesus."

"Cut it out, Colleen."

She bounced off the bed and yanked some clean jeans out of the dresser drawer and got into them.

"I'll go get the babysitter," she said. "You stay here and play with Ryan. He misses you."

"No thanks."

"Why not?"

"You know why." He busied himself with his boots and didn't look at her.

"No, I don't know why. If I knew I wouldn't ask."

"The husband's supposed to get the sitter."

"Oh, God, Dan. Are you so insecure in your role?"

"Shut up."

"Because of your dad, right?"

He straightened.

"Just be ready when I get back, okay?"

"Now wait a minute." He started out of the bedroom. "Dan!" She ran after him into the kitchen and grabbed him arm. "Wait, I said."

He stopped and looked at her, feeling his eyes flood with rage, knowing most of it wasn't meant for her, but directing it all at her anyway."

"Let go of me. Quit trying to control me."

Her face whitened until it seemed transparent to him, and her lips stood out redly. She released his arm.

A loud thump came from the bedroom and Ryan's wail sound its way out to them.

"Oh Jesus," said Colleen and hurried back to the baby. Dan didn't look into the bedroom but went on out to the car.

Ryan had landed on his bottom, as far as Colleen could tell. She scooped him into her arms and sat on the edge of the bed and rocked back and forth with him.

"You'll be okay, little boy. Everything will be okay." The words stuck in her throat as she tried to say them again, and they came out as a hoarse whisper.

Dan waited out in the car while Colleen told Carrie, the high school girl whom they had hired once before, when to tuck Ryan in and that he needed his flannel blanket as a comforter. She put the little boy in the babysitter's arms and kissed him good-bye, and left with an ache in her chest to hear him crying.

She no longer wanted to go. For a month she had been trying to convince Dan to take her, and during the last week she had been looking forward to going with him into Detroit to the Open City clinic near Wayne State University where Dan and Jack and Jack's wife Anna worked voluntarily two nights a week. Dan seemed bent on ruining their night out together and with Ryan's cries also in her mind, she felt sure any excitement she might have felt was precluded now.

She decided not to speak to him unless he asked her something, and he apparently decided the same, so their journey down I-96 was wordless, except for Dan's hissed curse when large snowflakes began dropping out of the cold sky. Colleen let her thoughts revolve around what life would be like without Dan, what it would be like to drive herself through the snow to a voluntary job helping other people with their medical and emotional crises. She was sure she'd feel less depression than she did now--probably even gaiety at the flashes of snow flakes in front of the headlights. She wondered what was in Dan's mind as he stoically drove.

Jack and Anna were already in the upstairs clinic, which consisted of a few narrow rooms and several desks with phones. The hall and stairway were lined on both sides with kids sitting and standing, waiting to be helped at the clinic. Colleen hadn't been around so many people her own age since college, and she felt breathless among them, apprehensive and excited.

"Hi," said Jack, his mouth wide as he drew out the word. "Nice to see you Colleen. Dan, there's a couple kids in that room there that need VDRL's. They want to get married. They've got a kid already.

Colleen glanced into the room and saw the two of them sitting in old wood chairs, the girl holding a small baby. The boy, no more than eighteen, looked up expectantly at Colleen. She glanced away and settled her eyes on the girl and the baby, but her thoughts were still on the boy's glance. It had given her a sort of thrill; not a thin piercing one, but one that widened up expanses inside her. She wished she could walk in there and do the VDRL's herself.

Dan and Jack did go in, and Anna came over from one of the desks where several female volunteers were talking together.

"Hi Colleen."

"Hi." Colleen shifted her feet and put her hands in her back pockets. She didn't know Anna very well, but she knew her better than any other woman her age. "Is there anything I could do?"

"Gee, I don't think so. Tuesday nights we always have zillions of helpers, and then Thursday and Friday nights, not enough."

"Oh?"

"Yes. I've been trying to talk Dan into coming on Thursday night, too, but so far, no luck."

Colleen frowned and then said, nodding,

"He comes on Thursday night. Tuesday and Thursday."

"No." Anna gave her head a hard shake, bounding her bangs. "Just Tuesday night." She frowned too, her eyes wide and concerned.

"Hmm," said Colleen and looked down. Her heart began drumming harder and she concentrated on its thumps rather than what Dan's absence on Thursday night might mean.

"Hey Anna," called one of the girls grouped around a telephone. "Duane is on here, wanting to talk to you again."

"Tell him I'm out for coffee." She turned back to Colleen. "Some weird man always wants to talk to me. There's other regular callers too. I just wonder what they'd do if they didn't have us to talk to?"

"Yeah," said Colleen. She watched as a girl came in from the hall and went to the first desk to fill out a form.

The young man sitting there with the forms said,

"Be sure to put down that you're eighteen."

She looked up at him.

"But I'm not."

"Well, what I mean is, lie. We have to notify kids' parents when they're under eighteen."

"Oh. Okay then."

"Do you want some coffee, Colleen?" asked Anna.

"No thanks."

"Well, I'm going to run out and get some. Why don't you sit down there in that chair--just put those coats on the floor--and I'll be back pretty quick."

She dashed out and Colleen picked the bundle of coats up and put them down in the cleanest corner she could find. There were cigarette butts and scuffed dirt everywhere.

When she stood up there was a woman with frizzy, billowy hair standing next to her. Her abdomen rounded out far from her body and she rested her folded hands on it.

"Hi. Are you Dan's wife?"

"Yes. My name's Colleen."

"Oh. Well, I'm Emily. I work here on Tuesday night with Dan."

Colleen nodded and then asked,

"When is your baby due?"

"Two weeks ago."

Colleen laughed and then shook her head.

"That would be awful."

"Oh, I don't mind waiting. I don't have any clothes for it yet or anything."

"You don't?"

"No. No money. I just moved in with this guy though who's got a good job with the state, and he'll let me borrow from him, or whatever."

"Had you been planning to move in with him?"

"No, I'm not a planner-aheader. I met him at a party a month or so ago."

"What were you planning to do, if you hadn't met him. I mean, not planning...hoping?"

"I didn't think about it too much. Things get worked out no matter what you plan or hope."

There was a commotion by the door and they turned to look. Anna was pushing through the kids grouped outside the door, and Colleen could see that her face was hardened with determination, her eyes rounded with worry.

"Oh, wow," said Emily as they both caught sight of the girl behind Anna, staggering as Anna pulled her through the doorway. The girl's skin was dirty yellow and her cheekbones stuck out sharply below her sunken eyes. Emily hurried over and Colleen took a few steps toward them, alarmed and repulsed, yet transfixed by the girl's yellow, bloodless skin.

"Get Dr. Edmund, Emily. Tell him it's urgent," Anna said briskly. Emily moved with surprising grace to one of the smaller rooms with a closed door.

A boy came in the door, as thin as the girl, but not yellow, and sidled over to Anna, his hands in his jacket pockets.

"God, you should have brought her right on in here," Anna said to him.

He shrugged.

"It was first come, first serve, I thought."

"Yeah, but not for someone in this condition."

Dr. Edmund, a small man with dark curly hair and bushy sideburns, came toward them, his head stretched back as if he were trying to appear taller. Emily hurried along behind him.

"Ummm," he said, shaking his head when he saw the girl, who was standing with her eyes shut, leaning on her boyfriend. "Open your eyes, please." She did, but he stretched one wider with his thumb and forefinger. "Immediate hospitalization," he said.

"Hospital," said the boyfriend, shocked.

"Definitely. She has hepatitis like I've never seen before."

"I can't take her to any hospital." He had lowered his head and was shaking it.

"You mean money-wise."

"Well, that too, yeah."

"You mean 'cause she's been shooting up and you're afraid they'll report her?"

The boy nodded.

"You'll just have to take the risk. If you don't, she'll die. I can guarantee it. She needs a blood transfusion."

The boy nodded again.

"Which hospital would be the best? You know what I mean."

"Detroit General. Or Harper Hospital. Take her to Emergency. Have you got a car?"

"No."

Dr. Edmund wheeled around, searching the room.

"I'll take them," said Emily.

"Oh, fine. Okay, good. If you have any trouble, call me, or have the hospital call me."

Dr. Edmund walked back to the examining room. Colleen watched Emily leave with the sick girl and her boyfriend, rubbing her own arms at the inside of the elbow, her flesh crawling at the thought of the girl being filled with another person's blood. Anna came over, shaking her head.

"She was so yellow," said Colleen.

"I know it. Terrible."

"Will she get, you know, natural again with new blood?"

"I guess so. Maybe not right away. She could even die. A lot of heroin addicts get hepatitis from sharing the needles, you know, and some of them die." Colleen nodded quickly, and then shook her head.

Jack and Dan came out of their room.

"I need some coffee," said Jack. "How'bout the rest of you?"

"Yes, get me some," said Anna. "I never made it that far. Did you see the girl I brought in?"

"No. We've been busy. What was wrong?"

"Hepatitis. Super yellow skin."

"Oh yeah?"

"Where is she now?" asked Dan. "I'd like to see her."

"Emily's taking her to the hospital. She needs a blood transfusion."

"Oh yeah?"

"Well, Colleen," said Jack. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

She smiled wanly.

"I guess I got shook up over that girl. But this is a neat place. I'd like to be able to work here too."

"Well, why not?" said Anna. "That's a good idea. You could get out around people and we could sure use the help on Thursday and Friday nights."

"How's she supposed to get here?" asked Dan in a flat voice, his lids drawn up a bit around his eyes.

"Can't you go home and bring her in?"

"I'm not going to drive home and back in again two or three times a week."

Colleen looked down, embarrassed by his sour attitude.

"Oh, do you usually just stay here in Detroit and not go home to eat?" asked Anna.

"Sure. It's an hour drive."

"You could just come once a week and I could come once or twice," said Colleen. "You could come home and take care of Ryan while I come in here."

"You'd get lost trying to drive in Detroit."

"No I wouldn't, Dan."

"And we'd never have any time together then."

Colleen made no reply.

The young man at the reception desk with the forms yelled,

"Here's some more blood test patients for you, Dan and Jack."

"Okay." Dan went into the room with the three boys while Jack hurried out for coffee.

"It would be cool if you could come," said Anna.

Colleen nodded quickly and looked down.

"Yeah, but I guess it is pretty far to drive."

"You guys should move into the city." Colleen shook her head.

"Dan would never live in the city. I would consider it. I like living in the country, but lately I've been feeling so isolated." She paused and then said, "I'd really like to work here. Or maybe have a job like you've got, as a social worker."

"Yeah." Anna nodded vigorously. "It gets dull sometimes. There's a lot of paper work. But at least I feel like I'm contributing something to society."

"Do you have to be a college graduate to do that?"

"Yes. You never graduated?"

"No, I went two years."

"Well, maybe you should consider going back to school."

Colleen shook her head.

"No money. No transportation. We only have the one car."

"Wow. That sounds bad. The "trapped housewife.""

"I guess so. I like being home with Ryan, though."

"Do you? But not all the time, huh?"

"No. Like this is only the second time we've gotten a baby-sitter since he's been born."

"Really? How come?"

"Well, Dan's always tired and he doesn't like to go places. He just likes to stay home."

"He hasn't always been like that, has he?"

Colleen thought for a moment.

"I don't think so. Since Ryan was born. And since he'd had all the draft problems."

"How's that working out, by the way?"

"Nothing's changed. The lawyers hope to talk to the United State's Attorney so it won't have to go to court. Dan will be 26 in two more months."

"So then he'll be free?"

"We don't know. They won't be able to make him join the army, but we don't know, they might still be able to prosecute him."

"Wow. That would be bad to have that over your head all the time."

"It's hell."

Anna nodded and was silent for awhile.

"Well, I've got to go help Dr. Edmund," she said.

"Isn't there something I could do?" Colleen asked again, worrying she might seem offensive by her eagerness.

"No, I guess not. Look at all the extra people by those phones already. Just sit and watch, I guess. There's a lot of interesting people coming and going."

"Okay," said Colleen, feeling depressed and excluded, but trying not to show it. She glanced into the room where Dan was busy, wanting to wander in there and watch and be near him, but he seemed displeased with her presence, so she decided she shouldn't intrude.

She sat down in the chair and watched everyone bustling about, struggling to keep a complacent expression on her face when really, she was restless and angry with the way things were going.

CHAPTER 14

Colleen had been waiting for her period for over a month, hoping that the slight bulge in her abdomen was due to water retention or an ordinary weight fluctuation. But during a Saturday morning bath two weeks before Christmas, when Ryan and Dan were still asleep, she noticed two droplets of milky colostrum on one of her nipples. She felt a plunge of depression to realize she was pregnant again, yet at the same time felt a sort of secret excitement to know a fresh person was beginning inside her.

She didn't really want another baby. She had ordered some catalogs from Wayne State and the University of Michigan without telling Dan, and had become determined to go back to school and develop her own potentials. Another baby would bring her to a standstill for a year or more. She would want to nurse it and raise it as conscientiously as she had Ryan, and she didn't think she could do that while trying to go to school.

She wished she could discuss the whole affair with Dan, but he was so distant these days, and often rude. She had kept her suspicions about being pregnant a secret and it looked like she'd have to keep the actual knowledge secret too, until he was over whatever it was that was bothering him.

She hurriedly finished washing herself and let the water out of the tub. Ryan would be getting up soon and she didn't want him to disturb Dan. If she could keep Dan in a docile mood today, maybe they

could talk about her secret, and his too. She still had not confronted him with Anna's statement that his Thursday nights were not spent at the Open City clinic. She kept hoping he would bring it up, or the thing would resolve itself.

When she went in the bedroom to take Ryan out of his crib, Dan was awake, lying on his back with his hands behind his head and his face turned toward the window that looked out into the icy black branches of the hickory tree. Colleen glanced at him just long enough to see that he was awake and then ignored him as she changed Ryan and dressed him.

"Dada, Dada," said Ryan in his high, clear voice, pointing at Dan in the bed.

Colleen stood before the squatty dresser on which Ryan sat, buttoning the boy's sweater. She glanced at Dan twice, wanting him to respond to Ryan's delight, but afraid to start a quarrel by reminding him that he should.

She stood Ryan on the floor and helped him toddle to the bed, and then watched him scramble up the foot of it and plunge onto the mattress. She went to the kitchen to fry some eggs. She remembered her intention to keep Ryan away from Dan, and wondered if she'd loosed the child on him in revenge. She gave some time to this thought and decided she had done it with a feeling that Ryan might bring Dan back from his somber thoughts.

She could hear Joellen and Butch down in their kitchen, talking as they ate together. Wanda and Talbert slept in till noon on week-ends.

Colleen went to the bedroom door to speak to Dan instead of calling from the kitchen. Even though the Weber's never tried to curb

their noise, she and Dan were careful about calling from one room to the next when they knew it might disturb the Weber's.

Dan was lying in the same position as when she had last looked. Ryan was sitting on the floor, pulling used tissues out of the wastebasket and shredding them.

"Dan, do you want your eggs flipped or not?" He shut his eyes and said nothing. "Dan, hurry up and answer, I've got them cooking right now."

"Just leave me alone."

Colleen crossed her arms and leaned on the doorjamb, trying to keep her breathing steady and her angry words inside her. She wanted to say something cutting so that he could feel some pain too, but instead she grit her teeth and bent to scoop Ryan under her arm. He let out an ungry yell. On the way out of the bedroom, she slammed the door, which was something she hadn't done in a long time, and never this particular door. The bang was greater than she had expected, since it gained volume reverberating in the small hallway and off the hard surfaces in the bathroom. The bang sounded more violent than she felt. For a second she felt guilty, but then her anger rose up to the level of the noise she had made, and she thought maybe she was that upset afterall.

Ryan quit his yelling at the peak of his outrage, startled by the noise, and stared up at her, his whole blue irises showing. This time, she was too angry to pretend for his benefit that she wasn't. She set him in his highchair without a reassuring word and gave him some wholewheat toast to chew while she finished the eggs.

She heard the bedroom door open with a rush, and she thought maybe all it was going to take to bring Dan around was a little anger. He came over to the stove, his face flushed and his eyes narrowed. He had his jeans on, but no shirt or shoes. Colleen wondered briefly why he had paused in his rage to half dress.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" he asked in a low, dense voice.

Colleen set the pan off the burner before turning to look at him.

"I'm pregnant," she said.

His eyes rounded as wide as Ryan's and he took a step back to lean on the refrigerator.

"That's half the reason," she went on. "The other half you have to tell me. What's ever wrong with you is half of what's wrong with me."

"You're pregnant? How do you know?"

She shrugged and slid a spatula under Ryan's well-done egg.

"My period hasn't come, my belly's bigger, my breasts are leaking colostrum."

"Your period hasn't come?" He shook his head, bewildered.

"That's right Dan. You usually keep up an interest in me, at least physically, but somehow you've missed out on two missed periods."

"Two? Goddam."

He was quiet for a moment, staring at the floor, with his hands in his back pockets. Colleen cut Ryan's egg into pieces and took it to him.

"Yummy egg," she said automatically.

"Yummy," he replied and picked some solid yolk up between his fingers.

Colleen was trying to appear cool and aloof, but found it hard to not show she was relishing Dan's discomfort. She went back to the stove and put his eggs on a plate and handed it to him. He went to the drawer and got a fork and began to eat, leaning against the counter. Colleen took her egg to the table and helped Ryan get a drink of juice before eating.

"I've got a lot of connections in Detroit now," said Dan. "I should be able to find you a good abortionist."

Colleen stopped chewing, stunned not so much by his words, but by his resolute tone of voice and the lack of the word "us." She turned slowly to look at him. He was watching her with a rather blank expression that might have meant disinterest, or else was a shield against an onslaught from her.

"You sound as if your mind is made up," she said. "Which is pretty unusual for you."

"You're damn right my mind's made up."

"Well, mine's not."

"What do you mean?" His voice was high and genuinely worried. He set his plate behind him in the sink and then gripped the edge of the counter with his hands. "We can't afford another kid. And we'd just be trapped that much more."

"I know all that. But I also know we'll want another kid someday, so maybe we should let this one develop. Then we'll get the babyhood stage over with all at once for the two of them."

Dan had been shaking his head all the time she was talking, and when she stopped he said,

"No more kids. Ever. One is too many."

"What the hell are you saying? You've never said that before."

"I'm saying it now. Jesus, Colleen, I'll never make a lot of money, you know that, and with two kids, there wouldn't be any money for what I want to do."

"What do you want to do? I didn't realize you had any firm goals in mind."

"I don't know. Buy a place. With land around. Maybe go back to medical school."

"Go back to medical school? Oh my God, what's happened to you? You aren't the Dan Bryant I married, that's for sure."

"Cut it out, Colleen."

"Or maybe it is a typical move. You know, going in circles. You've always been so damn indecisive, I guess it's in character for you to circle around to that idea again."

"Cut it out."

"What influenced this decision, Dan? I'd really like to know."

"It's not a decision. It's just a thought."

"So okay." She flung her hand out to the side. "What brought it on?"

"Let's get back to the abortion business."

Colleen put Ryan's cup to his lips, hanging onto the handle while he gripped the surface of the cup with his greasy fingers.

"I don't think we should talk about it right now, Dan."

"Oh c'mon." He was derisive.

"No, I mean it." She turned in her chair to face him again.

"I think one of us should go away for awhile so we can have time to think sanely and not do anything rash."

"I don't need any time to think."

"No?"

"Colleen, I know I don't want another kid. And I don't want to stay living with you if you want to keep this one."

Her brows were still up from her last question, and her whole expression tight, but his words made it melt away. He left before it could intensify into anger or fright. He went into the bedroom and carefully closed the door.

Colleen shut her lips tightly and then said in a whisper,

"How am I supposed to make a sane decision when he threatens me like that?"

"Mama?" said Ryan.

She stood suddenly and went to the bedroom, wrenching open the door. Dan had a shirt on and was brushing his tangled hair. He didn't look at her when she came in.

"How am I supposed to make a rational decision when you threaten me like that?" she said. "You must not want to live with me anyway to say something like that. You were just looking for an excuse to say it."

"Oh shut up, Colleen. You are getting just as loud and stupid as Wanda Weber."

"God, Dan, what are you doing?" She felt breathless and heaved in great amounts of air. She grabbed his arm so he'd look at her.

"Are you going to start crying now?" he asked coldly. "Are you going to use that tactic?"

"I'm not using any fucking tactics! Take me seriously, will you? I love you and you're hating me, and I can't understand it."

"I don't hate you."

"What do you feel then?"

"I still love you."

"Oh hell! Now who's using tactics, huh? You say one thing, but your actions say another. Shit on you, just shit on you." She flung a suitcase from the floor of the closet across the room onto the bed. Dan jerked as if she were throwing it at him.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"What's it look like?"

"You can't take the car."

"Why not?" She turned from pulling Ryan's clothes from the short dresser to glare at him.

"I need it to get to work in."

"How long do you expect me to be gone?"

"Well, okay then, if you plan to be back by Monday."

"I'm not planning anything. Nothing I plan on ever works out anyway."

He said nothing as he continued brushing his hair. Ryan yelled from his highchair, and Colleen was afraid Dan would ignore him and she'd have to get angry about that, but he went on out to the kitchen.

She stuffed her clothes and Ryan's into the one big suitcase, and then filled the diaper bag with diapers and a few small toys. She headed for the bathroom to get deodorant and baby powder and glanced

out in the kitchen. Ryan was still in his highchair with Dan nowhere in sight. As soon as the little boy saw Colleen he began to cry.

"Oh, baby," said Colleen as she went to him, holding out her arms. He held his out too. She picked him up from behind so his messy hands wouldn't smear her clothes and carried him to the kitchen sink where he stuck his fingers under the lukewarm water she turned on, and she rubbed them and then rubbed her wet hand on his cheeks and lips.

Dan came in the back door, but Colleen said nothing to him.

"Is your suitcase ready?" he asked.

"No."

She carried Ryan on her hip and went into the bathroom to collect what she needed. In the bedroom she slipped the toilet articles down the edges of the suitcase and then closed it, leaning her hip on the lid as she snapped first one latch and then the other.

"Are you going to call your mother first?" asked Dan, as he swung the suitcase off the bed.

"How do you know I'm going to my mother's? Maybe I've got a boyfriend I'll go shack up with." Dan shrugged. "You don't care, do you Dan? You're glad I'm going."

"I didn't say that."

"You don't have to put it into words, to say it."

He went on out of the room with the suitcase.

"Oh damn him, damn him," said Colleen as she laid Ryan on the bed to change his diaper. She got his snowsuit from a hook on the door and zipped him into it.

She heard Talbert in the bedroom below say something in his deep, loud voice, and it occurred to Colleen that she would be glad to escape the Weber's sounds for awhile. Sunshine was flashing in colors off the snow outside. It would be a pretty drive up to Alma. She would need to take some snacks for Ryan, though, to waylay any fussing. It had been a long time since she had driven anywhere by herself, and areas began to loosen up inside her as excitement moved in her veins.

Dan had started the car for her and the white steam from the exhaust looked warm and pleasant. She carried Ryan down the long stairway, glancing in the Weber's kitchen window as she passed it, but seeing only the can of Ajax cleanser on the windowsill. It made her wonder absently if Dan would clean the apartment at all while she was gone, and then with a frown, she questioned herself on how long she was planning to be gone, anyway.

When she turned and stood straight after strapping the seatbelt around Ryan and his car seat, Dan pulled her close in a quick hug.

"Drive safe."

She looked at him intently, and he looked aside a couple times to avoid her gaze. She reached behind his head and pulled his mouth down to hers. He kissed her quickly and then pulled his head away. She dropped her hand. She wanted to say more things about needing his love and not understanding what was going on inside him, but felt she'd been foolish to say as much as she had already. Instead she walked around behind the steaming rear of the car, her boots crunching the well-frozen snow, and got in the driver's seat. Dan stood where he was and only gave a solemn nod when she waved good-bye.

CHAPTER 15

Ryan slept most of the way which made driving less hectic, and gave her more time for thought. Colleen realized she was surprised to actually be leaving Dan, even if it was just for a day or two. Somehow she had never been able to envision herself driving down the road away from him. In her fantasies, he always begged her to stay, and she did. It was rather painful and humiliating to have had Dan usher her away so efficiently.

She tried to keep her thoughts off the fetus inside her. She wanted to get other things straightened out in her mind before she made a decision about that.

She entered Alma the back way, going past Leonard Refineries, which she had always ignored, but today, with her mind animated, looked like some goblin's castle, with the hundreds of metal tanks and towers, all different heights and circumferences, with little metal stairways curving up and around them and yellow, white and blue smoke coiling up to the sky from the towers. The smells weren't too bad today. She remembered her mother had told her they only burned the obnoxious gases at night, now, so there wouldn't be so many complaints about pollution.

She drove down Superior street to Gratiot avenue, where she turned right and went up past the high school to the old, maple lined residential area with large square houses, some of them three stories high. Near the end of the street was the smaller white house where she had grown up.

She turned in the narrow driveway and was disappointed to see the garage door up and her mother's Chrysler gone. Ryan was fast asleep, so she left him in the car and went up the steps to the back door. She opened the screen and tried the knob on the inner door, but it was locked. In through the window she could see the neat kitchen, with no dishes sitting about, and with apples and bananas in a wooden bowl on the counter. The violets were in their brass cart near the window, just out of the direct sunlight. Over the window by the table, philodendron vines gracefully climbed. Her mother had always raised a lot of plants, indoors and out, and Colleen, in opposition, grew none. But now, seeing all the greenery and flowers in the middle of December made her feel warm toward her mother.

With the key her mother had insisted she keep when she married, she unlocked the door and the warm, clean air from the house wafted around her, making her feel sleepy, comfortable. She stood alone in the kitchen for a moment, admiring with vague interest her mother's several varieties of violets; deep purples, double pinks, whites, and the simple flat-leaved single purples with yellow dots in the center that had been a part of her memories of this house since she was a toddler.

Ryan was still asleep, so she brought in the suitcase and diaper bag and the portable crib. She didn't know when her mother might come, but when she did, she didn't want her to be confronted with her daughter's things strewn about her as if the marriage was over and the possessions divided already. She carried the crib on through the carpeted living room and up the white staircase to what had been her own large bedroom. She glanced at the car in the driveway, but could

see only the roof of it, and not in to where Ryan slept. It frightened her to think how easily she could forget she had a child when she was in the house of her own childhood. With panic tightening her chest, she hurried downstairs.

She got in the car and backed it out into the street by the curb, knowing her mother would want to park in the driveway. Ryan awoke with wide eyes and a small smile. She kissed both his warm, red cheeks and climbed out of her side of the car.

Mrs. O'Malley was sweeping her large front porch next door, with her hair up in rollers and a wool scarf over the whole thing.

"Hi there, Colleen!" She waved tentatively, her smile uncertain. Somehow she had missed out on an upper lip and so wore lipstick all the time with an exaggerated bow drawn on her mouth where her upper lip should have been.

"Hi," said Colleen, and went around to get Ryan out. She didn't really want to visit with the woman, but she no longer felt as confident as she once had in being impolite to people she disliked. With Ryan on one hip and her bag hanging from the opposite shoulder, she followed the shoveled sidewalk over to Mrs. O'Malley's front porch.

"Nice to see you, Colleen. My, is this your wee one? I haven't seen him at all, you know, except a couple times when you ran in and out over at your Mom's. The name of him escapes me."

"Ryan."

"Oh, yes. A fine name."

Ryan was in the midst of a suspicious stage and his eyes were hard and hostile as he gazed sideways at the woman, leaning slightly

inward to be nearer Colleen. "Hello there, wee one. I won't touch you. Have no fear." Colleen smiled at her, grateful and slightly amazed by her understanding.

Mrs. O'Malley sighed.

"Been many years since I had a young one. And why my children have not given birth to any is beyond me."

"Where is Ruth now?" asked Colleen. She hadn't even thought of the girl who was a year or so older than her since she'd been out of high school. Her interest was honest now, which she couldn't understand. The girl had been very thin and pale and took all the home economic classes and typing and shorthand sequences.

"Oh, Ruthie is married to a preacher. She lives in Indiana, near Elkhart. But she has no babies, though she, at least, would like some."

"That's too bad," said Colleen.

"Yes, it is. But she's never been right on her insides, you know. She didn't start her period till she was sixteen, and even then it was never regular. Me, I started when I was ten and never missed a month, except when I was expecting, of course. I've always been proud of that, but lately I've thought on it, and it seems like a lot of fuss and bother, and only having six babies."

"Well, six babies is a lot."

"Oh no! My mother had seventeen!"

"Well." Colleen nodded and looked down.

"Don't you want more babies, Colleen? I don't mean to pry, but I just asked since we're on the subject."

"I don't know, Mrs. O'Malley. I mean, I don't regret it at all having Ryan. He's the neatest little guy. But I don't know if I could give enough love to two children."

"Oh sure you can. Love is a bottomless well."

"Yes, I know I could love another, but I mean have time to do loving things for it. Caring well for it, and still care as well for Ryan, I guess I mean."

"Well, I wouldn't have any worries about that if I was you. There are always problems, but things get worked out."

"Yes, I guess they do. Well, I better get him in before we freeze."

"Will you be here long, Colleen?" Her eyes were sharp, but she was valiantly trying to be nonchalant.

"Just a couple days."

"Oh. Well then. Maybe I'll drop over sometime. I owe your mother a visit anyway."

"Okay. Bye now."

Just after Colleen stepped into the bright, tidy kitchen again, she heard a car in the driveway and, glancing out the window, saw it was her mother's shimmering blue Chrysler. She could see her mother's hands as she busily gathered up her purse and several packages that were on the front seat. Mrs. O'Malley was still sweeping her porch, but she had her eyes on the car, watching for a chance to wave at Mavis. Her distorted, red mouth moved into a grin and she shook her gloved hand high above her head, and Mavis waved one of her thin, bony white ones, and asked some polite question that Colleen couldn't hear. Then Mavis turned and came with quick, slightly off-balance steps to the house. Colleen opened the door for her.

"What a nice surprise, my dear!" said Mavis, smiling broadly, but with her eyes behind her glasses drawn inward, reserved.

"Hello, Mother."

They exchanged kisses on cheeks, and Mavis kissed Ryan with a loose, smacking sound, because he pulled back midway through the kiss.

"And what is the occasion, may I ask?" said Mavis, putting her small brown sacks on the table, and unbuttoning her corduroy carcoat.

"Oh, well," said Colleen, kneeling and busying herself with the diaper bag. "Ryan and I just needed to get away for a day or two."

Mavis was at the refrigerator, and then the cupboards, her long, nervous steps moving her around like some shore bird.

"Well, I haven't enough food, since I wasn't planning on you."

"Don't worry about it, mother."

"I'll have to run to the meat market and get a roast."

"Please don't do anything elaborate."

Mavis was peering in the refrigerator, murmuring to herself about the leftovers. She shut the refrigerator door and smiled again, closing her eyes for a second as if she were fatigued. She put both hands up to her hair and patted it, and Colleen noticed that it was freshly styled.

"Your hair looks nice, Mom."

"Do you like it? Bill still does it for me down at Jerome's. That's where I was when you arrived. Have you waited long for me?"

"No. I talked with Mrs. O'Malley for a few minutes."

"Oh?" She raised her eyebrows high and smiled, rubbing the creases in her forehead. She looked away quickly, but Colleen could tell she was pleased to know she'd been nice to the neighbor. "I must get some lunch going."

"Mom, are you awfully busy today?"

"Oh, well, I've got lists of things to accomplish of course. Some botony quizzes to correct."

"Oh."

"What did you have in mind?"

"Just that it might be nice to get Ryan to bed after he eats and then the two of us have a leisurely meal. I've got some things I'd like to talk over with you."

"All right. That sounds good." Again the reserved expression in her eyes cast doubt on her words. "What should I fix for my little grandson?" She had been ignoring Ryan, who was still in Colleen's arms, and now when she beamed at him and reached a hand out to touch him, he recoiled. "Oh dear," she said, her hand going to her cheek instead. "I must not make such sudden movements." Colleen said nothing. She knew her mother would frighten him again. Mavis continually made small vows and broke them.

"He'll eat anything you've got, Mother," said Colleen, stooping to pick up the diaper bag. "Soup, leftovers. He's not fussy. I'll go change him."

When she returned, Mavis was peering into the refrigerator again with nothing begun on the stove. Colleen sighed to herself. Although her mother was always moving briskly, she was slow at getting anything done. She settled Ryan on the floor with measuring spoons and a tin measuring cup, and then joined her mother by the refrigerator.

"Here, what's this?" she said, pointing to a clear casserole dish, half-full.

"Oh, a mixture I put together for supper last night. It's just leftovers."

"Are you saving it for anything?"

"No, but would the baby like it?"

"He loves mixtures."

"All right, then."

While Colleen held Ryan on her lap and helped him devour his lunch, Mavis went to "get into something more comfortable." She was gone a long time. Ryan finished and Colleen washed him and cleaned up the table and floor and made a pot of tea before her mother returned.

"I took a short rest," she said as soon as she came into the kitchen, dressed now in navy blue wool slacks and a red and blue sweater and her orthopedic oxfords. "I generally feel the need of one on week-ends. I go so strong at the college all week."

Colleen nodded, stricken with grief suddenly for her mother's eventual death.

"Oh, some tea," said Mavis. "How thoughtful. And what shall we fix for our meal?"

"Anything for me, Mother. Really. I'm not very hungry. I'll take Ryan on up."

It took Ryan quite awhile to settle down because of the strange surroundings. Colleen rubbed his back until he relaxed, and then she sat on the stairs for awhile to be ready to hurry back to him if he should cry. When he was asleep, she tread softly down the stairs.

Mavis had warmed the rest of the casserole up in a frying pan, having added a few more leftovers, Colleen noticed, and she had made salads of lettuce leaves, pineapple slices and dabs of cottage cheese.

"Well, it's all ready," said Mavis, putting down her cup of tea. "Shall we eat?"

"Fine."

"He went to sleep all right?"

"Yes, after awhile."

They ate in silence for several minutes.

"Is Dan in good health," Mavis asked suddenly, not looking up, trying to speak in an offhand tone, but the extra volume in her voice revealed her agitation.

"Yes." Colleen was tempted to leave it at that, feeling ill at ease about discussing her problems with Mavis now that the opportunity had come. "He's been depressed, though," said Colleen.

"Oh? Do you know why?"

"No. I haven't really asked him straight out. I've sort of been hoping he'd just tell me."

Mavis nodded, conscientiously watching each of her bites of salad as she cut the lettuce and pineapple and maneuvered the mouthfuls in.

"Has he been feeling this way for quite some time?"

"Yes," said Colleen, sighing. "More than two months."

"Oh, my. That is a long time to be depressed."

"Maybe depressed isn't the right word. Maybe I'm giving you the wrong idea. It's just like he's tired of me and Ryan and like he'd like to get rid of us, but he doesn't know how."

"How do you feel toward him?"

"Just the same as ever. I love him. Except...well, it isn't his fault, but I'm sort of depressed with the way my life is going."

"I see." Mavis nodded and straightened and peered at Colleen, and Colleen wished she hadn't admitted it. She felt like a child confessing a lie that her mother had known about all along.

"Why do you say 'I see' like that," asked Colleen, trying to keep the sharpness out of her voice, yet speaking boldly to regain her dignity.

In contrast, Mavis spoke gently.

"Because I can understand that," she said. "You must know I felt that way for years when your brothers were small and you a baby. That's why I went back to college for my Ph.D and started teaching."

"I guess I always thought you did it because Daddy died."

"I'd been teaching a year before he died. I began when you were two."

Colleen tore bits of the paper napkin off and piled them near her teacup. Mavis poured some tea for herself.

"Would you like some more, dear?"

"No thanks."

"And so, how do you think you'd like to change your life?"

Colleen remained motionless and held her breath for a spell, and then said,

"I'm pregnant again."

"Oh?" Her mother's tone was intended to be noncommittal. After a moment she said, "Well, that will be a change."

"I'm not sure I want that sort of change," Colleen said quietly.

Mavis darted her eyes at her for an instant and then she poured more tea.

"You didn't plan this pregnancy then."

"No."

"And is this the cause of Dan's depression perhaps?"

"No. I just told him this morning."

"I see."

"He thinks I should get an abortion." She watched her mother's face closely, expecting to see shock or embarrassment or righteous disapproval. Instead Mavis met her gaze seriously and with genuine concern in her eyes.

"It is something to consider," she said.

Colleen looked away, nodding.

"I had an abortion," her mother said very softly. Colleen jerked her eyes back to her face. Mavis nodded, blinking tiredly. "I became pregnant again when you were two and I'd just been accepted as an associate professor at the college. The thought of yet another baby nearly drove me mad. So, even though I'm law abiding, I could see no justice in being forced into insanity, plus losing my new job. Dr. Harvey performed an abortion at my request and tied my tubes. It wasn't until afterwards that I began to feel any enjoyment in raising you." She smiled and patted Colleen's arm with the slight awkwardness that accompanied all her gestures.

"Dr. Harvey did it."

"Yes."

Colleen shook her head in amazement. She could not imagine that stalwart, Baptist family doctor consenting to break a law and abort a fetus.

"Did Daddy know about it?"

"He never knew about the abortion. Just the tubal-ligation. He was pompously angry about that as it was."

Colleen nodded, smiling wryly.

"So you see," her mother went on, "you're lucky that Dan feels the way he does."

"Yes, I guess so. But it's just that he took it for granted that I should get one. He also said he wouldn't want to live with me anymore if I didn't."

"Oh dear. Perhaps he was just upset."

"He was very calm and cool. Mother, I don't think he wants to live with me anymore anyway." Her voice came out thick and her eyes suddenly filled with hot water.

"Oh dear. Is there...is there another woman?"

"Oh probably. I don't know."

"Well, let's just hope it all works out."

"Yes. I don't think there's anything I can do." She wiped her eyes with the piece of torn napkin that was left. When she spoke again, it was firmly and with a flash of anger. "I just don't want to be pressured into getting an abortion. He'll think I just got it to keep him if I get it. I don't want that."

"Surely not."

"I don't know what to do."

"Well, you don't need to decide right now. Just let me tell you that I can arrange it with Dr. Harvey if that's what you want to do."

"Oh, wow, that's a load off my mind."

"And don't worry about the cost. I've put money away for you, you know, and we can dip into that."

"What money, Mother?"

"Oh, your college fund."

"You still have that?"

"Certainly. Enough for two more years of college."

"But I'm married now."

Mavis smiled and raised her brows in a sort of worried expression.

"Just because you're married doesn't mean I don't want to help you anymore. I hope that doesn't make you feel like I'm tying you to my apron strings."

"No, Mother. It makes me feel good."

Again Mavis laid her thin, blue-veined hand on Colleen's arm, and this time Colleen covered it with one of her own.

CHAPTER 16

Dan was in a weightless sort of sleep in which his mind worked lucidly and his body was immovably relaxed. When the phone began to ring it did not alarm him or make him spring giddily out of bed. He opened his eyes, saw that it was four o'clock in the afternoon, and rose easily to his feet.

"Hello," he said into the receiver in the kitchen. His voice was slightly deeper because he hadn't used it since Colleen had left the morning of the day before.

"Will you accept a collect call from Colleen Bryant?"

"Yes."

"All right, go ahead, ma'am."

"Dan, I'm going to stay a few days longer with my mother, so you better catch a bus up here to get the car if you want it."

"Why don't you just come home tonight?"

"Because I think it's good for us to be apart for awhile."

"You do?"

"Yes. Don't you?"

He was silent for a moment and then said:

"I miss you."

He waited a long time for her to respond, but she said nothing.

"Don't be cruel, Colleen."

"When will you be coming for the car?"

"I don't know. Maybe I won't come at all."

"How will you get to work?"

"I won't go."

"Oh, Dan, now you're being childish."

"I'm down, really down. I tell you I miss you, and you say zero."

"Well, I missed you for two months. Remember that?"

"Oh. So this is punishment for me, you staying up there."

"Just hush. I don't want to talk. Good-bye." And the phone clicked deep within itself.

Dan sat at the table for several minutes, scribbling names on an old envelope, sadness running through him at how the conversation had gone. He hadn't told her about the contents of the envelope, and he had intended to, and he was sure now that if she knew he had received a 1-H from the draft board she would immediately head for home. The 1-H definition was ambiguous--"registrant not currently subject to processing for induction or alternate service"--but it was a definite improvement over the 1-A. He had already drafted a letter to his lawyer, asking if the 1-H meant he was free and clear from the draft, since he was now twenty-six. He badly missed having Colleen proofread it before he sent it out.

The prospect of possibly having no more draft worries had put him in a euphoric mood yesterday, and he had begun to think of traveling either east or west to see an ocean with Colleen and Ryan and even the new baby if that was how it was going to have to be.

In the middle of recollecting these plans, Dan reached up and took the phone off its hook and dialed Goldie's number, which he had memorized months ago.

He didn't recognize the voice that answered.

"Is Rosa there?" he asked.

"Who's calling, please."

"Dan Bryant."

"Just a minute Dan, I'll check it out."

He began to get nervous quivers in his leg muscles while he waited. He jiggled his knees up and down, bumping them gently on the underside of the table.

"Hello, Dan," said Rosa, using her husky tone, slightly accented, that she always used on the phone.

"I didn't know if you'd be there or not on a Sunday night."

"I'm here a lot. You know that. Why are you calling on a Sunday night? That is strange."

"Could I come and visit you tonight?"

"That is even stranger."

"Colleen's gone for a few days. If we could maybe go somewhere and talk..."

"Dan, I've told you so much, come anytime. And I mean it."

"Well, okay then. It'll be awhile. More than an hour."

"That's all right too."

He couldn't bring himself to tell her he was hitchhiking in. Somehow hitchhiking would sound too boyish, too unsophisticated, too poor, especially since a lot of the men frequenting Goldie's drove Eldorados and Electra 225's.

He went to the bedroom to get into some long underwear and a Pendleton wool shirt his mother had given him for Christmas last year.

He glanced out the window at the thermometer and saw it was thirty degrees, which wasn't too bad, although the hickory tree was swinging its branches in a wind.

He knew he should wear his lined hunting boots for warmth, but didn't want to look so country to Rosa. He put on gray, woolen socks and then his usual boots.

In the half-mile walk down Van Amberg from the apartment to Spencer Road, his face got chilled in the damp, cold wind. He was glad to get a ride right away. A red, Pontiac Firebird skidded over on the shoulder up the road a way and then was gunned into reverse and came so fast backwards that Dan stepped into a snowdrift, thinking he might be hit. The door swung open and Dan leaned in, recognizing Frank Weber, one of Talbert and Wanda's older boys who had quit school at sixteen and now, at eighteen or nineteen worked at the Ford assembly plant in Wixom.

"I'm heading for Detroit," said Dan, hoping the undersized, pale boy wouldn't recognize him.

"So am I. Hop in."

"This is great," said Dan, tapping the snow off his boots on the edge of the car before easing into the leather, contoured seat and buckling the seat belt.

"You're the guy upstairs," said Frank, his narrow, pinched eyes scrutinizing Dan even as he floored the Firebird. "Where's your wheels at?"

"Oh, my wife and kid went up north for a vacation, so I'm just thumbing it for a few days."

"Oh yeah? On your way into Detroit for a night on the town, huh?"

Dan smiled but didn't reply. He had been feeling thrilled about going to Rosa, but Frank's mundane words and leering eyes took it all away.

Frank turned up the radio that had been pulsing quietly out of the rear speaker, and the car vibrated with the hard beat.

When Frank asked him to hand him the bottle of aspirin out of the glove compartment, Dan couldn't hear and had to ask him to repeat it.

"There's a bottle of aspirin in there. Get it out for me," said Frank, nodding and pointing with his cigarette.

Dan clicked it open and drew out a tall, square bottle that had once contained 500 aspirin, according to the label, but now held only a couple dozen.

Frank propped his cigarette in the ash tray, bobbing his head in time to the music, and took the bottle from Dan. He held it in one hand and unscrewed the top with the other, letting the car lead itself down the dark, damp road. He shook several aspirin into the hand holding the cap, and then screwed the cap back on, pausing to steer the car slightly when it headed for the shoulder. He gave the bottle back to Dan, still bouncing with the beat of the song, and, one by one, put six aspirins in his mouth, waited for each to wet, and then swallowed it down.

He glanced over at Dan, who was watching with mild astonishment.

"Got bad head-aches," he shouted. "An ulcer too, I think."

Dan nodded, thinking the ulcer probably came from all the aspirin gnawing at the tissue in his stomach.

"Where you headed?" Dan asked as they sidled in and out of the lanes of traffic on the Lodge Expressway as it ran low between concrete walls into the city limits.

"Hamtramack. Where do you want out?"

"Chicago exit, I guess."

"If it's not far, I can take you right where you wanna go."

"No, it's pretty close. Over on Hazelwood."

"Okay. I know that area."

Dan felt another surge of deflation at Frank's words. He wondered how well the boy knew the area, and if he also went to Goldie's.

Frank got off at Chicago and said,

"Which place on Hazelwood?"

"Just drop me off at the end of the street."

"Okay. I'll tell you, though, I wouldn't care to walk on these streets at night, so if you want me to take you to the doorstep, I'm willing."

"No, it's okay."

"Okay. Whatever you say. Here we are."

"Thanks for the ride, man." Dan gathered up the jacket he had shed in the overheated car, and climbed out under the mercury vapor streetlight.

"Sure thing."

Dan slammed the door and watched the car, which was bluish in the purple light of the lamp, blast down the street. The small piles of snow against the buildings and in the street were dirty purple, and when he looked at his hands as he put his gloves back on, the veins showed up bluey, and the capillaries that were usually invisible, showed up red and spidery.

He slung his coat over his shoulder and strode down the empty street to Goldie's.

When he knocked, Rosa called out "Dan?" without checking through the peep hole.

"Yes, Rosa."

She opened the door, grinning shyly, and with a sparkle of familiarity deep within her eyes.

Dan smiled slowly as he went in. The living room was empty and he heard no sounds from the rest of the apartment.

"Where is everyone else?"

"Oh, Cindy and Donna are out with two men for a profitable all-nighter. The rest of them are at their own places. Goldie and her daughter went to the movies. They'll be back at midnight, Goldie said."

Dan glanced at his watch and saw it was seven, and then up at Rosa who was smiling and laughing quietly.

"Five hours alone, Dan. Are you worried they'll come too soon, or not soon enough?"

He smiled again and desired to hug her hard, but had not yet expressed physically any of his emotion for her, and was nervous to start for fear of what it all might lead to.

"You had a drink the last time you came, didn't you?" asked Rosa, moving toward the kitchen. "I remember Goldie persuaded you to have one of her whisky sours."

"Yes," said Dan, following her.

"How 'bout one tonight?"

He was going to decline, but then nodded, remembering the sweet, floating feeling the drink had given him. He stood behind Rosa while she mixed the drinks, and stroked her thick, waving hair, smiling at the blue lights glinting off the black hairs. When he had first seen

her during the venereal disease interview, her hair had been curled and came to the middle of her back, but now she let it hang, although it still waved, and the tips of it brushed the waistband of her skirt. It filled him with a glowing sensation to know he had been a part of her life for that long.

He ran a finger gently over the smooth bumps of warm hair and thought briefly of the straight, sunny fall of Colleen's golden-red hair, and then thrust the image of her out of his mind.

Rosa turned and sipped from one glass and then handed it to him. He turned it so his lips would touch the spot hers had, and pulled a small amount of the cold, sour liquid into his mouth. The taste of the alcohol repulsed him, but he knew that soon his senses would become numb to it and all he would taste would be the lemon-lime sourness and the coldness of the ice.

Rosa took his hand. He went with her into the living room and eased down with a sigh on the soft, rich brocade sofa. He leaned forward with the drink between his knees.

"That's a cold wind outside," he said, glancing back at her as she sat with her legs under her beside him on the couch. Against the gold brocade, her skin gleamed darkly.

"I'm so tired with winter," she said and began kneading the muscles along his spine.

He nodded and tipped his drink up for another swallow, trying to keep his back motionless for fear she'd stop touching him.

"One thing with following the crops," she said, "the weather would never be too cold. A couple times we stayed for the fall apples

here in Michigan and so saw a little snow, and felt how cold it could get, but I never stayed a winter all the way through until my first year with Goldie. I stayed in from December to April. Really! I almost never went out."

Dan nodded, drank some more, and shut his eyes, the sensations from her hands and the toxins from the drink combining just under the skin of his back so that he felt his flesh was loosening, moving by itself, and that it might slough off.

"It's weird to hear you talk about being cold right now, because I'm getting too hot. It's weird to have the two things at the same time."

She laughed softly and quit rubbing him.

"You're getting high already."

He shrugged and sat back, smiling.

"I suppose so."

"Why don't you take your shirt off if you are too hot."

"No, that's okay."

"Oh, go on, you'll do it anyway once you drink some more."

"Yeah, you're probably right."

He set his drink on the coffee table and began unbuttoning his plaid shirt.

"Let me," she said. Hastily, yet with grace, she put her drink by his and reached her square, brown hands toward him. He hesitated and then lowered his own hands and smiled at her as she deftly undid him. She didn't move slowly, with deliberate attempts at arousing him, as did the women in movies who unbuttoned men's shirts. She was quick and kept her gaze on her fingers, except for one lifting and dropping

of her smiling eyes. Despite this, tremendous, pulsing desires began coursing through his brain, and he felt his smile slip away. He closed his eyes before she could glance at him and see his thoughts. Behind his lids he envisioned all the blood in his veins and arteries and capillaries rushing and draining into his penis, and he was afraid the large puffy veins, and the corpora cavernosa and the corpus spongiosum would fill to bursting, and he would bleed to death on Goldie's brocade couch. The picture that occurred simultaneously with this one was the dissected penis of his cadaver at medical school: deskinning, with the two, pale, tube-like parallel corpora cavernosa exposed, never more to feel the rush of blood, and the corpus spongiosum showing between, which he and his lab partner never cut into to find the tube that carried the seminal fluid, because it seemed too drastic a cut to make.

He opened his eyes just as she met his lips with her soft, lip-sticked ones, and he jerked a bit to find her so close.

"No?" she said, remaining near.

"Yes," he said and put his arms around her and rubbed his hands up and down her sides, marvelling at her smallness, aroused by the slightly indented areas where her brassiere wrapped about her. He had never removed a woman's brassiere, since Colleen never wore one and before her, there had been only Sue Brennerman, and he had never gotten beyond kissing with her.

Her tongue was moving inside his mouth, around his tongue and out to his lips and back in again to fill him up, and he thought that's what it must feel like to a woman when a penis was filling her vagina.

His thoughts kept flashing ahead of the immediate action, and the brocade couch seemed a fine place to copulate, but the velvet-draped

bedroom would be a better background for the memory. He gently held Rosa's head between his hands and kissed her lips and teeth and eyes and nose, and then pulled back from her an inch to speak.

"Let's go in the bedroom."

"Okay."

Her eyes had been shut, but they opened as she smiled, and he nearly became immersed in the warm liquid of them. She stood and he rose beside her and put his arm down across her back and his hand on her waist. She watched the floor as they moved across the thick rug.

"No. The other one," said Dan as she moved toward the bedroom where he had taken blood samples. She gave him a puzzled glance and then shrugged and led the way into the other bedroom. He closed the door.

"Dan," she said, as if she were going to start a conversation, but he began kissing her fingers, and then her neck, and she said, "Oh, Dan," and let her voice trail away.

Her pink sweater zipped down the back and he pulled the tab down carefully, feeling his hands begin to tremble, and peeled her out of it.

"Oh, you're beautiful," he said, and ran frantic kisses up her arms and across her chest, avoiding her breasts, with the dark nipples he could see beneath her filmy brassiere. Her hands were near his belt, and had pulled his undershirt up, and he felt her nails gently scratching along the line of his pants on his stomach, and then lowering, still pulling against the skin with her nails. He made a quiet groan and hugged her hard, and she moved her pelvis back and forth across his enlarged, cramped penis.

"Oh, I love you," he said.

She quit fondling him, and he felt her peering up into his face. He opened his eyes.

"Dan, I can't do this."

His rapt expression drained. He shook his head, bewildered.

She stepped back from him and then turned to get her sweater that he had flung onto the bed.

"Rosa, wait! What do you mean?"

"I just can't do it with you like this Dan. I'm sorry."

He stood alone in the middle of the room while she sat on the bed and slipped on her sweater.

"I don't understand," he said, his hands held out before him a little way, and his head straining forward.

She glanced at him with her dark eyes dull, and he desperately tried to read the meaning in their lack of shine.

"I'm sorry," she said, and dipped her head to zip up her sweater. He wanted to do it for her. A minute ago they had been intimate enough for him to offer, but now he felt clumsy and estranged. The pain he felt was over his entire body, as if the skin had been peeled off and the slightest movement, even breathing, was agonizing.

"My God, Rosa, what did I do wrong?"

"Oh nothing, nothing!" This time he could see concern in her eyes as she looked up at him. "Believe me, Dan, it isn't anything you did. I don't know how to say it." She was gesturing wildly, something he had never seen her do before. "It's just when you said 'I love you,' and it's the first time, and I love you too much and I want to be married when we do it, legal and holy, and I can wait for you until you are divorced, and I want to, I want to."

The blood drained out of him, and he did not know where it could have gone, because no spot in him felt ready to burst. Every limb, every finger, and his penis, felt limp, icy, near death.

He turned and moved into the living room.

"Oh Dan, you're not going!"

He put his shirt on, almost crying to see his own fingers buttoning it back up. He could not face Rosa, he could not face himself. He was not capable of making final decisions, and he despised himself because of that. Even his decision to refuse induction haunted him now as a possible wrong move. The skinny kid's words plagued his thoughts, and he knew Colleen was right, he went in circles, he had no firm goals, no firm accomplishments. He didn't see how he could ever decide between Colleen and Rosa, and live peacefully with his decision.

He went to the door, still avoiding Rosa's imploring eyes.

"Dan, does this mean the end? It's all over?"

"No."

"You just need time to think, right? And you still love me?"

"Yes, Rosa."

Yes, Rosa, yes, Rosa, all the way down to the purple-lit street where the cold wind put Colleen's lusty warmth into his mind.

CHAPTER 17

At the bus station, Dan sat on an old metal folding chair that had a small round leather pad in the center of the seat. In a dim corner, a young black couple huddled together on a wooden bench, holding hands and whispering, and nibbling potato chips. By the bathroom sat an older black woman with huge mounding thighs and nylons stretched over the curly hairs on her calves, a red patent leather purse clutched against her bosom. Dan ran his eyes over the others, trying to appear passive to the woman, who glared at him with hostility. He glanced at his watch and sighed to see that there were twenty minutes yet. He craved sleep. On the three hour ride up to Alma, he could get some. He rubbed his eyes and cheeks and then folded his arms and leaned back, keeping his gaze directed at the floor.

The door opened and the cold wind dashed around inside the small room, rustling newspapers and some candy wrappers on the floor. It stayed open for quite some time, and the others were looking that way, and the clerk was leaning on his counter, peering angrily. Dan turned his head just as the old man in bulky, ragged overcoats, got a good hold on the door and slammed it shut.

"Hey," said the young man behind the counter. "Just get out."

The old man turned himself around with several small steps, letting his pale eyes, with the rims around them sagging, revealing bright red tissue, rest on Dan for a moment before he faced the clerk.

"It's cold out there, buddy," he said quietly, dignity running in his voice, although it quavered from a lower register to a higher one.

"Sorry, old man, but you puked on the floor last night."

"Not me, buddy. I'm no drunk."

"Sick, though."

"And needing a warm place to sit awhile."

"All right then. But over by the bathroom in case you got to throw up."

The old man didn't tip his hat, or salute, or use any other of the grovelling gestures so common to old, destitute people in the city. He walked carefully, sliding his feet, and with his arms out a bit from his body for balance, to a chair next to the heavy black woman. She heaved herself up before he reached the chair he was headed for, and stalked across to Dan's side of the room, her large, humping buttocks moving up and down under her coat. She let herself down onto a chair like Dan's, putting her feet around to the sides for support, her taut skirt making a dark cave over the seat of the chair.

The old man changed his direction without altering his pace and went to the chair she vacated. He bent forward cautiously and then dropped into it, sighing somewhat, and pushing back into the leather as if to soak up the heat the fat woman had left.

Dan sighed as if he were the old man, chilled and tired, surviving because surviving was what one does.

When the bus finally came, the old man was snoring with his fish-white face distorted from leaning on the chair, one jowl up, showing long yellow teeth. Dan had been fighting sleep himself, the slow even breathing of the old man lulling him, stilling all thought and feeling.

On the bus he tipped his seat back and shut his eyes, and thought he'd be asleep before the bus pulled away. But with his body relaxed and warm, his mind began to work again, and he remembered his last bus trip, down into Detroit to Fort Wayne on the day of his refusal. That had been a decision he had thought he could live with. "I'm doing the bravest thing I know how," he had told the skinny kid with great conviction. But lately he had wondered if it was bravery only in a theoretical sense. Certainly going into the army would have scared him more, and if he'd done that despite his fear, wouldn't it have been braver? He had felt he was just and right in avoiding the army to stay with his wife and child, but now he was considering leaving them to marry another woman. He couldn't bear the changes, the contradictions inside himself. He wanted to remain steady, with the same ideas and feelings one day as another.

He slipped down into sleep as the bus got moving out on the Lodge, but when his dreams were of Mrs. Peck, he tried to force his eyes open again. He still slept, and Rosa and Mrs. Peck were one, saying,

"Just go, just go. It's the best thing. Just go."

He got too hot sleeping in his jacket and heavy clothes on the warm bus, and when he got off at the bus stop in Alma, the icy, humid wind sent him into shaking spasms, his teeth rattling. He had planned to go to Colleen at her mother's house, but it was one a.m. and the idea seemed pointless now. There was nothing she could say she hadn't already said.

He headed in that direction, though, thinking he'd take the car and drive back to Brighton. He'd go to work tomorrow and try to be his ordinary self, and hope that Colleen and Rosa would somehow decide the issue between themselves.

Being out on the empty streets with the Christmas decorations turned off and the stop lights flashing red, and being so cold, sent him spinning down into subhuman sensations, below emotions, below thought. He felt that he was empty, skeleton and skin, refrigerated, waiting for eternal pickling.

Church's Jeweler's window was lit and the diamond and gold and silver sparkled, re-igniting a spark in him, but he did not pause to gaze in the window, afraid a policeman on his beat would think he was going to commit a criminal act. It would be a good night for crime. The chilling wind was probably keeping police in, avoiding their night-beats.

The draft board was back the way he had come, over on Prospect street, near the Kroger parking lot. It would be out of his way, and foolish in the freezing wind to go over to that part of town, but his feet led him in that direction.

He turned south on Gratiot Avenue and went down to Center street, which was darker, with only a street light at each corner. It was a two block walk back on Center to the small, brick building where Mrs. Peck's meticulous files stood, filled with papers dealing in destiny.

Dan slowly walked all around the building and decided it was situated nicely if someone wanted to break into it. It squatted away from other buildings on a rather large lot, and the windows, although high, were small enough to not make terrible crashing sounds when broken. In fact, they could not be more than ten or twelve inches wide. That would reduce their search for suspects. It would have to be someone slim enough to fit through the windows.

He still wasn't sure if he would do anything. He had matches in his pocket, and it would be a nice memory to have, watching the files burn. It would be something significant to look back on, an important piece in the whole.

The wind blew hard, in loud gusts, and he thought if he broke the glass during one of the gusts, the sound of the shattering glass would be covered. He figured the heel of his boot would work if he took the boot off and swung it in his hand.

He leaned against the brick building for awhile, feeling the cold pressing the veins tighter around his blood. It seemed days ago, it seemed like another life when he had been too hot sitting on the brocade couch with Rosa.

Suddenly he wrenched his boot off and hurled the heel of it through the window he had been standing beneath. The crack was loud, but not more so than he had expected, but the tinkling sounds of glass falling on the floor inside seemed to continue forever. He crouched below the window and pulled his boot back on, listening for car motors or feet pounding on sidewalks, or windows or doors opening. A dog barked angrily, and a few dogs further away picked up the message and responded, but soon they settled again.

Not all the glass had broken out of the frame, Dan saw, as he finally stood to examine his violent act. Jagged chunks of it circled the frame. By holding a chunk with one gloved hand and hitting it with the other fist, he was able to quietly clear the most dangerous pieces away.

He pulled himself up, his boots scuffing on the bricks, and stared into the office. The tall, dark, filing cabinets were ominous

in the silent room, but Dan quickly pulled himself through the window and onto the top of a cabinet. From there he jumped to the floor, crunching splinters of glass with his boots. Immediately, he gripped the handle of the middle drawer of a filing cabinet. He yanked, but it only made a dull clank as the metal lock held it shut.

"Oh, damn, damn," he whispered hoarsely. Mrs. Peck would, of course, conscientiously lock all the files. He had nothing to pry them with, and no patience to try picking the locks with his jackknife. He whirled and gave tugs to two drawers on her desk, but they too were locked.

He glanced around furiously. The only things burnable were the curtains and the typewriter cover. There was even no trash in the wastebasket.

He was determined to do something destructive. He took out his knife and gripped a curtain and sliced it off near the rod. He cut the rest and piled them all on her desk blotter, and laid the typewriter cover next to them. He struck a match and the curtains blazed orangely.

The filing cabinets loomed up around him in the light, and in a sort of panic, he scaled the one by the window and went out feet first. He dropped to the ground and began walking down Center street, shivering as if he were ill. Once he glanced back and saw yellow light in through the windows, but it was dim.

CHAPTER 18

Dr. Harvey's receptionist was the mother of a girl Colleen had known in high school, even grade school. Sharon Baker was the girl's name and she had blond hair and was homecoming queen the year Colleen graduated. Mrs. Baker looked up as Colleen stepped to the small window in the waiting room, her brown eyes dull with bored neutrality. Colleen smiled warmly, certain the woman would recognize her as she gave her name, because she was a friend of Dan's mother, she had come to their wedding.

"My name is Colleen Bryant. I have an appointment for three-thirty."

Mrs. Baker looked down and dug at her scalp with a pencil, far back under her L.P.N. cap.

"Oh, yes, the special appointment."

Colleen glanced down at the book and saw that her name was written in red ink rather than black.

"Have a seat, please."

The woman's eyes moved carelessly behind Colleen, the dullness intact. Colleen turned to where she looked and headed for the empty seat. In her chest the pain of remaining anonymous was sharp and strangely conducive to tears. She picked up a magazine from a low table, wondering at her emotions.

During the last few days she and her mother had visited several people and Colleen had experienced deep interest in them, so unlike her

previous cynical and self-contained attitude toward the people in this town. It seemed to refresh her to talk with people from her past. She had tried to communicate this small feeling for history to her mother, but was let down when Mavis responded briskly that she was maturing, that was all. The answer was unsatisfying because she had not considered herself to be immature before. She had lacked this particular dimension in her life, but it didn't seem like the lack made her immature. If anything, she felt more immature now, more vulnerable, with this craving for contact with others' lives. Certainly the sting of tears at not being recognized was immature.

Someone sat down across the room, next to the receptionist's window, and Colleen darted her eyes up to see who it was. Someone hugely pregnant, she saw, and she glanced quickly back into her magazine without noticing the woman's face.

It was hard to not think back to her pregnancy for Ryan--how different it had been from this pregnancy--how joyous, how personal, how meticulously organized, with the piles of books that she read intently so she'd know all the angles and give birth perfectly. Now she was determined to keep her thoughts firmly on the present moment so that she had no preconceptions, no plans, about the abortion; no high expectations of a good sort or a bad. She wondered wryly if this, too, was a sign of maturity.

The pregnant woman moved closer, to a chair on the other side of the magazine table.

"Hi, Colleen. I haven't seen you for a long time. How's Dan?"

It was Sue Brennerman, Dan's girlfriend for years. Her dark hair was slick, well-sprayed, and under her plucked brows, her lashes

turned up so sharply Colleen knew they had been recently pinched with an eyelash curler. She felt a rush of compassion for Dan's old girlfriend who adorned herself for the doctor's office.

"Dan's fine. I didn't know you were pregnant. Dan's mother usually keeps me up to date on these things."

"Well, I haven't been to visit her for ages."

"When's your baby due?"

"Another month. I know I'm awful big. Dan wouldn't recognize me. I used to wear size nine in high school." She sighed loudly, but there was a pleased smile in the corners of her mouth as she gazed at her mounded belly. "What are you here for?" she asked.

"Oh. Just a check-up. A physical. For college."

"I thought you already went to college."

"Only for two years. I plan to finish up now."

"Oh," She had lost interest and was watching a two-year-old climb on a chair and jump off at the other end of the room. "I married Tom Dailey, you know," she said, still watching the child.

"Yes."

"Farming is hard work and not with too big an income, at least when you're just starting out."

"Do you like it, though?" Colleen asked, mildly interested, but not expecting a firm answer. Sue turned back and replied with near vehemence.

"Of course I like it. I wouldn't have married a farmer if I didn't know what I was getting in for." She smiled and softened her voice. "Sharon Baker married Barry Johnson, you know, and I see her a lot. He's a farmer too."

Colleen nodded, glancing briefly at Mrs. Baker to see if she would perk up at the mention of her daughter's name. She didn't appear to hear. Colleen wondered if she treated Sue anonymously too.

"They raise beef cattle," continued Sue, "which is less work than dairy cattle, as far as I can tell. But we get together a lot and talk about the old days."

"Do you?" said Colleen, wondering if they, too, had become kindled with interest for the people who had populated their pasts.

"Yes. Sharon and I were both cheerleaders, you remember, and on the Homecoming court. She was queen. We miss that." She sighed.

Colleen nodded, realizing it was their loss of prestige that kindled their historical talks, not a desire to know how people were leading their lives.

"Of course, we still go to the football games, but it's not the same without a panther on your sweater and jumping up and down in front of the bleachers. Can you imagine me jumping now?" She giggled behind her hand and grew red. Colleen watched her, fascinated, remembering that all the popular girls at Alma High School had laughed like that, into their fingers, with blood rushing into their cheeks.

"You haven't changed, Sue, except for being pregnant." She said it out of amazement, but meant it kindly, and was sure Sue would not infer a negative meaning. "I'm sure you'll get back to size nine after the baby's born."

"Mrs. Bryant? The doctor will see you now."

Mrs. Baker stood at the blond door leading to the examination rooms, and was holding the stainless steel knob, ready to pull it firmly closed as soon as Colleen had passed through.

"See you," whispered Sue as Colleen rose.

"Yes," said Colleen, jerking her face back to give an after-thought smile before striding in the open door.

"End room on your right," said Mrs. Baker. Colleen was relieved to be far from the waiting room. "Remove all your clothes except your shirt, and put the sheet around you and sit up here," directed Mrs. Baker, pulling a folded square from a drawer and letting it drop loudly on the end of the paper covered, vinyl examination table. Her words came out so fast and with such little variation in tone that Colleen had to think back through them before she knew what to do. Mrs. Baker went out the narrow door and closed it.

Colleen shed her shoes and jeans and underpants and shook out the paper sheet, which seemed unnecessarily large. She wound it around herself and climbed the step to sit on the end of the examining table. Her heart had been racing since she got up that morning, but now seemed to slow, not from relaxation, but resignation, and dread.

Even though she strived to avoid thinking ahead and making plans about this procedure, she couldn't screen out ominous flashes of police bursting in, arresting old Dr. Harvey, perhaps her too, and the fetus still growing inside her, becoming closer and closer to a person she would be considered responsible for.

She closed her eyes, wishing it were over.

She had not discussed her decision with Dan, although she had struggled and vacillated, unable to decide clearly, whether or not he should know beforehand, and deriding herself for being as indecisive as Dan usually was. Even now the thought sprang wildly at her that she should ask to use Mrs. Baker's phone and call Dan, postponing the

abortion until he could be with her. It seemed like he should be here to share her relief at ridding herself of an unwanted child just as he had shared her joy at gaining a wanted one. At the same time, she realized he would take credit for having influenced her to choose abortion, and she was afraid she would feel compelled to not get it to show him, and herself, that she was controlling this piece of her life.

Last Sunday night she waited up till midnight, expecting Dan to come for the car. She had been seething with a desire to call him and ask if he was all right, and how was he going to get to work, but she refrained, knowing she could not keep from mentioning the abortion. She vowed to herself, crossing her heart fervently as she sat on the examining table, that she would call him as soon as she was out of Dr. Harvey's office.

In one corner stood a shiny metal box on wheels with two large bottles in racks on top, and two switches. She listened for a moment and heard no one coming, and went to study the machine, clutching the paper about her middle. There were tubes and rubber stops in the bottles and plastic bags inside the bottles. Her mother had to endure the dilation and curettage method of abortion, hearing them scrape down the sides of her uterus. This new method, the vacuum curettage, would allow Colleen to be up and around as soon as she felt like it, Dr. Harvey had explained to her mother on the phone. Colleen tried to keep her mind free of speculations on how soon she would be up.

There was a door on the machine and she deftly popped it open and observed a coiled hose with curved white plastic attachments lying near it. She shut the door, and returned to the table, trying to smooth the damp, wrinkled paper sheet where she had been grasping it.

Footsteps sounded heavily in the hallway. Dr. Harvey came in, his head down, speaking in a low, mumbling voice to the nurse with him, a squat, bleached blond with brown eyes. The nurse flashed a smile at Colleen, but Dr. Harvey ignored her and went to open the door of the vacuum curettage machine that Colleen had so recently shut. He ceased talking as he attached the hose in the cabinet to a hose on one of the bottles. The nurse busied herself with getting out a speculum, some polished metal rods, and plastic gloves.

Colleen had forgotten how reticent Dr. Harvey was. She didn't really mind him not talking--it was better than having him talk too much--but she would have at least liked a glance from him to acknowledge that she was a person, someone he'd known from the moment she breathed air, instead of a piece of faulty equipment. It was in that moment that an aching longing began in her for Dan's jumping blue eyes and uneasy smile.

Dr. Harvey said over his shoulder to the nurse,

"Pelvic first," and she left off lining up tools and smiled again at Colleen.

"Dr. Harvey will examine you first to verify your pregnancy and to check the angle of your uterus."

Colleen nodded, returning the smile, grateful for the detailed information."

"Lie back, please, and then slide down to the end of the table."

Colleen did it eagerly, and the nurse raised the metal foot supports and placed each foot against one. The cold metal felt pleasant to Colleen in the overheated room. The nurse adjusted a goose neck lamp and Dr. Harvey turned with sterile gloves on and inserted the cool metal

speculum. Colleen shot her eyes to a neutral corner of the room, always ill at ease in such positions, sensing organ pleasure, but knowing it was necessary to ignore it, deny it. The contradictions strained her mind so that she would always leave an examination intensely tired.

"A month to a month and a half pregnant," murmured Dr. Harvey, his words barely travelling to Colleen's ears as he turned away to pick up a slim plastic rod. She saw it and ran her eyes away to the ceiling corner again. Dr. Harvey sounded her uterus, digging one hand into her abdomen announcing,

"Proper angle."

"Good," said the nurse. She filled a needle with fluid and Colleen observed, with her peripheral vision, Dr. Harvey taking it. She wasn't even sure she felt the prick of the needle as he injected the anesthetic in the back of her vagina, behind her cervix.

"This is just a paracervical block," he said in a sudden loud voice. "Such as you had when you delivered."

Colleen swallowed and did not correct him, afraid it would break her detachment from herself.

"Rods," said Dr. Harvey, and the nurse passed him the thinnest one.

"Dilating your cervix now," he said, as he passed increasingly larger polished metal rods inside her. Colleen began to feel a tensing in her uterus; a clamping down that was like a severe cramp. She swallowed and frantically tried to ignore it. Anger flooded her mind all of a sudden. It was undirected as yet, but she knew when she was through with the abortion, she would be in a dark and dangerous mood.

"Vacurette," said Dr. Harvey, and Colleen watched the nurse hand him one of the curved, plastic attachments from the machine cabinet. It was inserted, with the clear, plastic tube attached, and the machine was switched on. The tiny vibrations, along with the unrelenting cramp, increased Colleen's anger.

"Good," murmured the doctor at one point, and the nurse nodded.

At least it was working. At least all the humiliation and unpleasantness were in pursuit of a goal. She still felt angry, but she could foresee the anger subsiding into relief sometime, in the next day or two. Maybe she'd wait to call Dan when her mood was improved. At the thought of him, quick hot tears filled her eyes and she stared without blinking at the corner until the water evaporated.

The machine's hum stopped.

"Curette," said Dr. Harvey, and the nurse offered him an instrument with a spoon shaped tip. As he scraped the walls of her uterus, Colleen's anger flooded back at the unnatural sensations and the faint rasping sound.

"This is the last procedure," said the nurse, and Colleen glanced into her warm, serious eyes. "This is just to make sure all the placental material has been removed, to lessen the chance of infection."

Colleen nodded.

"She's clean," said Dr. Harvey. "No need for that," waving back long forceps.

He withdrew the speculum and Colleen let out her breath, only just then aware that she had been keeping her lungs inflated.

"How do you feel?" asked the nurse as Dr. Harvey pulled off his own gloves, his back to Colleen once more.

"Okay. Except for cramps."

"They'll go away shortly. Do you want to slide back on the table now?"

"All right."

The nurse dropped the stirrups back down.

Dr. Harvey came over and looked steadily into Colleen's face. His gray eyes had a distant light in them that might have been the start of a smile.

"You should be all right, young lady. Mrs. Murphy here will give you the precautions."

He held out a hand and for a moment Colleen was confused, thinking he intended to check her breast for lumps or something. Then she grasped it and smiled. "My best to your mother," he said, and cleared his throat, and went out the door.

"All right," said the nurse. "Are your cramps better?"

"Yes. Gone."

"Wonderful. Well, let me tell you some things, and then as soon as you feel up to it, you can get up. Pay at the window out front."

"Okay."

"No douching, now, for a week or even longer, because the cervix remains dilated and you could force fluids up into the uterus. And if you should get a fever, or pain or uncontrollable bleeding in the pelvic area, contact a doctor immediately, all right? We don't want you getting infected. Now, let me rummage around and find you a pad."

She turned to look in a cabinet drawer. "You'll bleed for a few days, maybe even a week, but your real menstrual period won't begin for five or six weeks. Here's one."

She handed Colleen a paper wrapped sanitary napkin, and Colleen grimaced at the thought of it safety pinned to her underpants between her legs.

"Now you won't know when you're fertile," continued the nurse, "so use a contraceptive even though you're bleeding. Are you on the pill?"

"Yes, I will be. I'm just going to start in again. I was off them while I nursed my baby--my little boy."

"Okay. Start them in five days, or else wait until your period comes, and start them, you know, after that."

"Okay."

"Well, that's it. You can dress and go when you feel good enough. Here, let me help you sit up." The grasp of the firm hands of another human being was satisfying, reassuring to Colleen.

After leaving the doctor's office, Colleen went to the pay phone on Gratiot avenue, near the high school, unable to wait a moment longer to talk with Dan. She placed a collect call and heard his faint, diluted voice accept the charges, but then he was silent.

"Dan? Dan, you didn't come to get the car, and I waited up for you." It sounded accusatory, and she shook her head. "I miss you," she said. Still he was silent. "Dan, are you all right?"

"No." The word was short, almost a gasp.

"What's wrong?" Her ear was aching with the phone pressed tightly against it.

"I'm going crazy," he said. She didn't refute him. She didn't doubt for a moment that he meant it.

"I'm coming home," she said after a pause.

"No! Don't, Colleen!"

"Yes. I'll be there in three hours."

"Colleen, for God's sake listen to me for once. Don't come. It will do me in."

Her feelings went out of control. Fright and a determination to help had been fierce within her, but at his words, her emotions caved in together.

"I don't understand. Don't you need me?"

"No! I love you Colleen, don't you see? That's the trouble."

"I don't see."

"Just don't come. Promise me!"

"When can I come?"

"I don't know. I have to work this all out. I'm going crazy."

"Have you been going to work?"

"No."

"Have you called in sick?"

"No. I just can't do anything. It's freaking me out to talk to you. Especially you."

Colleen's pains were in her uterus and chest and she could feel them creeping out into her arms and legs and up the back of her neck to her head. She ground the muscles of her neck with her fingers to get the blood flowing.

"I have to do something, Dan. I can't just sit and wait anymore. I've sat and waited too much, too long."

"I'm sorry. God, I'm sorry," and he began to cry strange short sounds that could have been another person's low laugh. Colleen clutched the phone and dug her nails into her scalp, screaming at him in her mind to stop, and screaming mentally at herself for ever leaving him. She felt crazy, clutching a hard black shape as if it were precious to her, when she should have been home clutching Dan, holding him protecting him from himself, an impossibility, she knew, yet at this point it seemed an obligation that she was neglecting.

The crying stopped. He had hung up, and she was unsteady with panic. She would go to her mother's and tell her she was leaving Ryan with her, and then rush home to Dan. But two hours would be lost--she couldn't spare time. It came to her that the Weber's were there below Dan, but she couldn't trust them to understand, let alone to help.

She put in another dime and got the operator and with a voice that sounded calm, although disembodied, she made a collect call to Jack and Anna in Detroit.

"Jack, this is Colleen Bryant."

"What's up? She could picture his raised brows and the nervous shifting of his feet.

"Something's wrong with Dan."

"Hey, I tried to call your place today and yesterday, but no answer."

"I'm up at my mother's in Alma, Jack. But I just talked to Dan on the phone, and he's freaking out. I'm really worried."

"Yeah, he hasn't been himself lately." He stopped.

"Why, Jack? Tell me, please, if you know."

"No, I don't think I should."

"It's someone else, right? Someone he's met. I don't care, Jack, I love him! God, I'd divorce him, I really would, if that's what he wants."

"Is that what he wants?"

"I don't know. He just doesn't want me to come home. Maybe if you could go over there and talk with him. He really likes you and respects you."

"Sure, I'll go right now. Do you want me to keep it quiet that you called me?"

"No, go ahead and tell him. He knows I can't sit and do nothing anymore. Just hurry."

"Okay. And I'll give you a call back later on."

She gave him her mother's phone number and then hung up and leaned with her elbows on the tiny counter beneath the phone. She could feel hot blood working its way out of her down between her legs, and she felt she must hurry to her mother's house before she collapsed.

CHAPTER 19

Dan sat shivering on the floor beneath the phone with the receiver dangling by its cord against the wall. He'd spent a lot of time beside the phone in the last two days. Monday morning, after his return from Alma and his attempt to burn the draftboard, he had slept underneath it, dragging cushions from the couch to sleep on, wrapping himself in a wool blanket, although he was still clothed in his Pendleton shirt and blue jeans. He forced himself up from a hot sleep at noon that day and sat cross-legged on the cushions, slowly cutting his toe and fingernails with the small scissors on his Swiss Army knife.

He could tolerate the silence of the phone for only an hour and had taken it off its hook at one o'clock, exactly, just as the second hand touched the twelve at the top of his watch. In the last few minutes before one, he breathed high and shallowly with anticipation, convinced Colleen or Rosa would sense his need and ring the phone while there was still time. When the second hand hit the twelve, he grimly lifted the phone from its hook.

He did not eat or sleep or scarcely move for twenty-four hours as he lay on the cushions underneath the dangling phone. Whenever a thought came close he would turn his mind away, twisting and convoluting his tiny inner self, retreating into the dark, telling himself he was going underground for awhile.

One conversation came up clearly from the Weber's apartment below, which increased Dan's sense of isolation. Talbert said, "They're

gone?" and Wanda replied, "I guess." Most of the time the buzzing bass of Talbert's F.M. radio seeped into Dan's head, helping to keep thoughts away.

At one o'clock Tuesday afternoon he hung the receiver on the hook again and forced himself to think. He was dizzy and thought he should eat something, or sleep, but he really didn't want to. It gave him a feeling of control to be able to deny his body its needs for so long.

When the phone rang in the late afternoon on Tuesday, he thought it was ringing downstairs in his parent's living room and he was up in his bedroom with the low eaves and the cowboy lampshade. It shocked him to sanity to realize how close to insanity he was. Throughout his conversation with Colleen, the idea of going crazy kept him cold, and after he cut her off, he huddled in his blanket, shaking beneath the dangling phone.

For awhile he kept the kitchen clearly in view, but as he warmed, he knew he wanted to be back in the upstairs bedroom of his parents' house. And he thought it was a good and masterful thing to be able to locate yourself wherever you wanted to be. So he let the kitchen fade and soon he was in his room, complete with muted yellow lights from the low, western windows, and the small green fan whirling and turning itself in one window. Downstairs he heard his mother put on a record that he hated, but which seemed pleasing now--a close harmonied quartet singing hymns. He could single out each voice and hum its line of notes, and he was pleased with himself, because he'd never been able to separate the parts before.

Every now and then he touched the iris of one eye to make sure his lids were open and he wasn't dreaming. One of the questions on the entrance exam for medical school had dealt with whether or not the iris could sense if something were on it. At the time, he had thought it a ridiculous question for determining someone's capacity for medical school, but now he could understand how useful the knowledge was, and he sat with his middle fingers near his eyeballs, ready to test himself as to his state of consciousness.

A rapid knocking came at the door, and he grew tense, and then relaxed, knowing his mother was downstairs and would answer it. The knocking continued and seemed to be drawing nearer.

"Answer the door," he called loudly to his mother, gripping his throat lightly to see if it vibrated, testing to see if the words really came out. He could feel movements of tendons and cartilage under his skin, but couldn't understand why the spasmodic vibrations continued after he had finished speaking.

His shoulder was being gripped and he shook himself loose.

"Hey. I'm awake, Mom. I'm awake."

"Dan!" The voice was loud and male and Dan squinted in the dusk of his dimly lit room.

"Turn the lamp on," he said and pointed vaguely behind the looming shadow in front of him.

"There's no lamp," came a female voice, and Dan glanced around.

"Colleen? Rosa?"

"No, Dan. Anna. And Jack."

"Oh. Hello. The lamp's right behind you on the dresser."

"There isn't any lamp, Jack" said Anna again.

"Sure there is," said Dan. "That crazy little lamp with the cowboys galloping around the shade."

"He's burning up," said Jack, and Dan glimpsed his friend's shiny bush of black hair before Jack dimmed to a shadow again. "Man, you're sick," Jack said.

Dan began coughing deep, painful hacks and realized he'd been coughing for quite awhile.

"Pneumonia?" said Anna.

"We better get you to a hospital, man."

"No!" He tried to spring away, but only had energy enough to bang his head on the wall. "Jack, hospitals are prisons. Just help me into bed. I'll be okay. I'm sick, I admit, but I'm not crazy."

"He thinks you mean a mental hospital," came Anna's voice.

"No, man," said Jack. "Just a regular hospital, for your pneumonia."

"No free will in hospitals," said Dan. "They'll tie you to a bed. Cut you open. Keep you alive with machines when you want to die."

Icy water was drizzling down his neck and he jerked away.

"It's okay, Dan. I'm just wiping your face."

"I'm hot as hell. Turn the fan on there, Anna, please. In the window." He looked over there and saw tall windows with a kitchen table by them and a high chair. "Wrong house," he murmured, and tried to get back to his bedroom in his parents' house.

"I found a thermometer," said Anna.

"Great. Open up, Dan."

The thin, cold thermometer was just warmed nicely inside his wet mouth, when Jack drew it out. Dan leaned his head against the wall

and watched his friends. They were bundled in fur-lined jackets with wool hats on their heads, which reminded him it was winter, and he'd been out in the cold last night or so. He began coughing tight, wrenching bursts that did nothing to clear his congestion.

"One hundred and four," said Anna, peering at the red line in the thermometer.

"Jesus. We got to get you to a hospital, Dan."

"No. No way. I refuse."

"Better just get him to bed," said Anna. "You'll drive his fever right up, scaring him."

"Yeah, I guess so. Hey listen. I've got those penicillin pills, Anna. Remember? That I lifted from work."

"Yes."

"God, I wish we didn't live so far."

"Well, you could go get them. I'll stay with Dan. And if he gets worse, I'll call an ambulance."

The ambulance careened, with flashing lights, before Dan's eyes, and he groaned, shoving the vision away from him. He wanted to be in the kitchen with his friends. Even the bedroom in his parents' house seemed a lonely place now.

"C'mon Dan, let me help you up. We're going to get you into bed."

Dan wavered as he stood and leaned on Jack.

"I've been sleeping here," he said. "For a long time."

When he was stretched out on the bed, Jack pulled off his jeans and Anna unbuttoned his wool shirt. She almost became Rosa, and he thought he might cry, but he coughed instead.

"Find some pajamas or something," Jack said.

After the spell of coughing, once he got his breath back, Dan said,

"Listen, you shouldn't even be here. I've got a lot of thinking to do. I made Colleen stay away." He felt a vague victory in that.

"You can do your thinking when you're well," said Anna.

"Colleen called us," said Jack. "She asked us to come here and see if you needed help."

Dan frowned and dropped down into the dark place inside himself. He quit lifting his arms and legs to assist in getting the snug, knit pajamas on. They pulled the sheet and blankets over his body and he realized he felt comfortable, and forced his eyes open so he wouldn't fall asleep.

"Dan," said Jack, leaning close, his eyebrows high above his rimless glasses. "I think I should call Colleen, don't you? Let her know how sick you are. Do you want her to come?"

"No."

"How about Rosa?" asked Anna.

"Hey!" Jack said angrily.

Dan turned to look at her.

"Does Colleen know too?"

"No," said Jack. "I just talked with her on the phone. She suspects there's someone else. She loves you so much, Dan. She said she'd give you a divorce if that's what you want."

Dan was silent, but thinking. He didn't want that. He didn't know what he wanted, except that he didn't want the decision. Again he was close to tears, but he still had control over his own body, and he kept his eyes dry and his throat free of aches.

"Is that what you want, Dan?" asked Jack softly.

"No."

"Jack," said Anna. "You should go." She sat down in the rocking chair by the window with one of Colleen's romantic suspense novels in her lap. "Get the penicillin. Let Dan get some sleep."

"Okay." He checked his watch. "It'll take me two hours. I'll be back at quarter to nine."

"Don't get in a wreck. Remember that slick spot down by Walled Lake."

"Okay. And you better take his temperature every half hour or so. Maybe I'll call you from home and check on you."

"No. Don't bother. We'll be all right."

Dan stared grimly at the ceiling, listening to their nervous exchange. People who cared about each other sounded sick. Crazy. He couldn't imagine, at this moment, having ever felt any love for Colleen or Rosa. He couldn't imagine he'd ever felt any other emotion than the one that was absorbing him now--a dull bitterness mingled with fright.

Nobody was going to take his temperature anymore. He didn't care if he died here in this bed. He wasn't going to a hospital.

A spell of aching, burning coughs awoke him. He'd been dreaming he was lying in this bed, so it surprised him to discover he'd been asleep. He was drenched with sweat and he tried to kick the blankets off, but the activity sent him into another bronchial spasm.

He glanced at Anna. She was slumped in the chair, sleeping.

The alarm clock on the stand by the bed read 8:25, and he raised the watch on his wrist, testing to see if the alarm clock was

accurate--8:22. He let his arm drop on top of the blankets, amazed at the frantic throbbing in his wrist. The thermometer was by the clock and after his pulse quieted, he reached it and put it in his mouth. He was sure he was hotter. When he pulled the glass stick out of his mouth, it read 104.5°.

If he could get rid of the thermometer it would be his word alone that would let them know his condition. He could tell them that he would let them know the minute he felt he should go into the hospital, and then he never would. The thought of tricking them, of separating himself from them with a lie, brought on a seige of loneliness, but his fear of being hospitalized was stronger, and he struggled upright, shivering as his damp pajamas were exposed to the air of the bedroom. Grasping the edge of the mattress, he tried to stand, but was unable to balance himself. Instead he sank clumsily onto all fours and crawled with the thermometer in one fist to the bathroom, deriding himself for being reduced to the state of an animal already. Vegetable was next.

In the bathroom he pulled himself up by the sink and coughed into a towel, getting up, for the first time, a bit of phlegm. Then he cracked the thermometer on the edge of the sink, splintering the red end off, and watching the trickle of red fluid run down the dry white porcelain to the drain.

The sight was pleasing. Blood had never disturbed him like other people. He found the deep red, the warmth, the saltiness, attractive.

He rinsed the red down the drain and was bothered by the blank whiteness of the clean sink. He could let some of his own blood color the sink; prick a finger. He could let it all out, what the hell. Being dead would solve a lot of problems.

The bathroom was lit only by the gray, snowy light coming in the window, and his reflection in the mirror was faint. He switched on the fluorescent bulbs on either side of the mirror and studied his expression while he asked himself, seriously, if he might not prefer death to hospitalization and a new baby and not enough money, and maybe a divorce and medical school again, this time with Rosa, and being imprisoned, maybe, for refusing to kill other people. Enumerating his conflicts made him feel sorry for himself, and tears washed over the rims of his eyes and wet his cheeks and his stubbly beard. The tears frightened him because he could not stop them. They rushed out, warm and salty, and he began coughing into the towel again and could not stop the coughing, either.

He was afraid Anna would hear him and he wanted to hurry up and come to a decision about his life, yet he had never been one to act impulsively. He wanted to consider all angles.

Suicide would be a means of escape from his problems, but that seemed a small, selfish reason. Ryan would need his father, But wasn't no father better than a crazy one, an abnormal one, one who couldn't cope?

And then it came to him that his acts since the day of his refusal had been tending toward violence. He had brutally fought those boys at the induction center, he had insisted Colleen kill the fetus within her, he had tried to burn the draft board. It sounded like war.

Dan began nodding at himself in the mirror. Looked at from that angle, it seemed he had a moral obligation to kill himself.

Some more of the skinny kid's words slid into the foreground of his mind. The kid had said, "You only know how everything turns out when you're dead," and again Dan began nodding at himself. Before

he cluttered the whole of his life with more broken principles, with more false and clumsy stitches, he should snip the thread. He should complete the whole now, by ending it.

Other times when he had abstractly considered the question of suicide, he had maintained that the best method was to shoot yourself in the heart. He had read of too many cases in which people survived either healthily or as vegetables with bullets embedded in their brains. But now, the quiet, gentle death from blood loss seemed better--less violent and more dignified. He would have loved to let his blood flow down the porcelain, brightening the white and warming it, but it was too risky here where Anna and Jack could find him.

He pulled open the mirror of the medicine cabinet, relieved to have his face gone from view, and took out a double-edged blade, thin and nice in its paper wrap. Slowly, shakily, he pulled open the little door behind the main one leading to the attic over the Weber's kitchen. He stepped down into the attic, careful to move without noise since he could hear voices in the kitchen. Reaching back, he pulled the large bathroom door as close as he could to hide the small one, and then shut the small one. The old wooden box with the torn quilt on it where Colleen used to sit and listen to conversations looked comfortable, but he moved, crouching, beyond it, back into the eaves where there was no floor but only insulation between the beams and slats. He lay on his belly, quaking with the cold, and peered down a crack into the Weber's kitchen. He was directly above their table. He could see hands move, holding knives and forks and clutching up cans of beer, but he couldn't see faces or bodies. Talbert and Wanda were talking, but Dan couldn't concentrate on the meaning of their words.

"Dan?"

It was Anna's voice, faraway in the bedroom. Dan ground his teeth together, vascillating now between going ahead and taking the chance of being discovered too soon, or forgetting it altogether. He was sick of decisions. His hands were cold and stiff and he wanted to hurry up and let the warm blood rush over them. Tearing at the slip of paper to get at the blade, he cut his fingertips and winced with the pain. He had forgotten cutting himself would hurt.

Gripping the blade in his left hand first, he pushed it deep into his right wrist, wishing he could see the welling red from the blue veins. He managed to cut his left wrist cleanly even though his right one was sore and weakening and pulsing blood up through the slit, around the severed ends of tendons. When it was done, he began to relax. He rested his fingers on a beam and his head on the insulation between two beams.

Anna's voice was calling louder and he heard panic sharp in the pitch. She opened the back door. He could hear quite clearly the click of the catch and the squeak of the hinge that had needed oil for the last two months.

"Dan? Dan?"

He could tell she didn't want to yell his name for fear her suspicions were unfounded. He was sure that even if she looked out here in the attic, she wouldn't venture to explore. She'd wait for Jack to do that, and by that time he'd be close enough to death that it wouldn't matter. In another ten minutes even tourniquets couldn't bind him to life.

At first he could feel the warm, fast-moving blood pushing out of his limp, throbbing wrists, but now he was too numb with the cold or

something to feel it leave him. He turned his hands over to make sure the blood hadn't coagulated, but his eyes wouldn't open, or else it was just too dark to see. He tried to raise his fingers to touch his irises, but his hands and arms were immovable.

"Good God!" someone said right next to his ear.

"What is it?"

"Yeah, what is it? Lookit! Jesus Christ."

"Talbert, it's blood!"

"Jesus, what's going on up there?"

"I'm going up."

"Wait! I'm going up. I'm the landlord."

"Oh, Christ, go then, mighty landlord."

Dan felt defeated. Talbert would know right where to come and would not hesitate about searching. He could hear his snow-muffled footsteps on the outside stairway, and Anna opening the door again.

"Who are you? There's blood dripping on our table, and I wanna know what's going on."

Dan wanted to die so badly. The thought of medical and mental hospitals brought a deep sorrow into him, and he expected to lose himself in tears, but nothing happened, even when he released all controls. He was encouraged by this physiological failure.

He remembered Mrs. Ruszkowski in the Linwood Cafe, after she had been murdered; how her closed eyes had seemed incongruous behind the lenses of her glasses. He hoped there was nothing incongruous about himself. He wanted to die with dignity, and appear consistent in his death pose, as if he knew what he had been doing.

CHAPTER 20

Colleen was reluctant to tell her mother about her worries regarding Dan because her mother disapproved of emotional weaknesses. She believed the power of positive thinking could extricate anyone from anxieties or depressions, no matter what their cause or severity. She didn't apply this power to physical weaknesses, though, and often indulged in coughs and headaches and limps at the least provocation.

Colleen was near collapse when she arrived home from Dr. Harvey's office, and she allowed her mother to tuck her in bed with a hot water bottle for her uterine cramps which had already ceased.

"You don't think you might hemmorage?" asked Mavis, standing in the doorway, ready to descend to feed Ryan his supper.

"No, I'm sure I won't."

"Maybe I should come up and check you every ten minutes or so."

"I think I just need some sleep, Mother, and then I'll be fine."

She slept for an hour and a half, and awoke with the conviction that she should drive home no matter what Dan said. It was her home as well as his, and if he didn't want to be in her presence, he would have to leave. He could come and visit his mother for awhile, or go to his girlfriend.

She packed quickly, stuffing the dirty clothes in unfolded. Her mother would try to restrain her from going, she was sure.

She went downstairs with the large suitcase in one hand and a box of her old college books in the other, in an attempt to demonstrate

her regained strength. Her mother wasn't in the living room and since the car was out front by the curb, it wouldn't do to carry the load on out to the kitchen.

"Mother! I'm taking this stuff out to the car."

"All right, dear."

It was a distracted response. Colleen was exasperated and relieved at the same moment, a mixture of feelings she remembered well from her childhood. She drew in air and let it out in a cloud in the cold air as she went down the shovelled steps and sidewalk to the car.

Mavis was in the yellow lit doorway as she started back up the walk, holding her sweater over Ryan's hair and ears so he wouldn't get chilled.

"You're not going home, are you?" she asked as Colleen came up the steps, rubbing down the goose bumps on her arms.

"Yes, Mother, I am." She closed the door and headed into the downstairs bedroom for Ryan's diaper bag so she wouldn't have to look at her mother while she spoke. "I called Dan after I got out of the doctor's office and he's not feeling well, so I think I'll head home."

"Oh. It's not serious, is it?"

"I don't think so. Is Ryan in dry diapers?"

"Yes, I just changed him into double ones when I put his sleepers on."

"Good. Thank you. I hope he sleeps all the way home."

"Colleen, I hope you're not overdoing, driving home. It's hard on your physiology to undergo any operation, you know."

"I know, Mother."

She went to the kitchen for her coat and gloves and Ryan's snow-suit.

"What are Dan's symptoms?" asked Mavis when Colleen returned to the living room.

"Um. A cough. He coughed quite badly on the phone."

"Oh. I hope it's not serious."

Mavis twisted her wedding bands as Colleen dressed Ryan, and Colleen was sure she was struggling to decide whether or not to ask if they had talked about their marital difficulties.

"Did you tell him about your operation?" she asked finally.

"No. I thought I'd wait till I get home."

"I see."

"Well, I guess we're ready."

"Oh wait! You haven't eaten anything."

"I can't, Mom. I'm too nervous."

"Yes, but you must consider your health. You have to regain your strength."

"I know. I'll drink some milk. That's all I can manage, really."

Mavis got into her coat and hat and boots to accompany them out to the car.

"Drive safely," she said as Colleen loaded Ryan in. "You have a precious cargo there."

Colleen went around to the driver's side and got in. Her mother came to the window so she rolled it down.

"Maybe you should leave Ryan here for a few days," she said.

"While you and Dan work things out."

"No, Mother, that's all right."

"Well, I'd be glad to care for him, you know."

"I know. I appreciate it, Mother. We'll come again sometime."

"Well, I suppose it's just as well. I have to teach every morning, and then the book club is coming tomorrow afternoon, and I was wondering how I'd manage it along with caring for you two."

Colleen nodded, feeling suddenly that she had been a great burden to her mother, and immediately thrusting the thought away because she had learned that this sort of remark was Mavis' way of displaying her emotional strength. She smiled gently at her mother's tense face.

"Mom, I'm so happy to have the money to go back to college with. I hope you know how grateful I am."

Mavis' smile was quick and warm.

"Yes, dear. Good-bye, now. Give me a call one of these days."

She stood back from the car, waving from behind her ear at Ryan.

It was nearly ten o'clock when Colleen turned up the driveway to the farmhouse apartment. There were no lights on upstairs, but the Weber's lower half was, as usual, spilling light out every window.

Colleen parked the car, hoping it wouldn't get stuck in the unplowed snow, and decided to take Ryan up and then come back for her luggage. She hoped Dan would offer to come down and get the things in the car because she was tired and eager to remain in the warm rooms upstairs. She left the car headlights on to illuminate her way across the yard and up the outside steps.

The upper half of Talbert's body loomed in the window of the Weber's back door, and she could see him adjusting his black-rimmed glasses, peering out. She was sure he was coming out to tell her she'd left her lights on in a gloating voice. She began planning a reply as she watched him fumble with the knob and jerk the door open.

"Hey! Colleen!"

She stopped a good distance from him hoping his shouting wouldn't wake Ryan who was sleeping, drooling, on her shoulder.

"Yes?"

"Say now, your hubby's in bad shape. C'mon in here, it's cold as hell out here."

He held his bottle of beer by the rim, away from him, so its coldness wouldn't contribute to his discomfort. Colleen stayed where she was for a moment, scanning his face with skeptical eyes. Then she stepped closer, but would not go in when she saw the kitchen filled with narrowed eyes, and mouths held in strange half-smiles. She caught sight of Joellen and Butch and felt vague concern that they didn't come rushing out to be the first to tell her.

"What's wrong?" she said, her voice resounding clearly in the still night.

"You aren't coming in? Well, let me tell it to you fast then. He was sick, that's what, or so your hippie girlfriend said. Pneumonia, they thought. Well, you see, he went out in the attic there, and by God, cut his wrists wide open, and the blood came dripping down through those beams onto our table." He pointed back into the kitchen at the artificial beams he had installed over the cracked ceiling plaster. Colleen watched him, shivering, not trusting him to give her the facts. He shoved his glasses higher on his nose. "Damn near dead he was, when they took him away in the ambulance. Jesus. I never saw so much blood. You'll have a big mess to clean up in that attic, believe me."

"They took him to St. Joseph's," Wanda shouted out.

"Now murder I can understand," said Talbert. "Two people mad at each other, that makes sense. But suicide. Jesus. That's crazy."

"Thank you," said Colleen, turning smartly, her muscles rigid, and heading for her car.

"Thank you, she says," muttered Talbert, and then louder, "I tell her her husband's dying and she says 'thank you.' Jesus."

"Hey!" yelled a different voice.

"What are you doin', Frank, huh?" asked Talbert.

"Let me by. Hey! Colleen! Mrs. Bryant!"

She stopped and Frank Weber, the oldest boy, ran out to her with his fingertips stuck in the pockets of his tight jeans, and his shoulders hunched against the cold.

"Hey, you want me to give you a lift down to Ann Arbor? I mean, like, maybe you're not up to driving."

Colleen was going to refuse, not trusting any of them, but as she turned to tell him no, Wanda yelled out,

"Hey! You want me to watch your baby for you?"

"No thank you."

She looked at the thin, short young man shivering beside her.

"Do you know how to get right to St. Joseph's? Fast?"

"Sure."

"Okay, then, because I don't know Ann Arbor that well."

He leaped back through the snow to the door that was still open with Talbert and the kids clustered around it. Colleen got the diaper bag out of her car, turned the lights off and locked her suitcase and the books inside.

Frank, bundled in a fake leather jacket, came running and she got into his red Firebird with him and fastened her seat belt with one hand as she held Ryan in the other. When he turned the ignition, the radio blared out, and Ryan leaped against her.

"It's okay," she soothed, and he slumbered again.

With the music numbing her, Frank's speed down the drive and Van Amberg didn't bother her much. She leaned her head back and forth, trying to ease her tight neck muscles.

When they were on U.S. 23, heading south to Ann Arbor, with Frank passing every car on the road, he suddenly shouted above the piercing treble of electric guitar distortion sounds,

"Hey, does this bug you?" pointing to the radio.

"No. It's fine. It's good."

She had never realized it was such a long way to Ann Arbor. Twenty miles the sign had said as they got on the highway, but it seemed farther. Her first thought was that it would be a long way to commute if she enrolled in the University of Michigan, but then was suffused with shame to have thought of that instead of Dan's long trip this way, sick and bleeding. But all week the prospect of going to college had been in her mind, with all its details, and so had reached a level of reality that the hearsay of Dan had not. Nevertheless, the idea of Dan being in need had been with her long enough to give her a sudden chill and queasiness.

"Hey, Frank!" she yelled over the music, covering Ryan's ear so she wouldn't startle him. "Did you see how bad Dan was?" She watched his lips so she would catch every word.

"Nah. I saw all the blood upstairs, though. In your place."

He glanced over at her. "It was a lot. My old man wasn't kidding when he said he was damn near dead."

The information froze her further. She still could not believe she was that near losing Dan, but felt electric shocks of fright buzz in her at the thought. Talbert's words, and Frank's echo of them, reverberated from one side of her mind to the other. She couldn't bear to visualize Dan's blood seeping down through their ceiling and dripping on their table; his physical essence dropping to their level of the house. It embarrassed her, as well as frightened her, to think how much blood it would take to soak through the boards of the attic.

"Hey, you want some aspirin?" asked Frank. "I got some in the glove compartment."

"No thanks."

Frank pointed out St. Joseph's as they were coming down a hill into the city.

"Oh God," said Colleen, shivering, thinking that it was still far away.

Frank turned the radio low all of a sudden.

"Keep your eyes open for the fuzz," he said. "I'm going to fly through this town." In almost the same breath he added. "I picked Dan up, he was hitching, and took him to Detroit the other night. Sunday night. He seemed all right then."

Then he twisted the volume high and Colleen didn't bother to reply. She had visualized Dan being cloistered in the apartment all the while she was gone. It bothered her that people weren't suspended in space and time between the times she was with them. That was what had fascinated her this weekend at her mother's--hearing about people

she thought had been suspended in high school, or college, while she went on with her life. People continued doing things and thinking thoughts and changing inside even when they were beyond the range of her senses.

Frank drove with acute surety to the emergency entrance and carried the diaper bag as they went in. Colleen's legs were unsteady, and her teeth tending to chatter. Ryan woke with huge round eyes and pointed breathlessly at the mercury vapor lamps lining the street. She said nothing, occupied fully with controlling the muscles in her legs and her uneasy stomach.

"There's your friends," said Frank, and Colleen focused on Jack and Anna who were leaning on a wall near chairs and coffee tables in the end of the hallway. The hospital lights glared, and Colleen had to look down, sensing a worsening in her stomach. Anna saw her and touched Jack's hand, and they started toward her.

"May I help you?" asked the nurse behind the desk, but Colleen ignored her, wanting Jack and Anna to be the first to speak to her of Dan.

Both Jack and Anna looked exhausted, drained, and Colleen hoped some of it was due to the glaring lights.

"Colleen, we tried to call you," said Anna.

"Where is he?"

"In the operating room, still."

"Oh God. He's alive, though?"

"Yeah, Yeah, sure," said Jack.

"Oh, thank God." Her face drew up in ugly bunches, and she cried, but realized it was only to relieve the pressure. She felt no pain as yet. Anna drew her close and Ryan protested, but Colleen

clung to Anna, glad to hide her face. Jack took Ryan and gave him his keys to fondle, and they all went down to the chairs, with Frank trailing, still holding the diaper bag.

Colleen took the paper towel Anna offered and blew her nose and pressed it against her cheeks, under her eyes.

"He just can't die," she said.

"I know it."

"Tell me everything. Tell me every detail."

"Listen. Colleen," said Frank, holding out the diaper bag.

"Here. I guess I'll go on home."

"Oh sure, Frank. Thanks for bringing me. I really appreciate it."

"Think nothing of it. I hope, you know, he pulls through."

She nodded, rubbing at her forehead that was wrinkling again with emotion. Frank nodded too, and left.

There was another young woman seated in the waiting area, and Colleen wondered briefly why she was there: if someone she loved were getting a few stitches or dying. She had a paper packet of Kleenexes on the chair beside her and a small pile of sodden ones, so Colleen thought it must be something severe and somehow it made her feel calmer.

As Jack told his story, Colleen noticed the woman watching him closely and darting her dark eyes at Colleen's face quite often. The woman began crying silently as Anna told of Talbert hauling Dan out of the attic, swearing all the time about the mess out there.

"He bled a lot, then," said Colleen, shocked again, and in too hazy a state to cry.

"Yes, a lot," said Anna. "I got tourniquets on him right away, and Jack came then, thank God, and the Livingston County ambulance came really fast. We told that man, Mr. Weber, to call ahead here, and he did."

Colleen nodded, feeling chagrined, believing as she had that Talbert was incapable of a good deed.

"We called your mother's house," said Jack. "She told us you'd already left."

"Did you tell her what had happened?"

"Yes. She was going to call Dan's parents and then come on down here."

"They're all coming here?"

"Yes."

Colleen nodded, remembering with a sort of distant wonder, that she wasn't the only one who loved Dan and wanted him to live. She shook her head suddenly.

"It's hard for me to believe he really might die."

They nodded, and Colleen caught out of the corner of her eye the up and down motions of the dark-haired young woman's head. Colleen turned and stared at her and swallowed, and then quickly looked away, feeling her cheeks heat, realizing who she might be. Probably Jack and Anna had called her, too, knowing she would want to be with Dan in this emergency.

Colleen sat still, staring at the floor for a few minutes, and then cautiously examined her feelings toward the other woman. There didn't seem to be any great pangs of jealousy inside her, but her curiosity about the woman was consuming. She was a lovely person, the

graceful kind that always made Colleen feel juvenile and clumsy. It was no wonder that Dan loved her. Along with her other emotions, Colleen was now touched by apprehension. Even if Dan recovered, things between them would still be in a turmoil.

I need to find a bathroom," she said to Anna, and went where Anna pointed, down the hallway.

Once inside, she moved fast, afraid she would miss out on something. She did not like the idea of Jack and Anna conversing with the other woman about Dan when she was not there.

Her tampon was soaked with blood, and she struggled to keep her thoughts only on the fact that she was bleeding and not that Dan had bled.

When she came out of the stall, she stood at the sink for a long spell, waiting to vomit, wishing she could, yet knowing there was nothing much in her to come up. After a moment she couldn't bear the sight of her face in the mirror; the wide, dark-skinned eyes in the pale face, highlighted with two bright red streaks, fever spots, on her cheekbones, and all of it framed with hair that seemed clown orange in this light. She turned on the taps and bent her face down to splash it with the tepid water.

The bathroom door swung inward. Colleen ducked her head lower and continued rinsing her face.

"Colleen."

"Oh!" She shut the water off and took the paper towel her mother offered her and let the wetness of her skin seep into it while she tried to get composure enough to face Mavis.

"Is everything all right, dear?" It was a typically almost

senseless question of her mother's, and Colleen thought she might shout a derisive laugh, but contained it.

"I'm all right," she said.

"It's good to cry, of course, but I was just worried you might overdo."

"I wasn't crying, Mother, but it doesn't matter. Are Dan's folks here, too?"

"Yes, they went on down to the cafeteria for coffee. Maybe you should come too."

"Oh, I can't face them, Mother." Colleen threw the towel hard into the trash. "Evelyn will make me feel I'm the cause of it. She never thought I was the right choice for Dan's wife." The face and demeanor of Dan's lover swept into Colleen's mind, and she grew bitter, knowing Dan's mother would certainly have approved of her.

"Oh, I don't believe she feels that strongly," said Mavis.
"Evelyn means well."

Colleen turned from the sink.

"I guess I'll go back out. I want to be there if anything happens."

Her mother was frowning slight, an expression that came whenever she wanted to broach a delicate subject. Her eyes were cast to one side and her brows were up and in at the same time--almost an expression of pain.

"Colleen. Have you thought ahead along the lines of what you'll do if he should...if you should lose him."

"Good God, Mother, I want him to live! I'm trying to think positively, like you say, about him living. To help him along."

"I understand, dear," She spoke with exaggerated calm to influence Colleen to calmness. "But you really haven't any control over him, over what his body and mind decide to do. I simply am saying I feel you should be thinking ahead, positively, to your future, no matter what tonight brings."

"Mother, I'm going back out. I want to be there if something happens."

Her mother's intensity waned.

"Yes, dear."

Mavis moved into a stall, glancing regretfully at Colleen, and Colleen swung open the door and headed for the chairs at the end of the hall. From her mother and from Evelyn and from everybody she'd get advice, and all she wanted was Dan alive and happy and loving her.

Anna ran out from the cluster of chairs to meet her.

"Quick, Colleen, there's the doctor down by the nurses's station. He wanted to see you."

"He did?"

All the heat she had generated in response to her mother rose up and evaporated, leaving her cold. Her feet were heavy as ice as she tried to run down the hall. Her mother stepped out of the bathroom as she rushed by.

"Oh!" she said. "Colleen?"

The nurse eyed her as she came frantically forward.

"You're Mrs. Bryant, aren't you? The suicide patient's wife?"

"Yes. Yes I am."

The doctor turned slowly and appraised her, and then spoke in low tones, nodding his head to enunciate words, and not as a sign of optimism.

"He's in the Intensive Care Unit, and is unconscious. No one may go in but you, and you may see him only if you promise not to make a scene."

Colleen drew herself up straight.

"Take me to him immediately."

"Well now." He turned aside to the nurse with a slight smile and then shrugged. "All right, then."

As they strode down the hall to the elevator, Colleen asked,

"I want to know how he is. Honestly."

"Well, Mrs. Bryant, we've done all we can. The rest is up to him."

Colleen tensed her jaw at the meager and double-edged information. If Dan had wanted to die earlier this evening, there was no reason to believe he had changed his mind.

"It's the pneumonia that's complicating matters, I suppose," she said.

"Yes, although his fever is down. He came near to bleeding to death. We gave him a transfusion. There might be brain damage if he lives."

"Oh, God."

Suddenly she didn't want to see him. She didn't want to see Dan weak and unconscious and not knowing if the person inside his head was the same or changed, knowing his blood was no longer his own.

The doctor opened the door and she began shedding loose tears even before she reached the bed. She wiped at them with her sleeve and looked down on Dan in his long, white crib. His face was flushed redly, which wasn't at all his natural color, and he was sleeping with his

mouth open and his eyes only half shut, which she worried were signs of brain damage.

She wanted to speak softly to him, hoping he'd hear through his dreams, but the doctor was still in the doorway and a nurse was by the next bed with another unconscious man who was snoring.

"Mrs. Bryant," said the doctor, "I'm going to tell your friends and family to come up to the waiting room on this floor, all right? It's down the hallway here about halfway."

"All right. Thank you."

"I'll come back in awhile."

When he was gone, Colleen glanced over to observe what the nurse was doing, and found she had moved to the third bed in the room to talk with a small old man who had trouble getting his words out, and whose eyes rolled back with the effort.

Colleen timidly touched the sheet on Dan's leg through the bar of the high crib. Everything but his head was covered with the brilliant white sheet. Unfolding the edge of it would conveniently conceal his head, she thought bitterly. She wanted to touch his hand, but it was lost under the sheet, and probably bound with bandages anyway. She stood nervously beside him, dry-eyed, emotionally neutral. She half-wished he'd open his eyes all the way and see her, and half-hoped he wouldn't. What could she say? That she was sorry? But it was his own doing. There was a space between them that had always been there and was there between each pair of persons; an empty area where faint heat and chill could get across, but across which there was no definite touching from person to person--the inside people. She was isolated, trying to steer her own course, as was he, and they could only hope to be drifting in the same direction.

Carefully she stooped by the side of the bed and whispered in his ear.

"Dan. I love you. It's Colleen here. I love you." She paused to lick her dry lips. "I want you to know that I love you, and that I want you to live. Please want to live, Dan." Her voice broke, and she quit talking. She felt it was futile. He was miles away now. The divide was nearly infinite. A word, or a breath of warm air in his ear would never drift within range of his senses.

She stood to go.

Even if he lived, things wouldn't be the same. Even if his brain was undamaged, things would have changed. Nothing in this life remained static, permanent, or forever.

As she pulled the door softly shut behind her, she looked down the hallway toward the waiting room and saw Dan's lover pacing away from her, the glaring lights flashing blue in her thick, black hair.

Colleen stood motionless, watching her, grateful that she, at least, could touch Dan's leg under the sheet and whisper in his ear. It was meager consolation, but more than that woman had. As she contemplated the other woman's stress and pain, Colleen was lifted into honest sorrow for the first time. The pain that welled in her was too heavy for easy crying. Maybe tonight, maybe tomorrow, it would work it's way out of her, but not now.

She returned to Dan's side to watch him breathe.

CHAPTER 21

Colleen could see Jack's car parked by the barn as she turned up between the two maple trees at the bottom of the hill. She was disappointed that he had come. She had counted on being alone except for the Webers down below, as she sorted through Dan's things and began to pack up her own.

Jack climbed out of his car as she drove up the hill and stood waiting while she parked and got out of her car.

"Good morning," he said quietly, his breath a cloud of white in the still, frosty air.

"Hello, Jack."

"I won't stay long," he said. "I just wanted to help you carry boxes up, and make sure you really want to be by yourself."

"Yes, I do, but I'll be glad to have some help with the boxes."

"Okay."

She opened the trunk and the back doors of the car and he began stacking boxes together.

"Colleen, I want you to eat lunch with me and Anna, okay? You'll need to see some people by then."

"I don't know, Jack."

"Really, I insist. It's good to be alone, I suppose, but not for long. We can pick you up here at noon, and go into Brighton to eat, and then we'll bring you back if you still have things to do."

"All right. That sounds okay."

They started for the stairs, their arms loaded. Colleen could hear the back door open, and knew Butch and Joellen were there, watching. She wanted to ignore them, but had vowed to herself that she would face up to Dan's death by facing other people about it. She turned her head to that side of her armload of boxes.

"Hi Joellen. Hi Butch."

"Hi."

"How've you two been?"

"Fine."

Their eyes were curious, but cautious and shy. They weren't going to offer any questions at this point, and she felt it would be senseless to urge them to the topic.

She followed Jack up the stairs and unlocked the door as he held the screen door open. She hadn't been in the apartment since leaving for her mother's the Saturday before, and she was apprehensive as to what she would find. Jack had warned her that there would be a lot of blood in the bathroom and kitchen, since he and Anna had only thrown paper towels down on it before following the ambulance in their car. She glanced at the dried, brownish crust, but didn't let any ideas about it touch her.

More interesting was a scribbled envelope on the kitchen table.

She set her boxes in the living room, and when Jack left to get the rest of them, she studied the envelope. Her name and Rosa's were written on it, sometimes plainly, sometimes darkly with decorations.

She began counting the number of times her name was written, and then stopped. A number meant nothing. What was important was how this

conglomeration of their two names confirmed Dan's state of mind. He had been undecided, at this point, and knowing Dan, he had never decided between herself and Rosa. There was consolation in that he hadn't dismissed her from his heart altogether, but she also felt frustration remembering how she had let two months pass without telling him she knew of his struggle to decide.

Jack returned with the last boxes.

"I'm going to clean the floor," he said. "I should have come back and cleaned it that night--Tuesday night. Jesus, it seems a long time ago."

"Yes, it does."

"Where do you keep the bucket and Mr. Clean or whatever?"

She showed him, and then took the envelope into the living room. Inside it was a notification from his draft board that he had been reclassified 1-H. He had seen it, he must have seen it, since the envelope was opened. And it didn't save him from killing himself? She had thought the draft problems were as much a source of depression for him as his problems with who to love and live with.

"Colleen?"

"Yes."

"Would it upset you if I talked about Dan?"

"No."

"There's something I just remembered that's good, in a way."

She went out to the kitchen and watched him sponge the floor, the brown reviving to red when the water mixed with it.

"When Anna and I came that night, and saw he was sick, and thought he should go to the hospital, he was so scared of going."

Colleen nodded. He had always hated hospitals. Even when she went to one simply to give birth, he had been nervous about her being in there.

"So, in a way," Jack said, "he'd probably glad to have escaped St. Joseph's so quick that night." He glanced up at her, nervousness evident in his eyes, afraid, she assumed, that he had spoken too flip-pantly.

She nodded, and then added,

"And glad to not have been a failed suicide and have had to go in a mental hospital."

"Yes. Right."

She stooped and gathered up the blanket and couch cushions from under the phone and returned them to the living room.

Jack was right. At least that had worked out for Dan. One thing that he had wanted very much was to donate his body as a cadaver when he died. He had signed a form from the University of Michigan Medical School, and carried a little signed card in his billfold about it. But they would not accept mutilated bodies, and with his cut wrists and the huge incision in his chest they had made to give him heart massage, that plan of Dan's had fallen through. She donated his corneas and kidneys, though, and had the rest of him cremated. His mother kept the ashes.

There was a small, short knock at the back door. Colleen went to it and opened it for Joellen and Butch.

"Come in."

"We don't mean to bother you," said Joellen quickly as they stepped in out of the cold.

"Here," said Butch, holding out a pile of envelopes. "Your mail for the last few days."

"Oh, thank you, kids."

"And my dad said you should tell the post office not to deliver it, if you don't plan to be here."

"Oh. All right. I'll do that."

She was glancing through the envelopes and saw one from Dan's lawyers.

"Also, my dad said to tell you he has to keep the security deposit you paid to buy new insulation for the attic, and replaster our ceiling."

"Oh, of course. All right."

"The ceiling's got blood stains on it," said Butch.

"Shut up," said Joellen, shoving him.

Colleen sighed. This was how it was going to be. People would ignore Dan's death, or talk around it, which would make her feel more ill at ease.

"I'm sorry about your ceiling, and everything else," said Colleen. "Please tell your mom and dad that. I'll be moving out tomorrow or Monday."

"Okay."

"Thanks for bringing me the mail."

"Okay."

They rattled quickly down the outside stairs, glad to escape.

Colleen tore the envelope open. Jack was scrubbing in the bathroom, but he came out when the kids left.

"A letter from Dan's lawyer," said Colleen, and then read it out loud to him.

"Dear Mr. Bryant:

I have received with joy the letter you sent me indicating you have been reclassified 1-H. Apparently our discussions and communications with the United States Attorney have resulted in his acceptance of our arguments that your induction was invalid, and prosecution in your case has been declined by him.

Your file was therefore returned to your local board and because of the fact that you passed your 26th birthday, you were classified 1-H, meaning you are not eligible for induction. Your case is therefore concluded with the following results:

1. No criminal action was ever commenced and you therefore have no criminal record whatsoever;
2. No criminal action will be commenced in the future;
3. You are not subject to induction and should now be free and clear since you are over 26.

We are glad we could assist you in this matter and have successfully resolved the case. If there are any questions, please feel free to call me.

Sincerely,

Marc Stickgold"

Jack walked to a kitchen chair and sat down. Colleen and he stared into each other's eyes, and they both shook their heads.

"If only he could see this," said Colleen.

Jack reached for the letter and she gave it to him. He read it slowly to himself.

"Save it," he said, handing it back.

"Oh, sure. I'll put it in his draft folder with all his other things."

She would have to get the folder back from the lawyers, and she would have to complete the payments to them, another five hundred dollars. And she would have to inform Local Board #30 that Dan had died. Dan would want everything possible completed with his life, she was sure. And she felt it was good for her to be completing these details. It helped her comprehend that Dan was dead.

Jack rose to continue the cleaning.

"Jack?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you have a lot of stuff you have to do today?"

"No. Nothing, really." He sat back down.

"I was just wondering if you could stay and help me afterall."

"Sure."

"Right through till suppertime, maybe?"

"Sure. I'll have to call Anna and tell her. And you can come to our place for supper and stay all night."

Colleen nodded, feeling an easing of her stomach muscles.

"I think I need to be with people. Friends."

"Yes."

"And if it wouldn't upset you guys, I'd like to talk about Dan. It seems too soon to be silent about him."

"I agree."

"That memorial service..."

"Oh Jesus."

"That preacher his mom got would have infuriated Dan."

"That's what I kept thinking, all through the service."

"If I'd known how bad the guy was, I would have vetoed having him. I just kept thinking, "Oh, Dan, I'm so sorry to have loosed this righteous, judgmental man on you. Dan was so non-judgmental."

"That was really inspiring what Dan's dad said. It sort of saved things."

Colleen nodded. The preacher had finished, and immediately Dan Senior rose and asked if he might interject something before the prayer, and then he said he felt an important part of his son's life had been overlooked in the minister's sermon, and that was Danny's refusal to serve in the army because he didn't want to take part in killing anyone. The preacher blushed amazingly red, and Colleen learned later that he was adamantly in favor of the war in Viet Nam. Dan Senior said 'thank you' and sat, and Colleen had been overwhelmed with emotion for what he had done in Dan's behalf.

"Tonight we'll have our own memorial service," said Jack, nodding. "Jeez, I miss him." His voice broke and he put his head down suddenly on his arms.

Colleen's mouth trembled, but she kept the tears back.

The Weber's radio suddenly boomed below them, and Colleen glanced at the clock, knowing it must be near noon. She would have to pack fast, now, if she were going to move out tomorrow.

She went into the living room while Jack recovered and picked up the envelope Dan had written on only days before. She had hoped to find a note from him, but it looked like this was all he had left her.

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