

—For just a few minutes, okay? Just talk to them. I'll tell them not to get too near.

He closes the door.

She raises and bumps against the album. She can feel the dents in her flesh where she squeezed its edges into her upper arms. She looks quickly to where Howie stood, trying to gauge whether he might have seen it. She shoves the album under the bed, props up the pillows, arranges the blankets around her, leans back, and closes her eyes.

The pain is sharper, deeper, more defined, lodged in her chest, cutting up into her throat. She was ready to talk to him, could have, would have, wanted to, if only he had stayed. If only he'd given her the chance, made some opening. The tears well and slide slowly, quietly. Not a muscle of her face betrays her emotion.

SCENE 3

—What do you mean a ride, what kind of ride?

Mummy is in rumpled khaki pants and stretched-out white T-shirt, roller in hand, arrested in midstroke, paint pan on the stool beside her.

—Just a ride. In his car.

—Doing what?

—I don't know. Riding around, talking, looking at things.

—There's nothing in this town to look at. One main street four blocks long, two side streets, a Safeway, a post office . . .

—Your roller is dripping.

Mummy sets roller on pan, looks over at Daddy, cross-kneed in the only upholstered chair in the house, a dusty frazzled thing I know won't be around long. But he's studiously engrossed in his book. So she glares back at me.

—I don't know a thing about this boy, I don't know his family . . .

—You don't know anyone's family here, Mummy, we're strangers, remember?

—I can't even call the minister. Do you realize there's no Unitarian church in this town, not even a Congregational?

—So we'll go Catholic.

—God forbid.

—All right, Episcopalian.

Daddy's eyes flicker up. —Personally I prefer the Church of Christ, the hymns are more rousing.

Mummy shoots him a frown of disgust, but he's intent again on his book. I stay intent on Mummy.

—His name's Casey.

—Casey what?

—How do I know? When you're at a swimming pool, trying to make friends as the new girl in town, you don't go around saying, Pardon me but I didn't catch your last name.

Mummy picks up the roller and returns to her wall. I'm right behind her.

—He's very nice.

—How do you know?

—He looks nice.

—You can't judge by appearances.

—When did you change your mind about that?

Daddy snorts. Mummy looks over sharply but he's innocently entrenched behind his book.

—I told him to come by at seven thirty.

—Oh, I don't know— Mummy turns to the upholstered chair, exasperated.

—What do you think, Artie?

Daddy looks up as if surprised to find himself invited into this conversation. He tilts his head and assesses me.

—Well I'd say the boy's taking somewhat of a chance himself.

Mummy scowls then turns her back and vigorously swipes the wall with her roller, making it clear she's through with the both of us.

I dress carefully. Full circle blue-and-white striped skirt, sash tied in back with a wide bow. White gathered blouse with puffed sleeves and scooped elastic neck that can be slipped off the shoulders. White thong sandals. I paint my toenails Fire Engine Red, then wipe it off and repaint them Petal Pink, to match my lipstick. No fingernail polish, cheap for a girl my age, Mummy's decreed.

Daddy's in the armchair, Mummy's in the rocker, there's no more seating space. For once no one can say, For heaven's sake, Reggie, sit down. I wander around the living room trying to look indifferent. Mummy has banished the yellowed window shades to the garbage pile, so I stick close along the front wall.

Casey arrives promptly at seven thirty and sits in his car. Mummy and Daddy pretend he's not there. It's a tense wait. Finally he turns out his headlights and swaggers to the front door. Daddy stands, I make introductions.

—Casey, I'd like you to meet my mother and father, Mr. and Mrs. Patterson. Mummy and Daddy, this is Casey.

Casey shakes Daddy's hand. —Mr. Patterson.

Mummy leans forward. —I'm sorry, Casey, I didn't catch your last name.

—Colter, ma'am.

Mummy extends her hand. —We're pleased to meet you, Casey Colter.

Casey looks around. In the glare from the white walls he looks younger and smaller.

Daddy smiles, Mummy assesses. It's up to me.

—I'm sorry I can't ask you to sit down, all the chairs are wet.

He can see them lined against the back wall, five wooden chairs in three different styles, behind a rectangular table, all freshly painted white.

—That's okay— Casey decides to take the bull by the horns. —If it's all right, Mr. and Mrs. Patterson, I'd like to take Reggie for a ride.

—Anywhere in particular?

Mummy and Casey take each other's measure.

—Just around town. To show her where things are. Then maybe to Dairy Queen.

Daddy wraps his arm around my shoulders. —That seems all right.

I cast him a grateful smile and head for the door. Mummy's right there beside me.

—What time will you be back?

Casey doesn't hesitate. —Ten thirty, ma'am.

She looks at her watch. —No later.

The car is tan, a four-door Chevrolet, old but spotlessly clean inside and out. The plush in the window frames is still wet. But the upholstery gives up a poof of dust when I slide in.

—What'd you call your mother?— I look at him. —When you introduced us.

—Mrs. Patterson.

—You called her Mummy.

—What do you call your mother?

—Catherine.

—It's disrespectful to call your mother by her first name.

—And calling her a mummy isn't?— He snickers. —She must be some kind of nut for white.

—She likes it clean and light. It's a small house, the rooms are dark.

—Well wait until the first dust storm, she's going to wish she'd left it dark. But your dad seems nice.

He's driving randomly up and down the streets, turning corners on apparent impulse, casting frequent glances my way. I look out the window.

The early evening has brought everyone out. Children are playing street games, fathers are watering grass, mothers are gossiping with neighbors. Grandmothers and grandfathers relax in porch swings or on lawn chairs, sipping cool drinks, waiting for the sunset, the highlight of any summer day in Arizona.

The houses are low and for the most part small, here and there a would-be pueblo or Spanish villa, but mostly bungalows. Cinder brick bungalows with townhouse fronts that remind me of the East. Wood shingle bungalows with points of stained or beveled glass that remind me of the Midwest. Spare frame bungalows with tall narrow windows that remind me of the Prairies. No colonial or ranch types. I can't tell neighborhoods. The styles are mixed haphazardly, Indian adobe next to Eastern brick next to Spanish stucco. Dirt and rain have splashed red stains up lower walls, sun and wind have burned bleached streaks down upper walls. Paint and wood don't fare so well as adobe and brick.

We drive in and out of blocks where the lawns are drier and sparser, the houses shabbier, but even here I can't find a pattern. I feel only the town. Except for a single hill, there are no lowlands or highlands to explain the poorer from the more substantial.

There are trellises of trumpet vine, sweet pea, and bougainvillea, pots of geranium, marigold, and petunia, beds of stock, snapdragon, and hollyhock. The air is warm, moist, and fragrant. I keep the window down and don't mind about my hair.

—So how long have you been in Harden?

—Five days.

—How much have you seen of the town?

—Not much. Main Street . . .

—We call it First Street.

—The Safeway, the post office. And my walk today to the swimming pool.

—That's it? What've you been doing all that time?

—Unpacking. Moving in.

—And painting everything in sight white— He considers, drops the snideness.

—I guess there's not that much more to see.

—That's what Mummy said.

—What's your mother's name anyway?

—Margaret.

—So call her that.

—The family calls her Maggie.

—So call her Maggie.

His driving becomes purposeful. He whips around corners, down-gearing with the intent split-second revving of a Grand Prix racer. He heads east, to the edge of town where the houses end, and stops in front of a large square brick building.

In the last red rays of sun I make out a flight of concrete steps leading to

double glass-and-steel-frame doors, and three stories of steel-framed sash windows. Behind, baseball field with backstop, football field with bleachers. No tennis courts. To the side, a small parking lot. No trees. The efforts at grass—in front, on the playing field—are scruffy, tired-looking, pocked with patches of packed dirt. Beyond, desert takes over.

—This is the high school, our new one.

He waits for comment but all I can see is Wexler, my private girls' school back home, its dignified gray-and-white Georgian buildings and twenty-five acres of green playing fields surrounded by hilly forest. Not for the first time, I'm having serious misgivings about this adventure my father has brought us on. I say the only thing that strikes my mind.

—My god, what was the old high school like?

He puts the car in gear. —Where're you from, anyway?

—Boston.

—I figured it was some place East. From the funny way you talk.

—What's wrong with the way I talk?

—It's high and in the back of your nose, kind of tight and prissy-like. Like you have to say everything just right.

He's heading back toward the center of town, taking his time, steering by his wrist draped over the steering wheel.

—What year are you?

—Sophomore.

He whistles, with raised eyebrows. —I thought you were older.

I assess him. —What year are you?

—Senior— Proudly.

—Really?— Archly. I widen my eyes. —I thought you were younger.

He looks over, eyes me speculatively, then grins.

The street lights are furry against the blue night. Front doors are open. Figures move across bright living rooms, children play tag and wrestle on dark lawns, dogs bark. Casey slows down as we pass a dark hulking building set in a block of hard dirt enclosed by cyclone fence. Backstop, bicycle racks, a rectangle of blacktop with a basketball hoop at each end.

—The old high school. Washington. Once the only school in town. Then they built Jefferson Elementary.

He's slowly moved into the next block, another square of hard dirt enclosed by another cyclone fence, in the middle of which squats another dark building with another backstop and basketball court, but in addition, swings, monkey bars, jungle-gym, and merry-go-round. —This is where Denny goes.

—Who's Denny?

—My little sister. She's starting first grade. They moved the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades over to Washington when they built Lincoln.

I giggle.

—What's so funny?

—It just strikes me that way.

—What?

—The names of everything. Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln. The avenues are states. Dakota, Wyoming, Ohio, Montana. The streets are trees. Elm, Maple, Cherry, Oak.

—So what?

—It just sounds so, I don't know, like something out of Sinclair Lewis.

—What do they call the streets where you come from?

—Brookline. Commonwealth. Beacon.

—What's so great about that?

I shrug and look out the window. —Forget it, you wouldn't understand— He gives me a narrow look, I return it. —What time is it?

He tilts his watch to the dashboard light. —Nine thirty. Am I keeping you up?

—It's too dark, I can't see anything.

He jams the car into gear, slams his foot to the accelerator, and doesn't slow until we're half a block from my house. He glides to the curb and stops, looking straight ahead, car motor still running. Behind the shadeless windows, our white living room glares like a klieg-lit Hollywood set. Mummy and Daddy sit poised, reading in their chairs, ready for the cameras to start rolling. Casey makes no move, so I open my door myself and slide out.

He shifts in his seat, glances toward me. —What's Sinclair Lewis anyway?

—A man who writes books about provincial minds in provincial towns.

I slam the door and sashay up the walk without a backward look. Casey peels out, leaving behind rubber and smoke.

SCENE 4

She lies in the darkened room, listening to her family stir, start their morning rituals, hoping someone will make a move toward her that will give her motivation and direction, get her out of bed. Minutes pass. Resigned, frustrated, curious, she swings her feet to the floor, peeks down the hall, and tiptoes past the closed doors to the guest bedroom. Howie is in the guest bath, preparing to wet his