

II

The Inland Empire

My mother died soon after I was born, at the turn of the twentieth century. She'd been left to shift for herself, and I've always supposed she ventured west to California the way unfettered young people did at the time, with as much as she could carry in a carpet bag and the earnest expectation of something better just over the horizon. I don't know if she found it. She got as far as the groves and farmland between Riverside and San Bernardino, took a job as a schoolteacher, and met my father at a barn dance. After a decent interval of courtship, they settled down together on his family's stake, with the edge of the Pacific just out of sight beyond the hills to the west. I had a shelf of her old books above my bed—*The Scarlet Letter* and *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Moby Dick*, *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Red Badge of Courage*, and a book called *American Tales* which started with Ponce de León and progressed through Johnny Appleseed and Daniel Boone to Paul Bunyan and John Henry, and ended with Davy Crockett and Pecos Bill. I'd read all of them through at least twice before I was twelve—all but *Moby Dick*, and I've only ever heard one man brag he'd read that book to the end, but I got the story from a newspaper serial that I cut out and kept folded inside the cover. There were also a few old classroom references—an almanac, Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language*, and the *New Updated Continental Atlas of the United States*, copyright 1892, that plotted out Indian Territory in the space where Oklahoma had since come to be—and a Bible we never much troubled

ourselves with, though we were churchgoers out of habit. And that was how I knew her, from her books and her careful signature in black ink fading into brown on the flyleaves. She was buried in the fallow bit of field behind the house, where a row of headstones marked my father's parents and an uncle I never met, and my mother's started a new row just beyond a rail fence at the edge of the yard. We cleared away the tall grass often enough to keep it all respectable, but we didn't think much more about them otherwise.

My father didn't wait long to marry my stepmother. He was a practical man with a newborn in the care of a neighbor woman and a farm to run—peaches and almonds on a spread that reached deep past the orchards into dusty scrub, to the foothills of the blue Santa Anas lifting the horizon in a crooked line—a farm with an overseer and a half-dozen migrant hands from spring through harvest time, playing cards and telling lies around the stove in the bunkhouse. She was also on her own and they had grown up as nodding acquaintances, so after another decent interval of courtship, when she proved level-headed and agreeable, he proposed and she accepted. It was a sensible match, and the prospect must have looked good for a local girl: a young husband and a farm with chickens and a few cows and horses and a passable plot of untapped ranchland beyond. If she undertook to raise a child who wasn't hers, others would surely come in time, and she bore him three more children—but I was the only one to live past the cradle, so soon enough there were three new memorials in the field beside the house, my infant siblings in a single plot beside my mother. You could see them from the window over the kitchen sink, where a group of rough stones hauled in from the fields marked the grave, one for each but uninscribed since none had lived to christening. I think it was that circumstance, and that view—from morning as she went out to feed the chickens through sundown when beans were soaking

and dough had been set aside to rise in a covered bowl—that soured her. At least I can't picture her as a girl with her future ahead of her, the way I imagine my mother. In fact, I can't recall a genuinely happy word from that woman all the time she raised me. She had the feeling about her as if she had long since determined to make the best of a disappointment. Her given name was Marietta, though I never called her anything but ma'am.

But I was cared for well enough. She kept me clean and fed, and she wasn't unkind—she even took in mending for the hands when she noticed they needed it, and she kept a tidy home, which was a lot of work in those days. And while she didn't go out of her way to be critical, she didn't need to. She was efficient, without affection, and I grew up with the suspicion that I was a reminder of what was to blame for the silence at the table. "Get over here," she'd order, and plunge a cloth into the bucket under the kitchen spigot—only places closer to town had indoor plumbing in those days—and I'd get my face and hands scrubbed as she frowned down at me the way she'd scrub down a dog who'd rolled in fertilizer. She'd rinse out the cloth and hand it back to me, dripping. "Now wet down your hair and go comb it into place. And use the brush under your nails. How you get so *smudged* a day after a bath is a solemn mystery to me." My father was quiet and preoccupied, a man who measured things out in his mind, announced decisions and gave orders, but didn't much discuss his thoughts. He wasn't given to conversation. He expected not to be disturbed as he totaled up accounts or read the paper in the evening, and I learned to make myself inconspicuous around him. I suppose I could have had them all wrong, but I didn't get the chance—not with either of them—to learn better.

So I was tended to and not doted on, but that suited me well enough. Most afternoons I passed in reading, or hiding out in the hayloft. I had a favorite toy, a *kinetoscope* it was called: you held it up to your eye with a light behind you, squinting through an opening as a pasteboard strip tacked into a circle rotated through a series of still pictures. They seemed to melt into a single image that moved and changed, though if you stopped it from spinning you saw they weren't moving at all—only each one was slightly different from the one on either side. Sometimes I'd slip off to the back of the property, over a ridge where a stream cut through a line of tall grass and scrub trees and an ancient willow rooted where the current swelled into a pond before pinching off again, and I'd amuse myself with a magnifying glass, chasing tadpoles through the water with the hot point of focused light. I loved the sparkle of the water and the lens, and the way the dark blobs curved into view and back out of view as they darted across the circle. I was always on the lookout for a second, smaller lens to make a telescope like the one León had in the picture in my book, but I never got one. Still the far reach of the hills and the mountains above turned upside down when seen at arm's length through the polished glass, and I learned early that the edges of a lens could frame a prospect complete in itself if you knew where to focus it. I never got into much trouble, I suppose, but I was a solitary child and never much trouble to begin with.

That was in spring, when the migrants who followed field work up the coast came north, the farm would get noisier and it was easy to get away unnoticed. The almond trees would stir themselves in February and come into bud, and I was warned out of the orchards as the hands set up beehives among the rows. By the time the leaves were dark and the green husks had peeled back from the shells, summer was nearly over and honey

dripped from the boxed combs. By then the winds had begun to blow down from the mountains, trailing a veil of red dust from the Mojave and jostling the nuts from the trees. The peaches came in a step behind, their bitter smell hanging in the air until the wind could blow it away and the deep hot nights swelled and ripened the fruit. By the time the bees swarmed and clustered on the windfalls the fruit would be ready for harvest. The rest of the year I was in school for the first part of the day, and for as little formal education as I had, my parents were serious about study. I was turned out of bed and marched down the road to the schoolhouse every morning, then was sat down at the dinner table for homework weekday evenings as my father read or did the farm accounts and my stepmother readied the kitchen for the day after. "You're not cut out for farming," my father said to me once, less in judgement than as a simple point of fact. "But farmer or no, you'd best be able to read and figure as good as the next man."

"And God knows what'll happen to this place," my stepmother murmured from the kitchen, wiping a dinner plate and stacking it with the others on a shelf.

"We'll sell it and move," he said without looking up from his paper. "Retire, the way people in town do. My folks died working this farm, and I can certainly think of better ways to go." Did I look up and see her glance through the window as he said this? Maybe I'm making that up, but still—maybe she did. I was fourteen at the time, and that was the one ambition he'd ever voiced in my hearing, the only time I ever heard him talk about a life away from the farm. I kept my head down and listened like a scout. "You know Harlan asked me yesterday if I'd ever thought of selling. He wanted to know how much I thought the place would bring. I took it he was making a suggestion."

Harlan—Harlan Walter—was the overseer, and he lived in a room of his own at the end of the bunkhouse with a bed and a table and chair, and a pistol in a holster that he used now and again to scare away coyotes and turkey buzzards. He sometimes took it down from its hook and made a show of cleaning it in the evenings. He had a chest of drawers and a hearth with a grate, and even though he lived on the place and ate at the table with us for Sunday suppers and Wednesday evening dinners, he gave the impression he was restless with his lot. He poked into corners and pried under things around the farm, always looking out for a problem, which must have made him a good overseer in my father's eyes, and maybe that was also an advantage, but he had a mean sense of humor and the hands kept their distance. Now and again he'd try to get a rise out of me, and I learned not to take the bait. "That boy's a scholar," he'd say, pointing me out to one of them. "He's got a *fine* gentleman's hands," and he'd chuckle. This was true enough by his standards, since I was never much called on for heavy labor, but it wasn't a compliment. I didn't talk to him much.

My stepmother put down the towel. "What'd you tell him?" The question hung in the air for a moment and finally I couldn't help but look up.

My father let the paper fall forward onto his chest and they exchanged a look that said nothing at all to a fourteen-year-old with a Geometry book open in front of him. "I told him I'd never considered it," he said levelly. He shook the paper out again and went back to his reading.

She made a low sound deep in her throat. "Harlan Walter—buy this place." She picked up the cloth and turned back to sink. "With what money, I'd like to know." I looked back at him. Where we lived people traded things—swapped help or loaned out a piece of equipment or a pair of draft horses and a wagon. Wives came back from town with a sack

of sugar in August and the neighborly expectation that, during the fall canning, they'd loan out a measure of it and get it back as they needed to ask for eggs or buckwheat flour or spices. There wasn't much in anybody's house that everyone else didn't already have, more or less, so you never questioned when someone asked. The hands were paid in coin at the end of the season when the harvest had been sold and a whole day spent going from the bank to the stores in town to settle accounts, but paper currency was still a rare commodity. Money was something formal, something you gave to strangers or got from them according to the etiquette of a business transaction, and it wasn't often discussed between a husband and wife on a quiet evening after dinner.

"I don't know that I'd question it," my father mused. "Harlan's careful. He saves it up. Anyway, you can't blame a man for looking out ahead," and his eyes strayed over to me where I was sitting. "And Frank's not a farmer."

That much had always been plain. I just didn't take to it the way some of my schoolmates did. It wasn't that I didn't work around the place—we all did, morning into evening and not infrequently into darkness when the season demanded. But every passing year felt to me like a walk uphill, where the ground ahead was always level with my eyes and the crest never arrived—and I suppose that showed. Sometimes I'd climb the ridge that cut across the back of our property just above the stream and sit looking back at it all: the curving rows of the trees and the house and barn and bunkhouse, the paddock where the cows and horses stood around, and the plot behind the house. Then the long road that cut through it all, trailing off up the valley past other farms and out into the haze of the hills to the west. There wasn't—not then—a single palm tree in sight. It was a good view—every tree a separate sphere in its row, and every orchard plot bounded by a two-rut track

as the lines of trees curved and furrowed away like rumpled corduroy—ordered and purposeful, and if it gave me the feeling that I was at the heart of something grand and intentional (and I've thought of that often when I think back to the farm), it was still the uniform certainty of it all—the neat groves with every stationary tree, every squared plot, every farm the same, more or less, across the flat stretch we called the Inland Empire, all the way to the hills—well, I also had the growing impression that something new and different was waiting to be seen beyond those hills.

The world east of the mountains was at war—the Great War, as we were calling it even then—which was fought in places with foreign names the newspaper measured out in miles from ancient cities—but that wasn't much our concern. If a few local boys had lit out and enlisted, and if they wrote letters home that were carried around like charms and read aloud when people met, they were still in the States and we were all half the wide world away. Our real focus—my focus—was always to the west. Over the hills ahead was the coast where strangers were like us in most ways—but not so much alike that a single one of them, we told ourselves, was right then raking up windfall almonds or picking a peach from out of the leaves of a growing tree. They lived in cities bigger than Riverside or San Bernardino, in apartment blocks and rows of new-built bungalows with yards but no real land, and they worked in factories and offices. “Just imagine getting your food—all of it—from a *store*,” my stepmother was fond of saying. “Not just dry goods, but eggs—and onions. Once I met a woman in Riverside who'd never learned you had to dig for onions—she thought they grew on a tree! How did she even know what to *do* with them?” These strangers didn't see an unpaved road unless they wanted to, and frankly that had some

appeal in it. They were where, for all the comfort of the view from the ridge, I had an idea I was eventually headed, and I found the prospect as daunting as it was inviting.

At the root of it was that line of books above my bed. Once I learned to read, I took to schooling as only a few of us ever did. The schoolhouse itself was an old church, with tall clear windows of wavy glass that came to a point at the top—what I later learned was called *gothic*—and two big rooms. In one, a few serious-minded local girls kept themselves busy before marriage with tending to the younger children at the direction of the teacher. That was called the Lower School, which went up to about the sixth grade, judging by its graduated readers and the headings on the title pages of our mathematics books. The other room was smaller, behind a wall that divided up the building near its middle, judged from the outside. It was the Upper School, for us older ones who'd stayed on to finish. There was a desk at the head of us beside a podium, and a slate board on a stand, with the Periodic Table on the wall and maps and a globe and a few cases of books. We could hear the Lower School throughout the day: they read their grammar aloud until they memorized as much of it as would stick, just as we had done, and sometimes they sang songs and played number games. Or they gave recitations about foreign countries or great figures from history. But it was quieter and more solemn in the second room where the air still smelled of beeswax candles in the winter when the windows were closed. Our teacher was a serious, straw-haired man who wore a suit coat and a tie every day, though he had once been a farm boy himself. Now he had a limp from a harvester accident that had kept him out of the War, and that was enough to explain his general circumstances to my stepmother's satisfaction. "A woman wants a *whole* man," she pronounced, "so it's just as well he went off and got himself an education." He wore eyeglasses, we all surmised, from

too much reading. He'd teach us and look in on the younger students every so often to oversee the progress of the operation, and once in a while he'd lecture them himself. At the end of the school day he would meet with the older girls in quiet conspiracy around his desk, and he'd collect papers to check and make a list of things for them to do the next day—lessons with page numbers from their books written out—while we were left to read on our own for a while and the young ones had been sent out to the yard to mill about and wait for older siblings to walk them home. Our teacher had two rooms of his own at the back of the building where the pulpit used to be, behind a door that was always closed. His hands were soft like mine, but I can't for the life of me recall his name now.

It was nothing fancy, but for me—and here I was as different from my fellows as an almond from a peach—it was a place to enjoy, not to get away from, and year by year I let it catch me up until I found it had set me apart. Now and then, if I'd worked ahead, I got asked to help out with the younger children, especially when the boys in the Lower School (some of them had been held back a year or two), gave the girls a hard time, and I certainly caught fun about that. "Someone's gotta be the schoolmarm," Charlie Cotton teased me. He was my age and had no qualms about farming for a living. The group of us laughed—and I'd laughed with them, but they could laugh and I could take a joke. I was still the fellow to ask if chores had kept you out past sundown and a chapter went unread. I'd even read to some of them too, to the ones who never got the trick of it, and sometimes I spent the walk to school telling over again what I'd parsed out the night before. I learned early to be careful not to add things as I retold them, since that could get us all in a tangle if we had a composition to write and I'd imagined things my way and not exactly what the book said.

But I loved to be the one to frame it in my mind and see it all laid out as I told it. The trick was to picture it all as if it was shown through a lens, and not to stray outside that.

Most of it was the same education our parents had and no one much expected it to be otherwise, though we heard often enough that the world beyond the horizon was changing. One day as a Geography lesson ended—about the War and the differences it was making in the map of Europe—our teacher ducked into his room and didn't reappear until we'd put our books away on a shelf and were back in our seats. He held a book under one arm, and it was big enough to make an effort of closing the door behind him. He hoisted it up and laid it out on the podium where it hung over the edges by a few inches on either side. He then turned it around with a shove to face us. "I want to show you something," he said.

Standing behind it, he opened to a page with chromolithographs pasted in like ones you'd frame and hang on the parlor wall. "These are paintings by a Dutch painter, Vincent van Gogh," he said earnestly, "who lived in France and died about a quarter-century ago. See if you don't see something familiar in them." We stared in silence from our seats. He cleared his throat and corrected himself. "You can come up and see, but be sure your hands are clean. This is on special loan from the library in Riverside."

Riverside had a regular library, complete with a children's room donated by Andrew Carnegie himself, and a few families around had special library cards and went there when the mothers, particularly, were in town. They came back with novels for ladies and storybooks for children, and now and then a work of history for the men who liked to read over what they already knew. We older students sometimes ventured in, if a trip into town was in the offing and a composition demanded it, to consult the *Encyclopedia Britannica* in

the cool and sour-smelling Reference Room where we were forbidden to speak above a whisper—and from which we were usually removed after a few minutes by a soft-spoken, unsmiling woman whose whole job, it seemed, was to watch over us. Like every official building we knew, the library was constructed on the outside to look like an old Spanish mission, and we were told it had twenty thousand books, which was hard to imagine even when you saw it, and that made it something to talk about. That day it had one less. We crowded around the podium and stared at the pictures on either page as our teacher folded back a sheet of tissue paper that had been laid between them.

We were disappointed. One side had a picture of a blue sky with nothing but a spray of tree branches in flower against it, and the other had a picture of a pink book on a yellow table, with the same sort of branch sticking out of a glass jar set down in front of the book. Neither looked like much. Then Betsy Meyers, whose family lived just down the road from ours, shrugged and stepped away from in front of me, and I got a closer look. “Almonds,” I said, puzzled. “Those are almond branches?” A sigh of recognition ran through the class, and Betsy elbowed in to make sure.

“Why’d you want to paint that?” she asked. “It’s just a bunch of *almond* branches.” The Meyers had a telephone at their place, which was something unusual, and Betsy spent her afternoons, while the rest of us were busy at chores, listening to the party line. Her mother did it, too, dropping knowing comments and passing her personal judgements when others gathered after church. This raised a few eyebrows, but it was generally allowed that there was no point in remarking on it since anyone could pick up a telephone provided she paid to have one in her own home. Kinder consideration held that a widow might be lonely, but all the same it wasn’t considered neighborly. In the schoolyard Betsy

herself often held forth, gossiping about what she overheard. She was my age and bragged that she'd be teaching in the Lower School after graduation, but I didn't much believe her. She had to sound out the bigger words when she read aloud, and sometimes just came to a halt, waiting for our teacher to supply a particularly difficult term. She was a stocky red-headed girl, bossy like her mother, and had her own opinions. She was proud of that.

"Look," the teacher said, and he replaced the tissue paper and turned the page. It showed the same picture—the one of the branches alone, or very nearly like it—but this time against a background of bright red. Some of us gasped and a few others let out a laugh of surprise.

"But the sky's not red!"

"It's not pink, either!" one of the others yelled, poking a finger at the opposite page, under its tissue. Then someone ventured, "It is at sundown—or it can be—and sunrise."

"Think about it, and look closely," the teacher said seriously. "It doesn't have to be the sky at all. Artists make choices. What difference does that color make?"

Betsy turned away and went back to her seat. "What does it *make*? It's just a color, it doesn't make nothing." Another laugh from the group.

"Anything."

"It doesn't make *anything*." She tossed the words over her shoulder. "It makes *no difference*. That's all it *makes*." No one laughed at that. She was sassing him now, and we all recognized it, but he let it go.

"Are you sure?"

Then I spoke up. "It changes things. It changes the way you see the branches. And the flowers."

He smiled. “There. Do you see it? There’s a whole series of paintings here, one after another, all of almond branches in flower—something we all see every year—but the artist is trying out different ways of looking at them.”

Charlie Cotton’s interest was piqued. “Why’d he do that?”

Our teacher spread out his hands above the pictures in the book. “What do artists always do? They *see* things for us. Then they paint them so that we can see things differently.”

“What’s the point of that?” Charlie asked. “You either see it or you don’t.” The class was quiet now. There was something at stake here, something we knew we didn’t understand. In the Lower School, the younger children were leaving, tumbling down the front steps and into the yard. A child’s face appeared at a window.

“Is it really the same thing if you see it differently? Or is it something else *because* of the difference?”

“Does it make the almonds taste any different?” Betsy drawled from her seat and the class broke up in laughter. Our teacher was beat for the moment and he knew that, though he took it well enough. He smiled as he closed the book and we went back to our seats.

“And the Mona Lisa is only a rectangle of painted wood,” he sighed as he set the book on the corner of his desk. “I suppose you’ve got a point, or else it wouldn’t be funny. But just think about it, won’t you? I’ll have this here all week if you want to look at it.” Then he dismissed us for the day.

I stayed behind and waited for the others to leave. “I see what you mean,” I said as I tapped the cover of the book. “The way we see them. The colors change the other colors, right?”

He looked up, a spark in his eyes. “That’s part of it,” he said. “It’s never the same thing twice. Nothing ever is.”

“So that’s why he painted it twice.”

“More than twice—” he dragged the book over, opened it and buckled the pages, letting them fan open and then, with a soft snapping sound, letting them fall one by one. Pictures flashed by like the drawings in my kinoscope. “You see?” he said, pointing to the book. “Every time it’s a different thing—a different experience.”

I looked at them and I knew what he was getting at—and it was the same pattern of shapes in every picture, though each showed them differently and none of them were the same once you noticed. I thought of the kinoscope, and the nickelodeons in the arcade in town that showed photographic scenes on cards that flipped by, one by one, and of the artist working over each separate picture, convinced that he was doing something completely new each time. “I get it,” I said. “They’re all just as different as they are the same.”

He let the book close. “Wait a second,” he said—and then he did something I’d never expected: he stood and limped over to the back wall and opened the door to his room. “Come here. I want to show you something.”

I approached that open doorway as cautiously as a man in the dark, but he was already inside, pulling another book from the top of a chest of drawers and tilting it down against his torso as he opened it. “Look here,” he said, balancing the book on the edge of the chest and opening its wide cover. He tried to hold the book and move aside for me at the same time, then gave up. “Better yet,” he said as he stepped back and sat on the bed beneath the window. “Pull up a chair.” I did as I was told, and he laid the book across our

knees. I was still a little in awe of my circumstances—that door had always been closed, and no one much imagined what lay beyond it, though it turned out to be a simple room with a sink and a pump in the water closet behind—but he took no notice. “This is another painter, a Frenchman named Claude Monet.” He pronounced ‘Claude’ like *cloud* and left off the letter at the end of the last name. “He’s still alive.” He pointed out a photograph of a man with a beard like Santa Claus standing in a garden, then turned the pages for both of us, waiting a moment each time, and revealing, over and over, a scene so familiar that I had to say it.

“Haystacks. Just a couple of haystacks.” I sounded stupid, I thought, and I didn’t want to. Once I caught on, I’d been irritated with Betsy, with the tone she used, since he was sincere, after all, and was excited to show us all something new.

“But at different times of the day, so they’re in different light. See?” He turned back a few pages and we went through the first few pictures again. “Here’s sunrise. And the middle of the morning. And now noon—see the shadows disappear? The sun’s right overhead.” And he was right. I knew the time of day like any farmer and was used to knowing where the sun was, overhead: mornings it broke over the Santa Anas and long shadows pooled among the hills as it rose. In the evening, even after we couldn’t see it any longer, the mountains opposite lit up orange and yellow against the sky as a few stars came out. At the moment it was clear and bright behind us through the tall window over his bed, and cast light across the book in our laps.

“So he must have set up and painted it all day long,” I ventured.

“This and other things—a grove of birches, and even the front of a cathedral, near where they’ve been fighting, but not then—not at that time.”

Then it struck me, just as before. “And they’re all different. Every time.”

“Every time,” he said and smiled.

“So why does the color change? This one,” I took a page and pointed to a haystack. “It’s a different color from that one.” I pointed to another. “Why’s that? It’s the same color all day long, right?”

He broke into a grin. You know your physics, right? Remember optics?” He sat back and looked at me. “Where do colors come from?”

I combed my memory of our science lessons and remembered him using a glass of water held up to a window to cast a rainbow across a blank page laid out on a desk, though I had only stared at it for a while without understanding. Now I did. “From light? Is that right?”

“Colors come from light—and light *is* color, all of them, all together. Remember? But if you change the light—”

“The color changes.” I whispered it, but the thought filled up the room, which was warm and close and smelled of shaving soap and sun on the woolen bedspread. I thought of those mountains in the evening, of their colors against the darkening sky. “And light changes during the day, right, so you can tell this one—” and I pointed to a haystack painted in ashy browns darkening toward its top, but circled around with scarlet, “it’s sunset here, and this one—” another, a few fumbled pages earlier, with yellow streaks and an orangey base, and with cold blue shadow reaching out beside it, “is morning.”

He sat up and took a hard look at me, squinting through his glasses. Their edges sparkled in rainbows of their own. “You’re a bright young man, Frank,” he said. “There’s no telling what you can do if you use your head.” He stood up, taking the book with him.

“I’ll leave this one out, too, if you like. You can look at it when you’ve got your work done.”

And he took hold of the back of the chair I was in, and I knew that it was time for me to leave.

So I’d stayed on past eighth grade, when most of my schoolmates had judged themselves learned enough for normal purposes and started working full-time back home. And I was still a student when some of them, in the course things, had even paired off for good. It wasn’t unheard of at that time to turn sixteen a month or two before your wedding day and bring your girl back home to live with your parents in bashful silence. We farm kids either grew up fast or not very fast at all, and I stayed in school and stuck it out all the way to the end. I even took on some of the teaching when it was needed, after our teacher left in a year or two and a new one arrived, an uncertain young woman who’d come down from San Francisco—“I suppose there’s a story there,” my stepmother had tutted to herself—and I sat for the state examinations with six or eight others at the end of twelfth grade and graduated in the spring after I turned eighteen. I was a farmer’s only child as my father had been, so I was yoked to the farm in a way I couldn’t see a path around. And no one else saw things much differently.

By then I was a marked man: the friends I’d grown up with could talk crops and cattle with a sense of ownership I couldn’t command, and now and again Charlie might come by and strike up a conversation with me and my father or with Harlan, and after a few minutes I’d be on the outside, knowing enough to follow but not enough to have an opinion of my own. I worked around the place as I always had, and occupied myself tending the animals, and my father would put me up to directing Harlan and the hands at something, since I was his son and I was old enough. Harlan didn’t like that. He’d raise an eyebrow

when it was announced over Sunday dinner that I'd oversee something particular, and he looked away and shrugged when I told him to do something, never saying yes exactly. He knew more than me, and I knew that, too—but that wasn't our situation. What needed doing got done, but he made it clear who he was working for. And I suppose I could have gone on for years as I was, gradually taking over the place and letting it grind me into bitter dust, or maybe even making a go of it. But the chance of all that came to an end soon enough, when my stepmother took sick with the Spanish Influenza.



Thinking all this over, I don't mean to make us out for a bunch of hayseeds, though that wasn't so far off the mark in certain ways. We were children, but we knew the territory around and over the hills as far as Hollywoodland—which is what we came to call it once a developer had put that name up on Mount Lee in white letters thirty feet high—and we knew Riverside and San Bernardino, with their old baroque stone courthouses and the Old Mission Hotel where no less a celebrity than Mary Miles Minter once came to stay for a weekend, along with her mother and sister and her director, William Desmond Taylor, all kicking up a cloud of excitement around them. People in town sometimes ate dinner at the restaurant there, just to ogle the clientele, sometimes even in the middle of the week. "A restaurant," my stepmother had pronounced, "is where you go when you can't cook your own food for yourself." A few of us went along on trips as far as Los Angeles now and again, and came back with descriptions of escalators and the yellow electric streetcars—things we'd only seen in pictures, though the Union-Pacific line reached Riverside by the time I

turned fourteen—and some of the more advanced young couples had gone to the city for the day, just for the experience. By then there was nothing much new about the arcades in town where you could peer into a nickelodeon for a penny and watch people chase each other and get into fights. (One of them had been rumored to show a woman in her underclothes, but we gave up trying to find which one.) A new theater called the Fox had gone up in Riverside, just to show the flickers, and it was a fine Saturday afternoon, if nothing needed doing at the farm, to give a woman in a glass booth a dime for yourself and a friend and let an usher in a uniform with brass buttons lead you to your seat. You'd spend the next few hours in the cool, vaulted darkness of the place, where a screen stretched out level with the balcony lit up and showed first a newsreel and then a serial, and then a whole feature like a play on a stage. Come to think of it, that's where I first met up with Little Lulu, a child who starred in a serial and got into a lot of trouble when left to her own devices, but always somehow managed to outwit the adults around her and get her way in the end. That's about how it played out for her in real life, too, and she's now got her own room a few doors down the hallway, but that's a long time ago and I'm already getting ahead of myself. After the picture someone would come out and talk, and maybe take up a collection for a charitable cause, or announce a tent revival the following week, which was a way to keep an uneasy truce between the movies and the local churches. We all saw Wilson campaign against Roosevelt and Taft—I liked the look of the old Bull Moose, myself, with his moustache and his horse teeth, his thick fist soundlessly thumping away on the podium—and when Wilson got himself elected we saw that in a newsreel too, as he took his oath of office in a top hat and tailcoat, his hand on the Bible.

But it was the features we talked most about, since they struck us as epic, important things. *Birth of a Nation* came and stayed for a whole couple of weeks, and I ached to go see it, but it had called out such a fuss from the pulpits and the papers, with a lot of talk about the colored problem and a few strong words from the veteran survivors among us, that my parents thought the better of it. “A waste of good money,” my stepmother called it. “It isn’t as if you can’t get it—and get it better—from the book.” Sometimes that was true, but often enough it just wasn’t. *Birth of a Nation*, directed by a man named D. W. Griffith, who wore riding pants and a wide-brimmed hat like a prosperous rancher, had come from a book called *The Klansman*, and when the local library refused to loan out that book, some thought it wasn’t quite right. I felt as if I was missing out, so I asked our teacher if she might have read it. She said no, but she said it in a way that kept me from asking any more. But before too much longer, Mr. Griffith had made another big movie—this one against the War, he let on—and it was ballyhooed all over and about that it was the most expensive movie ever made. Betsy Meyers got it from a magazine that it had cost a whole two million dollars, but we couldn’t make out a number that big when a local farm might sell for eight thousand and the farmer walk away feeling like Hearst. The picture was called *Intolerance*, and it sure looked expensive, with Babylon the Great up on the screen in all its sinful pagan glory. (That alone had cost a quarter-million, Betsy told us breathlessly.) Some of it was set in France, both in the present and back in the Renaissance—a word we’d only lately learned in school, along with a lot of talk about Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci, who’d drawn a naked man in the middle of a Geometry proof to prove a point about proportion—a picture some of the girls looked at dumbstruck while we boys smirked—and it ended in the trenches themselves when a whole choir of angels and saints came down to put a stop

to things before they went too far. “Makes you wonder how much *that* cost them,” I cracked wise in the dark, and the dark hissed back at me.

But *Intolerance* wasn't to be tolerated much longer, and we were all mustered to stand up at the end of it and sing *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, with the words printed on sheets the ushers handed out. Afterwards, we watched a newsreel on a whole regiment made up of negro soldiers—something we hadn't even considered at the time, though trains full of volunteers stopped off in Riverside every afternoon on their way east. We came home late for supper and retold over the table the things we'd seen, and not always to general approval.

“I've got a gun if any of them Huns start up something around here,” Harlan reminded us that Sunday, after I'd recounted the experience.

“We all know you've got it, Harlan,” my father said, unimpressed. “I've got one, too—and what man doesn't? Frank's got one, even if he doesn't find much occasion to use it. They're for shooting coyotes when we need. Or turkey-buzzards when you need the shotgun. And that's about all the ordinance I want to hear around this place.” So the order was given, and Harlan went back to pushing his potatoes around with his fork.

My stepmother couldn't resist the chance. “You could just join up yourself, if you feel so strongly about it,” she smiled.

Harlan looked across the table at me. “What, and deny Frank his spot in line?”

My father put down his fork. “Frank's seventeen, and he's here with us where I want him. The Karners—now there's a pack of Huns for you, Harlan, and they run a good farm, too—they lost their boy, and you were there at the funeral, so I'd bet you remember it. I won't have that.” He went back to eating. The Karner boy had lit out and signed up early.

He'd been killed in action almost immediately and was shipped home with a package of his belongings that contained a medal pinned belatedly to his uniform jacket. His younger brother was a few years behind me in school, and we'd all gone to the funeral where there'd been a lot of loud comment about noble sacrifice, and some hushed talk of what a waste it was for a fight that wasn't ours to begin with in the first place.

"Well, someone's got to help out—run a good farm." Harlan had sat back and glanced at me. My father met his eye but didn't say anything.

My stepmother made a noise low in her throat. "And you also have ambitions in that direction, if I understand rightly." She said it as if it were something laudable, as if she were complimenting a beau on his future plans. "I suppose you find the prospect encouraging."

Harlan hadn't taken his eyes off my father. "The offer still stands," he said quietly. "It's open as long as—"

"I believe we've already discussed it."

"There," my stepmother said. "Now Frank, tell us about that colored regiment—did they actually give them guns and all, and send them out to fight? I'm not sure that doesn't sound dangerous." And that turned the conversation aside.

Hollywoodland was just over the hills to the west—a place where men were building whole empty neighborhoods of houses (developments they were called, like unexpected adventures in a flicker) and theater people were coming from the east to live there and make movies. They first set up on vacant lots, to take advantage of the sunshine, but soon enough built whole factories called studios, like the places artists worked. The people were called movies, too, after the things they made, and they had a bad reputation in person, but drugstores and newspaper stands—and even the peddler who came by once a month with

magazines on subscription—already carried some of the monthlies devoted to their activities: real periodicals with glossy pictures of women smiling and distractedly fondling a string of pearls in long-fingered, manicured hands, or smooth-cheeked men in starched shirts and broad-brimmed hats. They all looked as if they smelled like *eau de cologne*.

The movie people even came by, now and then. They'd trundle through the farmland in a line of motor cars loaded up with canvas-covered bundles, everyone dressed up like Sunday morning with the women in picture-hats, and sometimes they'd ask for permission to camp out for a few days on a promising patch of ground at the edge of the hills. We'd watch them from a distance when we could get away. They'd have men in snap-brim hats and shirtsleeves diligently cranking cameras they'd set up, while others would dress in costumes out of history books and play out scenes before them. We'd watch until we'd got the gist of what they were up to—they stopped and started a lot, which made it all hard to follow and eventually bored us—then we'd walk back home, debating seriously among ourselves what we'd just seen and what the story was. You could sometimes recognize a famous tale out of a book if you'd read it, but that was only me most of the time, and I learned not to brag about that—there were penalties, after all, for getting too far above yourself. Once at the Fox we were amazed to see a stretch of local farmland we knew from a few trees and a shed beside a creek pop up behind the actors in the serial on a Saturday afternoon, and there was nothing else but to marvel about it for all the following week. The ones who'd seen it made it out to be like something they'd never seen before, and those of us who hadn't seen it on screen nursed a vague sense of deprivation. We could have gone out anytime to stare at that shed and those trees, but that never occurred to us. It was something new and different when we saw it in the pictures.

The pictures even made their presence known, before too long, in the schoolhouse. Betsy Meyers brought in a few pages of magazine photographs she'd cut out for herself and showed them around. They featured young women who hadn't yet cut their hair short, as we heard talk they were doing—and having it done in real men's barbershops, too—but looked back at us knowingly. They were got up as all sorts of characters, from Marie Antoinette to one girl dressed as a tramp and holding—but not smoking—a cigar, which was something else we'd never seen a woman do. They were real people who ate their breakfast like the rest of us, we understood, but in some more important way. Betsy's clippings got passed around among her friends, and caused a little stir in the shade of a tree in the schoolyard, and all the girls had a remark to make, some shocked, some wise. She tacked them up under the lid of her desk and stared at them dreamily now and again, until the teacher caught her and took them away.

Betsy wasn't all that bright at school, but she was growing up worldly. There was a lot of talk at the time about the New Woman, as if someone had discovered some exotic species of female—a creature who could shift for herself and make her way on her own. Not everyone believed Betsy when she claimed on a Monday to have spent the whole weekend in San Bernardino, that she and her older sister, who worked as a secretary for a real estate broker in town and lived all by herself in a rooming house for teachers and other single women, had gone out for dinner and sat through a double-feature show all by themselves unchaperoned. She told us how her sister, grown up now but still young enough for some of us to remember, had handled ordering and tipping the waiter. "He did everything she told him to—he had to!"—and how the theater usher had winked at her just like he knew her.

“Did he do everything *you* wanted, too?” drawled Charlie Cotton, feigning disinterest, but another joined in before she could answer.

“Hey. Your sister—has she made up her mind who she’s voting for?” and we all thought that was a great joke, but Betsy waved him off like a woman of the world. (That wouldn’t be a joke for long, though we didn’t know that.) A few of the girls leaned in close and asked her what it was like to see the pictures at night. It cost a whole quarter for the two of them to get in, she bragged, and a couple down in front had amused themselves with kissing each other the whole time. Her sister had a regular fellow she called her boyfriend—a word our parents never used—and he had a car and he’d take her out for ice cream and a picture show in the evenings. Sometimes even in the middle of the week. Once, Betsy said, lowering her voice, he’d gone so far as to offer her sister a drink from a flask he carried with him. We hadn’t grown up in a dry county and it wouldn’t have mattered much if we had—we weren’t innocents, and more than a few farms back then operated a still, either out of sight in a toolshed or sometimes right in the barn, and we fairly considered it a property owner’s right. My stepmother was occasionally vexed with keeping the hands sober, though and now and again a few would have to be sent off if they’d got too loud or made mischief. But it wasn’t the way a gentleman ought to treat a girl, we considered after some deliberation, no matter what you might have seen on the screen at a movie house.

That was in the late summer of 1918, just after the picking was done and the Santa Ana winds had blown themselves out once they’d warmed the nights and ripened the fruit and sprinkled the farm with red dust from the Mojave. The dust got in through the cracks in the windows and showed our fingerprints on the sills and our footprints just inside the

thresholds. It rattled the windows and sighed through the pent-up air in the room, making a plate of hot food at supper a sweaty chore with a napkin in hand to dab at your face while you ate, and it worked on a man's nerves so that Harlan took his meals for a week in his room in the bunkhouse. The barn lost the sweet smell of the new-baled hay we'd loaded into the lofts, and the animals chafed at their confinement through the night as currents of wind threaded through the walls. You had to watch yourself if you crossed too close behind the horses, since they startled more easily and sometimes took to kicking. One of the hands spat tobacco into a stall, and he took a full kick that left a shoe-print in the skin of his chest, and he was laid up for a week with a broken collarbone. My stepmother muttered about the expense of keeping on a worker who couldn't do much work, but my father reasoned it was our horse that had done it, so we owed him. He hung around the place for a week like a ghost as the winds blew themselves out, doing what he could but feeling useless while Harlan taunted him about the bandage around his chest and kept after him to keep busy. Then, the morning after payday, he was gone, slipping away in the night more out of shame, we considered, than anything else. I felt for him, though my stepmother said more than once that it was the easiest week's work she'd ever seen a man do outside of an office at the bank.

Throughout the winds she had all but finished the yearly canning, with half a bushel of peaches yet to go, now growing soft and spotty in a basket on the kitchen floor. The week previous my father had hauled the harvest into town at the head of a train of wagons loaned around among the neighbors all through the week before, and come back with loads of hay, and the last of the hands had moved on from the bunk house, following the growing season north and west, to places we'd never gone. Harlan even took down his gun and gave

it a good cleaning, as if to set it aside for a while. The County Fair had come and gone, though I don't remember it that year, and it should have been time for barn dances in the cooling evening air, or indolent potluck suppers in the churchyard after Sunday service, with the smaller children chasing each other among the headstones, or a demonstration of elocution and public speaking in the evening at the end of a school week. But I was out of school and I missed it, too. The farm had a deserted feeling to it after all the activity, and the chickens fussing in the yard were the loudest noises you could hear on a still clear morning.

Then the temperature dropped thirty degrees one night and my stepmother came home from a trip into town, sweating like she'd run the distance, and took to her bed early. The next day she had trouble catching her breath but made an effort to get the canning done, dropping a pile of peaches into hot water to peel them and mixing up a syrup to boil on the stove, but it was hot work in the kitchen with the stove and the steam, and she finally turned away and stood swaying for a moment, one hand on the edge of the sink. My father got up from the table where he'd had an account book out and was totaling figures from the harvest, and it looked as if he was about to ask her something, but she just waved the question away and stalked past him to the bedroom. Inside the doorway she looked back again and gave him a long, searching look before she shook her head and closed door behind her.

I got sent for the doctor and brought him back in the trap, and he prescribed aspirin, which he left behind in a large bottle in the kitchen. The heat rose steadily throughout the day, but the windows in the sickroom stayed closed as the patient took a chill and shivered under a quilt, gulping down aspirin every two hours. That evening a few neighbor women

caught word and set up a watch around her bed. They took turns tending to her and finishing off canning the peaches, but it was only for the one night, since the next morning her face had taken on a dark cast and her lips turned blue. We knew what was coming—a few cases of the Influenza had cropped up during the harvest, when we were too rushed to take much notice of the accounts in the papers—and we knew there wasn't much for it but to see it out. It's hard to imagine it now, but penicillin was another twenty years in the future. Marietta Potter could birth a breach calf, and do it with both heifer and young none the worse for it, but now she lay staring at the ceiling, panting under the coverlet, and before long she started whispering to herself as if we weren't there. The next afternoon my father sent me into town again for the doctor, but she was gone before we got back.

By then a few neighbor men had looked in to lend a hand where they could, and the women had doubled themselves and divided into a group that washed and laid her out with with a rubber sheet underneath her in the bed and her hands folded together on the coverlet, her hair tied up in a ribbon on her shoulder, while others killed a few chickens, plucked and dressed them, and rolled out dough for dumplings and pies they made with the very last of the years' fruit. They stuffed almonds into pitted dates and rolled them in sugar, and laid a white cloth out on the kitchen table, and sent for their husbands to haul ice for the icebox and summon the mortician who arrived with a casket that he tactfully unloaded in the barn before he came inside. This was all done with a stoic quiet and concentration that had been honed into a ritual over the years. The epidemic had been kind to us, locally, but we'd caught sight of cloth masks in town and a few people had even taken to wearing them to church or when strangers were around. That looked strange to us, since the summer had been mild, though my father read the news in the paper and

ordered the hands not to leave the property in the week before the harvest, which seemed reasonable enough at the time. None of the neighbors who came by were masked, but some had already been sick in the spring, when it wasn't yet considered particularly dangerous, and we didn't feel unduly concerned as they set about preparing for the funeral.

My father sat through all of this in the parlor, answering questions when he was asked but otherwise not volunteering to say or do much, taking something to eat when it was offered and handing back the dish when he was asked, and he sat the whole night there, even after I'd gone up to bed, with somebody always near to hand but otherwise not saying much. Someone had lit a candle by the bedside, and it was the only light in the place when I got up the next morning and washed and dressed in the dark, and came down to find the hearse pulling into the yard and someone outside the kitchen window feeding the chickens near where a grave had been dug beside the others. I could hear a few hushed voices from the yard as the windows caught first light. My father roused at the sight of me, and he washed and dressed in my room upstairs as I took up the watch in the parlor. One of the women came through with the bedside candle snuffed out, trailing a plume of smoke that rose through the still air, and that was how the day began. And that was the last night for a long while that I slept in my childhood home.



One funeral is much like another. The body would have been lifted from the bed and the linens changed while the hearse was loaded, and I recall my father modestly leaving the parlor to wait outside as the coffin was brought in. He stood watching from the porch as I led out the horse and hitched it to the trap, then handed me the reins. "You drive today," he told me, and so I did. The hearse led the way to the church with my father and me following just after, and we would have arrived as the tolling started, with nearly everyone around just behind us as the bell rang once for every year of her life, which was the custom. I don't know how many times that was, since a practical-minded woman stopped counting her birthdays after marriage and only took it up again, with some degree of accuracy, if she reached a great old age. We would sing a hymn or two, hear a eulogy full of fine words and conventions from the pastor, recite the service together, sing another hymn, then follow the hearse back home. That was the order the day, though I don't remember it much, since everything after looms so large that it forces out what came before. Some families, the longest-settled in the district or those who had no one already in a plot on the property, would have finished the service in the churchyard or at the municipal cemetery, but we took my stepmother home to lie in a grave dug beside her three lost children, in the row my mother had inaugurated in the field behind the house. And that's where she is today, lowered there after a few more pastoral words, and next to my father who was to join her soon, and then there's one more after that. That completes the family plot.

When I recall my father on that day, except for the way we parted company, it was that he resumed the seat he had occupied overnight in the parlor and didn't move much from it. By the time we got back from the service, the house was full again, as the ladies who had known my stepmother least, or had no stomach for funerals as some folks just

don't, had skipped the service to render their attentions to the wake. They had started to arrive while we were still getting ready to leave, some wearing cloth masks against infection—this was a plague-house now, after all—and most with food they brought over, which seemed incongruous with their masks, but a wake was a wake, and they had set about boiling those chickens and dropping yesterday's dough into the broth for dumplings, and putting out the pies that had cooled overnight and the stuffed dates they'd made. Behind the house a laundry kettle was boiling with the deathbed sheets in it, and they'd be hung out to dry before nightfall. Harlan had roused out the hands he could find nearby to turn up for a meal and a morning away from work, for a few words of sympathy about the woman who had darned their socks and sewed on buttons and once or twice maybe sent them to bed at the end of an evening's carouse to sleep it off and wake up sober and aching the next morning. They came into the parlor like timid children, said their piece and ate together out back before they dispersed into the still heat of the afternoon. I suppose that everyone we knew, and probably a few we didn't, was there. On the whole, though, there was nothing unusual about it—at least until the movie people arrived.

I'd had my back patted and my hand wrung thoroughly enough by then, so I'd left my father in the parlor, where a few younger widows seemed bent on making an impression, and stepped out onto the front porch. Betsy Meyers and her mother, who had walked over from down the road, were just coming up the drive. Victoria Meyers, her hair as bright beneath her hat as her daughter's, was a stout woman crammed into a corset, making a show of herself by keeping the sun off with a parasol. The effort of the walk, got up as she was, was starting to tell, as Betsy trailed behind hatless and sullen in full sunlight, a cloth mask in one hand. Her breath laboring and her eyes fixed ahead, Mrs. Meyers

stalked straight through a group of neighbors in the yard, parting them like a heifer coming through of a hayfield. She lowered the parasol as she reached the shade of the porch, the color high in her cheeks.

“You poor boy!” she said loudly, by way of announcing her arrival to the few of us outside, though I was sure she knew she’d be heard in the house as well. “Twice an orphan!” That thought was new to me, since I had never known my mother. Behind her Betsy trudged to a halt and nodded weakly, scratched herself under her bust and looked away. Her mother had got her up in a corset too, I guessed—something a farming woman at the time didn’t wear but for an occasion—and I’d find out later I was right. “You poor boy!” the mother said a second time, awkwardly leveraging her constricted bulk up the step and onto the porch. She took out a lace handkerchief and dabbed at her orange hairline, and I was reminded of my stepmother spending a Sunday afternoon convincing herself that she dyed it—“Even color all over. Not a single gray hair at her age. Unnatural.”

“Thank you for coming.”

She tutted to herself, tucked the handkerchief away, wedged the parasol under one arm and deliberately took both of my hands in her own. She’d put on lace gloves for the occasion, of the kind the ladies used to knit up, then sew the lace together to a pattern before working designs into the backs and at the wrists. Her hands were perspiring and they felt like a damp ball of tangled string in mine. “Two mothers,” she said a little inaccurately, as if she’d given it some thought, and she probably had—she was the sort of person who entered enthusiastically into the work of mourning. “Two mothers! You’ve lost your mother twice!”

She stood for an anxious moment, her eyes searching mine. "Twice!" she said again. That seemed to be her theme for the day as far as I went, but I looked back at her blankly. She wasn't really expecting conversation, and I had run out of polite ways to accept sympathy by then. My stepmother and I had always had a relationship forged more from obligation than affection, and while I would find myself missing her, and was sorry to see her go—and genuinely enough, since my father was a widower twice over now and she had been relatively young and they were well-suited to each other—neither of us had ever been given to expressions of deep emotion, but also because I realized that a demand was being made on my me, as if Mrs. Meyers expected a show of grief as a complement to her words, and I refused to play humor her. We were silent for a moment, and I heard a dog barking in the distance. Then I nodded toward the door and let her hands fall from mine.

"Father's just inside," I said, "in the parlor." I caught Betsy's eye over her mother's shoulder. She was staring at me as if she wanted to say something, then shrugged and rolled her eyes, and walked past us. She stepped back as she opened the screen door. An automobile horn sounded out on the road and Victoria, unsatisfied, turned her attention from me. She placed one high-buttoned foot on the threshold and called out to my father just a few feet away. "Leonard Potter! You dear man! Such a loss! *Such* a loss!" Betsy drifted into the house behind her, pulled into her mother's wake as her voice carried outside. "I've just spoken to Frank here and that boy is absolutely overcome with grief!" The screen door slammed and everything was hot and still for a moment. I took a deep breath. After the sudden chill of the last few days, it was now unseasonably warm, and the day had grown more taxing because of it. Then, as if nothing could be allowed to remain the same ever again, the movie people made their entrance.

Long before I was born, my grandfather had planted a row of crabapples along the road at the far end of the yard. They were just for decoration, but they kept the wider world at a distance, or at least from view of the house. They'd dropped most of their fruit with the harvest, not that we'd ever done much but wage childhood battles with them before they were raked up in the fall. Now a line of motor cars could be seen through the dark leaves, coming to a stop along the road one by one, as a single car in the lead edged down the drive. It was a car like I'd never seen, colored like cream at the top of the pail, and sparkling with chrome, long enough for three rows of seats ahead of its folded-back convertible top. It flickered and glowed like a second sun as it pulled into view in the afternoon light, and it was piled along its terraced stretch with cases and boxes and trunks. When it came to a stop, just inside the flat dirt of the yard, I could see a line of square, varnished wooden boxes secured in its loaded rumble seat, with bundles of furled wooden legs piled in beside them and tied down as well. These were cameras, but I didn't know it at the time. The car was full of people—eight, I counted at a glance—with ladies in white gloves and veils tied over picture hats in the last and highest seat, and man in a uniform like the ones on the ushers at the Fox sitting behind the wheel. He put the car into neutral as if coasted to a halt, then pulled the brake and it settled back a fraction in its tracks as a man riding in the seat beside him got out and looked around the yard uncomprehendingly, as if he'd just stepped down from the moon.

Mrs. Meyers was already back at the door, staring in disbelief. "Lord!" she exclaimed through the darkened screen.

The man took a second to size things up as the car door slammed shut. He looked decisive, but also unsettled at what he'd found. "I'm very sorry—" he began as he strode

toward the group between us, but they just stepped back and waved him on, toward me.

“Oh, I see. Well. Very sorry.” Maybe even he, a stranger, could see it was a wake, or else he supposed as much from the look of the us as he crossed the yard in a nervous bound.

“Sorry to intrude,” he said to me, taking off his hat earnestly. “Terribly sorry.”

I took the hand he held out: his grip was firm but it wasn't unlike like my own—softer even. He'd been driven in from the city, maybe from miles beyond, but certainly from somewhere he'd never had to hay a barn for the winter. Or dig a grave. He had a gold chain looped across his vest and a ring I could feel, cool and sharp-edged, on his little finger. His shoes were sharp, too—two-toned and pointed at the toes, and matched to his suit which was pale and bright like the car and pressed to a near-shine along the seams. He was about my father's age I guessed, with a hard jaw and a neat moustache, and he wore a pair of dark glasses that hid his eyes. His hair was brilliantined and he gave off a scent like lilacs. He looked like no man I had ever met before.

For a moment we just stood facing each other. Maybe it was the apparition of the car, or maybe it was his energetic confidence, but I was at a loss for words. A few people edged out of the parlor and onto the porch to take in the scene. For a crazy second, I thought the people in the car, and those stopped at the far side of the yard, had come for the wake, as if my stepmother had conducted some glamorous, hidden life far from the farm, slipping away when we hadn't noticed to meet up among these strange and elegant people near the edge of the ocean. Or as if they had arrived here to take us all away now that our lives had definitively changed, as if we were done with this existence and were somehow needed elsewhere. “Well, thank you.” It was about all I could manage. “Much appreciated.”

A woman in the back seat opened her door and stepped down from the car, pulling her scarf away from her feathered hat and uncovering her face. Her lips and cheeks were painted a deep glowing red and her eyes, behind eyelashes I could make out from the front porch, were outlined in dark blue. Her eyelids were painted blue, too, but a lighter shade, almost iridescent. A spray of long bright feathers at the side of her head sprang free from her scarf and arched out behind her, swaying in the hot breeze as she stretched the cloth out in front of her. She looked around at us in startled wonder. Her hair, but for a few dark curls across her forehead, was covered completely by her hat, and her neck, long and powdered white, craned up from the shoulders of a duster coat that flapped open at the collar as she cast the scarf over her head and drew it up tight behind her. Her shoes were pointed as well, and she had lit gracefully in the dust of the yard on thin heels like some strange exotic bird. "Cyril!" she exclaimed to the man in amazement. "This is a funeral they're having—we've interrupted—" and here her voice fell musically, balefully, "—we've interrupted a *wake*."

My father appeared in the doorway. He tilted his head to one side as he took in the scene, then stepped out, onto the porch. He approached us as he took in the woman pinching the ends of her scarf. He smiled and nodded respectfully as he addressed the woman. "You're welcome," he said, and held out his hand. "You couldn't have known, of course."

The sharp man in the vest and chain—Cyril, she had called him—turned from me and took my father's hand in both of his own. "I'm so very, - *very* sorry to intrude—" he said emphatically.

"Most welcome," my father said, smiling at the sparkling car full of stunned onlookers. "Are you lost? We have all sorts of food inside if you're hungry." It wouldn't have been unusual, on a less eventful day, to offer hospitality to wanderers pulled in off the road—this was the country still, where people could stray for miles along some stretches and not see a house, and once in a while a salesman new to his route or a couple out for a drive would pull up in exasperation, unsure of just how close they were to the landmarks they'd passed on the way out. But I looked on in amazement. I had never seen my father in this temper, never so genial or more self-assured. "Come sit down with us, if you like. It's no trouble."

The woman stepped forward holding her hands out helplessly. She had rings on both of them and they sparkled in the sunlight. "We never imagined! We're all so sorry for—sorry for your loss. And... and—" she spread her long arms wide and shook her head forlornly as if to apologize for her presence—for all of them, there, in that moment.

"Movie people!" Victoria Meyers had pushed her way out onto the porch. We all turned back to look at her, rooted to the spot in surprise. *"Movies!"* Somewhere in the house behind her, another woman echoed softly, "Movie people. For heaven's sake."

"Well," the sharp man swallowed and recovered himself, "we're deeply sorry to have intruded. And we'll be on our way. We had only stopped off because we had hoped to ask if—" then he stopped as if he hadn't wanted to continue.

"We were going to ask if we could shoot on your property," the woman finished for him in a tone of deep disappointment. She looked back at the car and a few of its passengers nodded in sympathetic agreement, as if to say that they, too, were sorry and had meant no harm. She sounded as if that were impossible under the circumstances.

There was a long pause. Victoria Meyers fixed them all with a disapproving stare and cleared her throat. Then my father spoke again, and suddenly it wasn't impossible at all.

"Not a problem," he said mildly, over a few sighs of dismay from the porch behind. "I can't see how that matters much to us here at the house." An idea struck him: "You mean out on the edge of the property, I assume?"

"Yes, well," the man hemmed, "down by the creek, we had thought, since we were told in town that you have a pond out there, and that's what we were looking for: a private place with a pond, outside—but of course this isn't the time to ask."

"We wouldn't dream of it," the woman declared. She fanned her sparkling fingers out before her, palms down, like wings about to take off. "Not now, of course—not at such a time like this."

"But you're here already," my father reasoned, and once again I was struck by his composure. "You might as well."

"Really?" she said in disbelief. "Oh, we couldn't." Her eyes strayed over to the man she'd called Cyril. "We just couldn't."

Mrs. Meyers turned to a woman beside her. "Can you believe it?"

"You've come quite a ways, haven't you?" my father said. "It won't bother us here at all. Besides, I can't imagine wasting the day," He glanced up at the sky. "It's perfect weather for it, if I understand your business rightly—not a cloud to be seen." How he could have known this was far beyond me.

"Out of the question," the man declared, "We'll be on our way. We're very sorry—simply can't impose like this."

“*Not* an imposition. We won’t even know you’re here.” My father lifted his chin and took a long look down to the road, where we could make out the other cars beyond the trees. “Not at all. And you’ve gone to all this trouble—brought along quite a crowd. You have a day’s work ahead of you.” Somehow I’d never thought of it as work, what the movie people did—not like the work I knew—but he was right, of course, and the word had a generosity to it that impressed me.

“Well,” the man said, looking down, “we had wanted to set up for twilight—it’s our best light for some scenes—and camp overnight and get a few shots in during the morning—we have a scene to film, you see, one that’s set at sunrise. By a pond. But—”

“Then set up camp and get your scene. It’d be a shame otherwise—a waste of time and effort.” He said it with a finality: the door was open.

“Are you sure?” asked the bird lady. “Only if you’re *sure* it’s all right.”

“Never surer,” my father said, and turned back to the porch. “Make a day of it.” He looked at the group around the door. “We’ll be just fine here,” he said as if giving an order. “I hope everyone’s getting enough to eat.” They took the hint and filed back, quietly and reluctantly, into the house ahead of him. “My boy Frank here can give you directions, get you situated, if you need.” He nodded definitively, and then he was gone, and I was alone with these strange and glittering people.

There are times, as a child—and I was still, then, a child in most ways—when the adults around us command a sort of magic, as mysterious as it is wonderful. I had just seen my father, on what I had every reason to consider was the saddest day of his life, rise to circumstances no one could have foreseen, and his elevation had been so graceful and selfless that it left me without words. And this is how I best remember him still, and not in

the shame and confusion of later events. So the screen door closed, a group still crowded behind it to watch from the shadows of the parlor. When I looked back, the man and woman, and the whole carload of those who had ridden in with them, were staring intently at me.

“I—I can show you....” I offered.

“No need,” the man declared. “We know the way. The edge of the hill country’s at the end of the road a ways up, isn’t it?”

“Yes—yes, it is. Yes, sir. Turn right just after the stream—it’s all flatland for a stretch, once you’re past the ridge—follow along the stream and you’ll come to the pond.”

He nodded and started back to the car, but the woman remained behind, looking at me from the blue shadows of her dark-painted eyes.

“Pardon me,” she said, taking a half-step forward. “Tell me something—I just have to ask.”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“So. This is this your house—your farm, here?”

“Yes, ma’am, it is. My father’s—that’s him you just spoke to—his and mine.” I had never thought of it that way, never actually assumed possession of it as a citizen of the territory, but it was a day of great changes, and there it was. She had just conferred upon me the freedom of the neighborhood.

“And the wake, your wake here—who is it for?” She looked terribly sad—as sad as anyone had looked at the service or in the house.

“My stepmother,” I said. “She passed of the influenza just yesterday.”

“Oh!” Her hand touched the side of her face before reaching out toward mine. “So terrible!” She looked at me for a moment, and for the first time that day I could feel tears rising, caught up as I was in the sadness of her eyes. It was as if she had a power, in her poise and articulation, of conducting emotion, like a wire through which a current flowed. “So awful!” she moaned. Her hand coolly held my cheek for a moment, then dropped helplessly to her side. “You have our deepest sympathy!” she declared, and held my eyes for a moment in the depth of her gaze.

Then she turned and wordlessly got into the car, making her exit as she retrieved her veil and pulled it back across her hat. It was a performance, but I didn’t know that—and it wouldn’t much matter even after I had made that discovery, quite some time later. The driver turned the key in the ignition and shifted into gear, and the car reversed in a near-silent circle, back around the yard. Then he shifted again and they were gone, flickering up the drive behind a puff of exhaust like sparks burning out on the hearth. I stood watching them, my hand to my face where the woman’s hand had touched me, as if I could feel some sort of mark she had left, then the whole line of cars beyond the crab-apples pulled away one by one and vanished from the shadowy branches and the spell was broken. I stared after them a moment, then went back into the house.



It didn't take me long to get out of the house. The place was close and hushed, and I'd had a few hours of the older folks telling me who I was, what I was about, and how they knew all about me. Mrs. Meyers had set herself up as Chief Mourner in the parlor, a group of women around her, and was loudly finding an improving example in every memory of my stepmother. You'd never have guessed they hadn't much cared for each other. My father, his face lined with sweat, had retreated to the opposite end of the parlor, where he took off his jacket as a few local men had set about distracting him with small talk about the harvest. By then the place was less crowded. Most of the neighbors had paid their respects and, with evening chores ahead of them, pulled the masks from their faces with relief as they stepped off the porch. The last motor car was gone from the yard.

I took refuge in the kitchen, watching a few of the ladies working at rearranging leftover food, first heaping it onto separate areas of wiped-off platters for the late arrivals, then pulling dishes from the table and discarding the remainders or packaging them up. The icebox was piled full of covered bowls and anonymous bundles in waxed brown paper and the pump could be heard throughout the house as plates and glasses were washed and stacked away again. Every few minutes the screen door slammed in front as someone left, or in back as someone carried out the bucket. Betsy wandered in, looked around at the activity and gave me another purposeful look above her mask before disappearing through the back door. The top of her head, copper-bright in the late afternoon sunlight, shone at the bottom edge of the kitchen window. She paused as she pulled the mask from her face in the still heat, then disappeared from sight.

Since school ended that spring nearly everyone my age, and nearly all of the ones like me who had hung on to the end, had considered their situation, summed themselves up

and made their choices, one after another. I'd been to a few weddings before the harvest, where Betsy and I always seemed to end up thrown together, and a few nights out in the hills where the roads turned to rubble, or wandering pathlessly through the orchard-rows, with a jug of moonshine among a group of boys—nights meant to see someone off to the army or a city job over in San Bernardino, or a wedding the following morning—but those were rare enough. For myself, I hadn't come to a final decision, which is to say that I could feel a decision needing to be made, but no serious prospects had presented themselves. I'd been fretting through the summer and into the fall like a stall-bound horse in windy weather—at the farm and the harvest and the blank screen of the future ahead of me in the dark, and all funeral day I'd been reminded, with every polite inquiry, that my father was on his own without me. I'd been ready to quit the place for a while by the time I'd stepped out onto the porch

Then I'd experienced incarnate something I'd only dimly known, if I'd thought about it at all. I'd been to the flickers as much as anyone my age, I suppose, and I'd seen the pictures in the movie magazines, and even watched the movie people—the *movies* as some called them—from a distance as they went about dressing up and doing their play-acting, as my stepmother judged it. But I had never spoken to one of them, and certainly never had one walk right up and bend herself to me in grace and sympathy. If anything, I'd thought of them only in black and white—flickering beings, temporary apparitions in the beam of the projector above us in the darkened hall of the Fox, not real people but figures evaporating in a silvery mist when the lights came on again. They were images in a series of dreams we shared, worth only what I understood of them, and not the solid sort of characters who could motor down the drive and politely require permission for their presence in the

landscape around us. And it had never quite struck me so forcibly before that they were here only temporarily, at the edge of our realm, and they were soon to leave again.

“Frank, honey, pour out the water from the ice, if you don’t mind. I don’t want it to run over and leave a mark on the table.” Mrs. Cotton was a thin, dark-blond woman with heavy eyebrows that stood out over the white cotton of her mask. With half her face covered and her hair pinned back, she could have passed at a glance for Charlie.

“Yes, ma’am.” I did as I was asked, fishing out an ice pick and draining into the bucket the liquid from around a shattered block of ice shrinking in the center of a low bowl. Then I replaced it on a towel on the table.

“You want to get out, don’t you.” It wasn’t a question and she didn’t raise her eyes from the platter she was drying. “Charlie and the others took off to take a walk in the trees just now. You could catch up to them.” She turned her back to me to set the platter up on the shelf and then fished a plate out of the basin of soapy water in the sink. “You’ve certainly done your duty for the day. No one would say different.”

I was grateful for the reprieve and ducked out through the doorway. The yard was deserted, but a line of prints in the dust led from the new grave beyond the fence out to the front of the house. People had been in the habit, I realized, of stopping by the settling mound as they left, to say a last goodbye. Between my mother’s grave and my stepmother’s, a cluster of three boulders we’d hauled in from the edge of the property were piled over the three children she’d lost: they’d been buried in the same plot, one above another, the way we did at the time. A shovel had been left leaning on the fence. I grabbed it and started around the house to the barn. I didn’t feel much like joining up with the others and I hadn’t yet figured out where my feet were heading once I returned the shovel

to the barn, but I was ready to put some distance between myself and that smothering house, and glad to be out in the late afternoon air. I got as far as the barn door before I heard a voice inside.

“Frank? Frank! In here.” I pulled off the mask I’d put on and stared into the dark. It was Betsy. Her hand flickered in and out of the daylight from the shadow. “Here,” she said. I couldn’t see much, and had paused just inside the door as my eyes adjusted. I could make her out dimly, standing in the middle of the flagstone floor like a ghost in a dream. She put her hands on her hips. “I’ve been wanting to talk to you.”

“What?” She sounded decisive, as if she were calling me out, though she could have spoken up any time since she’d arrived—I’d been well within reach all afternoon—but I followed her into the shadow and looked around us. The barn was empty. “What are you doing out here?”

“It’s awful in there, isn’t it—all the old people and all the fuss.” She took a step back into the darkness, toward a bale of hay someone had dragged into the middle of the floor. “Put down that shovel. I wanted to talk to you. Just you—*alone*.”

“What for?”

For a moment she looked at me disbelievingly, as if she’d told a joke I hadn’t got, then shrugged. “Here. Help me with something.”

She turned her back and, reaching around, unbuttoned the top of her dress, then pulled her arms awkwardly out of the sleeves. “If I don’t get out of this corset, I swear I’m going to die.” Then she turned back to me and let the top of her dress fall away. She smiled. “You’re a gentleman, aren’t you? Do a lady a favor.”

I blinked uncomprehendingly. She stood there and stared for a moment, then turned away again and spoke distinctly, as if I were a dullard. "It laces up the back."

I knew how a corset worked. I set the shovel aside and obliged her. She made a show of looking down modestly, her hands folded in front of her, as I undid the bow at the top between her shoulder-blades and pulled the ribbon tie out, eye by eye, down to her waist where it doubled back upward. "There," she said. "That's a gentleman."

"I'll step outside," I offered.

"No, don't." She pulled the corset away and dropped it beside her, then turned around to face me. "I *want* you here—don't be bashful." She looked up at me, her eyebrows raised, then glanced away and quickly unbuttoned the thin shift she was wearing beneath it. She worked her arms free of that and let it fall around her like the top of her dress. Then she looked back at me and turned her hands up at her sides. She managed a smile. "So?"

It's true enough that I had never seen a woman close up and naked to the waist before, but *The Seduction In The Barn* was, even back then, a scene as old as creation—and Betsy knew that, too, I supposed. Maybe this was the way she had heard confided, in the sorority of our local girls, how this particular passage might be crossed. All I had to do was reach out and touch her and I would find myself embarked upon the same voyage into the same uncharted territory nearly everyone we knew had navigated, one way or another, that summer. We were modern, after all, and the thing to do was get the business done, then make a decent proposal a day or so after. She had obviously thought it all out carefully: this was a gambit that had, in the custom of the time, only one honorable consequence, and we both knew that if I responded as she expected, there was only one

outcome. But she looked pale and factual to me in the dull light, and I was unmoved. No doubt other boys my age had recently found themselves in the same circumstances, whether with Betsy or another, and it was the contrivance of the gesture, as if I was required to act out to a scene she had scripted in advance, that I found distasteful—and I balked at that.

“Glad to be of help.” I took a step back.

“Frank!” Her face lost its composure and her arms reached up to cover her breasts. “Frank Potter!” She smiled, flustered. This wasn’t how she’d planned it out, and that was an embarrassment. She glanced down for a second, sighed, then determined on a different approach. She settled herself on one end of the bale of hay behind her and, keeping her eyes on mine, patted the place beside her. “Don’t be like that. Come over and sit down.”

I sat beside her but looked away. Her free hand found my knee and rested there, plump and inert.

“I’ve had my eye on you for a while, Frank,” she said in a whisper, her mouth at my ear. “You’re not like the other boys, out in the trees getting drunk and all at night.” I had been, and I wanted to correct her impression, but I kept my peace. “And just look at this place—you have a future ahead of you, right here.” And here she leaned in close and dropped her other hand away, so that her chest pressed up against my arm. “A fine future. And I’m right next door, just sitting here same as you. Isn’t that something?”

No doubt clumsier attempts had succeeded before—maybe even for Betsy, for all I knew—and I could even then, I suppose, have recovered myself and gone along with what she expected of me, and that would have changed everything. It could all have happened differently—and probably would have, with any other male of our age and acquaintance.

Had I been gifted with foresight, as I think about it now, I might have saved us both a world of trouble—but at what cost? I stood up. There was a long pause as motes danced in the dim light around us, but I just stood there, hands at my sides, staring out the door like an idiot.

“No.” I glanced back at her, keeping my eyes up, then quickly looked away again.

“No?” She was startled. Her pride had suffered a blow. I had noticed her eyes were welling up, and I felt sorry for her, I suppose, but also imposed on.

Was there any comment, at such a time, that wouldn't have failed me? “Well, what do you want?”

She dropped the act, and her voice rose. “I want *you*. Don't you want me?” Maybe anger was as useful as anything else to save her dignity after the scene she had conjured in her mind had met up with this unexpected digression. “I thought I was making myself *perfectly* clear.”

I found myself getting angry, too. “I bet you thought you were.”

And that was the end of it—or at least the end of how she might have imagined it. There were other girls I would have rather had the chance with, ones I hadn't the courage to approach, who had slipped away one by one in the past few years, but that wasn't the point. I had made my decision about the prospect at hand, and Betsy was not in my future as I would determine it. For every reason imaginable I would remain an innocent—and an idiot.

“Well.” Betsy stood and retrieved the corset, her breasts hanging slack as she bent down and snapped it out to shake loose a few bits of straw. She was all business now. “The least you could do is help me. I can't go back inside—”

“You can help yourself,” I said, disgusted. It occurred to me that the day had been crammed with expectations, and here was one more—one more thing determined without my say that would have ruled the way ahead. So I shook the dust from my Sunday shoes and walked out of the barn. I nodded to Harlan, who was coming out of the bunkhouse, having changed out of his best. It didn't occur to me, in the heat of the moment and the glare of the late sunlight, that he'd be heading into the barn.

But a thought struck me, about what she'd said about our farms. I turned around and shouted back, into the dark. “You didn't want me, particularly, and you know it.” It was deliberate, and no doubt it was right, and I wanted her to feel the same sort of affront she had offered to my dignity and pride.

I haven't often been deliberately unkind—and not like Betsy would prove herself, soon enough—and I've considered with regret my actions of that afternoon, or at least that part of it, since Betsy knew more than her prayers, of course, but that was about all she knew. She had left school a few years before and must have imagined her prospects dwindling. If she had watched more than a few of her friends cross the threshold of married life before her, perhaps she was just as troubled as I was by the sense that, in that place and time, the future was already outrunning her, and that now was the moment—even perhaps the final moment—for decisive action. Maybe, when we had found ourselves together a few times, easily paired off as neighbors and former schoolmates still unmarried, she had considered her options and laid in her stores in advance. I might even have been flattered, I suppose, but it was more likely a question of opportunity. There were other boys with brighter prospects than mine—Charlie Cotton had even talked about going off to Riverside Polytechnic in town—another stone building with a mission front, one that

taught agriculture as a science, something none of us considered otherwise, and a matter of some awe when he had written for information and the school sent back to him a stack of serious-looking forms, with booklets and brochures with pictures of orchards and hayfields unlike even the most promising examples of the best-run farms we knew, and a typed letter addressed to him formally as *Mr. Cotton*—an experience the rest of us had also, up to then, never had. His father had even deeded over to him a parcel of land on which to start grapes as new rotation, and that seemed like an inspired idea. But Betsy's intentions, whatever they might have been beyond that afternoon, had landed on me as their object. Or on our farm. That was a sign, ultimately, of her innocence, too, and I suppose that says all I need to say about the subject—about her, and about myself.

So I left her behind and struck out, across the orchards, heading to the far end of the property. I judged that was as far as I could honorably go, that afternoon, and at that moment I wanted to be far away. The scene in the barn had upset me, sure enough—I had upset myself, I could as easily say—but there was more to it than that. I sorted out my thoughts as I ducked branches and dodged among the trees. All that afternoon I'd contended with the dim realization that I'd been touched by something, come close to something—and it wasn't just the feel of that strange woman's hand on my cheek. But there was a sort of urgency to the memory of it, and my mind had circled back, all through the nods and sighs of the wake, like a bird in slow descent, to the sight of her in her feathered hat. I could picture her eyes sunk in those two pools of dark blue shadow, and I wondered if she had by now got herself up in something even stranger. Had she been transformed, with her painted face, into an agent of assured and mortal peril, a vamp with her costumed arms spread wide like the wings of a turkey vulture wheeling south along the

edge of the hills, or like Isabella of Castile in my mother's copy of *American Tales* sending her own Columbus down our creek and off to discover another whole new world?

I was sure the bird-woman was an actress, though I had never met one, or even seen a real play on stage aside from school pageants at the holidays and, once, a production of *Metamora*, a musty melodrama about Pilgrims and Indians my stepmother recalled seeing in her youth with Edwin Booth on tour playing minister-father to a son who'd rescued a native maiden from her heathen ways by marrying her. She'd talked about the great actor whose brother had murdered Lincoln, and my parents had brought me along to see it with them, out of sentimental interest, when a touring company had strayed close enough. I remembered the Chief, the maiden's father, bare-chested but for a string of *wampum*, with a blanket over his shoulders like a cloak, making a fine speech of approval at the impending match. And so the East was won. I snapped a last shriveled peach from a branch and threw it back, over my shoulder. I had been shaken awake, I realized, suddenly made aware of the gulf between the commonplaces of the life I'd led and those of others only as far away as the hills to the west. Or over the ridge. Was some bright-eyed suitor in black knee-breeches even now taking fair Oceana's hand and promising her a fruitful future as his wife, with a dowry of Puritan salvation beyond that on the other side? And what about the rest of them—the others in the car and those out among the crabapple branches on the road across the yard? By now the company must have unpacked their belongings—all those canvas-bound bundles and rumble-seats full of boxes—and pitched their camp and set their cameras up. And they must also have made what use they could of the daylight, which was already well past its peak, so they'd been practicing all this while their mysterious

trade. What new wonder for a Saturday afternoon had been unfolding, stop and start, as they went about their labors among the rocks and scrub at the rough edge of the property?

I walked deliberately through the trees, keeping my head down until I was sure I was well out of sight, then climbed the ridge at the edge of the orchard. When I reached the crest I let my heels slide down a few sandy feet, so I couldn't be seen from behind, and sat down on a rock cropping out of the slope. I'd come to the right location, and the scene before me was much as I'd imagined it—the movies loved to show the movies being made, I realized—so it was no surprise that I recognized a line of small tents pitched in the flat grassy space across the stream. I could see white canvas peaks among the low trees and scrub. A ways apart, a flock of cameras stood on wooden tripods, all aimed out toward the Santa Anas which were already tipped with the gold light of the sun behind us. A few young men—no older than myself, I realized—were standing to one side of them, and if filming had temporarily paused, one still kept his post, turning the head of the arrangement—the actual camera itself, I surmised—back and forth across the scene before him. He stood with his legs spread wide and swiveled his torso from the waist up, shoulders squared with the mechanism, two rounded disks flaring out of the top of the thing. Just to his left—my left—was the last mature tree at the edge of the scrub that crept into the hills, a weeping willow that spread its roots near a spot where the stream widened into a shallow, rocky pool. That was where I'd caught frogs as a boy, but now there was a conference in progress beneath it, just inside the grassy patch that sprouted up in its shade.

A few men in shirt sleeves—one was the man who'd spoken to my father, the one called Cyril—were speaking, across a few paces between them, to a young woman in a white linen shift and a man in a suit and tie. He had hair in loose waves down to his

shoulders and from behind I could see that he'd sweated through his shirt and jacket. I considered that he'd spent much of the afternoon in the sun. Now he walked off toward me, to a spot in the shadow of the tree but behind the other men as the girl in the shift, her head down, took a few thoughtful steps toward the tree trunk and sat down among its roots. One of the men in shirtsleeves turned back and I saw him notice me before he turned back to his work. He waved to the boys with the cameras, and one lifted his strange machine off its wooden legs and brought it to him, closer to the tree, as another turned my way. This one looked back once more, nodded to the man, then picked his way over the rocks across the stream and started up the slope toward me. He was carrying a clipboard and wearing a snap-brim cap, but he'd gotten the sun his cheeks—I could see that from a few yards away—and he shielded his eyes with the clipboard as his head caught the light over the shadow of the ridge.

“Hey there.” He smiled at me. I nodded back. “This is your place, isn't it?”

“Yes, sir.” He wasn't much older than me—maybe none of them were, now that I think of it—but it seemed the right thing to say. “I just walked over.”

That seemed to strike him funny, since he smiled again, and I wondered if I'd said something ridiculous.

“That's great. We've been looking for a place like this. It's a beautiful farm.”

“Thanks.”

“Cyril—that's the director, down there—” he pointed back to the group, where the camera man was setting up again, this time aiming himself at the woman under the tree. “He wanted to ask if you could stay where you are, so you don't wander into the frame.”

“Frame?” It wasn't a concept I knew at the time, though I'd learn it soon enough.

“The frame of the camera. The area it can see through it. It’s what gets into the picture. If you’re here, you should be fine.” He paused and held out his hand. “Carl, by the way—Director’s Assistant: a fine title. Pleased to meet you.”

I stood up and took his hand. “You don’t mind if I watch?”

He laughed to himself. “Mind? Hell, it’s your place, right? We’re grateful to have the use of it.”

I thought back to the afternoon, to my father’s comment to Cyril. “You won’t have much light left, you ought to know.”

“That’s certainly true enough—and that’s why we wanted to ask: we have just one more shot to get in, if it goes all right.” He looked behind him, toward the tops of the mountains in the distance. They were already starting to glow, and I glanced down at the willow and the people under it, who were collecting shadows in the dark around them. Carl followed my gaze. “No time to lose, matter of fact. Say, I didn’t catch your name.”

“Frank. Frank Potter.”

He nodded. “Well, Frank Potter, you came just in time, I guess.” He smiled, as if there was something funny about the situation. “You’re about to get an eye-full. But stay right here, right?” And he turned and started back down the slope.

I watched him pick his way back across the stream and part the tall grasses he’d come through, then walk back to the group near the base of the tree where the camera was now planted and the boy behind it had resumed his stance, bringing his eyes level with the mechanism he was looking through. The girl under the tree arranged her hair for a moment, then Carl, who had traded his clipboard for a chalk slate, held it up close in front of the camera, gave it a shake for definition, and let it swing away below, out of sight. I

heard a command issued, and the scene started as the cameraman began to rotate a handle on the far side of his device, his elbow held out from to his side and his wrist moving in tight steady circles between his chest and the tripod as he stood anchored to the spot.

No one spoke. The girl in the shift looked at the ground around her, up at the tree and back at the stream behind, then stood and, without a second's thought—or so it appeared to me at the time—crossed her hands low before her and lifted the white shift by its hem, up and over her head in one smooth movement. She held it up to her body and assumed a pose like a statue in a book about art, then dropped it gracefully aside, her left arm covering her bust and her right hand below, then turned and, without so much as a glance at the camera, walked proudly out between the low-hanging branches of the willow and, step by delicate step, into the pool where she waded to the middle, then plunged herself in at the deepest part, lifting her long hair out to one side and coiling it up into a loose knot at the top of her head as she sunk herself in slowly, all the way to her shoulders. She paused for a moment and, turning back to show the side of her face—and the side of her face alone—to the camera, she glided gently across the pool to the other side, and waded back toward the tree and the edge of the pond, covering herself again with her white arms, until she reached the curtain of the willow branches and parted them, slowly, to either side. She looked up at the camera and smiled shyly—she was facing away from me, but I could imagine that much—as if she saw it for the first time, and took one final step, and drew one ultimate degree toward the men clustered on the other side of the tree as the branches swayed shut behind her. For a moment her body hung there, a light glowing in the shade, suspended above the earth like a lamp hanging among the branches, and paused again. Then Cyril shouted a single word, a barked-out command that I couldn't hear clearly,

and the whole vision collapsed: the girl surrendered her sleek advance and slumped into a plain walk, as if she were crossing a sidewalk, and picked up her shift again and fitted it back over herself, pulling at the places it clung to her wet flesh as the men around the camera relaxed into casual activity and the boy with the black box left off turning his contraption. I realized, as I sat there on my rock, that I had held my breath the whole time.

She had walked toward me, at some distance, through the willow branches and into the pond at first, and I had seen the whole length of her as her hands had fallen away and she had waded naked into the same pond I had splashed through, grabbing at tadpoles, as a child. The water was hardly above her waist as she had lifted her arms to raise her hair and tie it back, and while this was the second time in half an hour that I had been favored with such a sight, I had completely forgotten about Betsy and the image of her sitting, round-shouldered and slumped, on the bale in the barn. She had been nowhere in my thoughts as the girl had glided silently across the surface of the water, only her head visible for a few seconds before she rose again and, with a single shake of sparkling droplets from her outstretched hands, had presented herself for my inspection from a whole new angle as she waded back, out of the pond and into the willow branches, where time had seemed to stop and the earth paused in its nightly rotation before I'd heard her director snap out his command—and then the earth had lurched further from the sun once more and time had nicked itself back into its usual path. The shot was over.

I was on my feet again without knowing it, half enthralled to the scene and half ashamed at myself for having sat out in the open and watched it, for letting myself get so caught up in what I saw, and half again scared to death that Carl, or Cyril, or even the girl herself—any of them at all—might look my way or even wave to acknowledge my

presence. That's how naïve I was—how much we all were, at the time—with such things. I was a boy on a farm in the fall of 1918, the Great War just over. And despite the recent attempts of a local girl—and one without much mystery to her, it had to be said—I had just beheld in the open, golden light of the sun the sight of a mature woman in all her naked glory. Nothing I had seen could compare to it.

I had wanted to avert my eyes, to hide myself and watch as the cameraman had done, from the vantage of a place within the operation which would have given me cover and, better, an excuse—and how often had that young man, that boy no older than myself, it crossed my mind—how often had he cranked away at his camera and seen much the same? How could they all have stood there, cool as the evening breeze, and stared as she emerged, glowing light around her, through the curtain of the willow branches, and then simply turned their attention to other things?—and their glances elsewhere—as she pulled the shift back on? It hadn't seemed decent, now, to have sat and watched, though Carl, in his way, had hinted at the scene to come. And he had said it as if there was nothing—or nothing in his estimation—out of the ordinary about it. I had been entranced at what I'd seen—in the naked flesh and not on a movie screen, where I could already imagine myself seeing it again, through the unblinking eye of the camera and graced with its perspective. And I turned and fled. Once more, I crested the ridge and stalked down in the spilling, sandy soil, and reached the edge of the orchard with a sense of urgency. I plunged back into the trees and ducked low among the hanging branches. Had they seen me leave? I wondered. I glanced back once, as if I expected to find the whole group of them in silhouette at the top of the ridge, staring after me in my shame, in mute wonder at my trespass and my flight through the orchard, but no one was there. I had been observed, I

knew; and all of it had played itself out before me with their implicit approval, but I was of no consequence to the group, absorbed as they had been in capturing the sweep of the images before them. I looked down and noticed what I had already felt, the dark stain seeping across the front of my trousers, and I plunged forward, glad of the gathering shadows beneath the silent, knowing trees around me.



I made it back home in the gathering dark and I was glad of it. My face was flushed and I'd worked up a sweat in my run through the trees. I pulled up short, just inside the edge of the orchard, and looked around, unpinning the celluloid collar that had been chafing my neck all day. The house was quiet. The yard was deserted and the last of the traps were gone and a single light shone through the window over the kitchen sink. I'd hoped to walk straight across the yard unnoticed, enter through the back door and slip up the stairs and into my room, changing into work clothes for evening chores. I could blot out the stain on my trousers later. I left the cover of the trees and crossed the paddock, jumping the fence to make a beeline for the house. But the barn doors were open—another part of a long and disordered day—and I pulled them shut on one side, then stopped.

Once or twice I'd been awakened by the sound of a cat in heat, since we kept a few mousers on hand to do their part and they sometimes set up a racket in the night. My stepmother tolerated them enough to put out scraps in a dish on the back porch now and again, and they had their run of the place, so it wasn't all that unusual to hear a squall, unlike the noises livestock make, coming from a corner of the barn. But there was

something more there now—a rasping, sort of heaving or scraping that struck me funny. It came from near the hay elevator beside the mow, where we broke apart bales to shovel in for bedding in the stalls. I paused in the doorway and stared into the shadows for the second time that day. We'd never kept much stock—a cow and a pair of horses, one for the trap and an old draft we'd retired when the tractor arrived—so the elevator was empty, but someone had dragged a bale onto the platform of the mow and broken it open.

I didn't know how to make out what I was seeing: there was some kind of struggle in the dark, as if a man had fallen over onto something and was now grappling with it, having a hard time getting back to his feet. He was grunting with the effort. It sprawled under him, and for a moment as my eyesight cleared it looked like he was trying to pick up a calf or a pig, though the animal seemed to be putting up a fight. Then I saw a plump hand reach up from underneath him and grip the wooden rail of the mow, and the picture in front of me snapped into place.

Betsy, her dress and her shift bunched up around her waist, was sprawled across the broken bale of hay—I assumed it was the one I'd last seen her sitting on—lying back with one hand gripping the railing and the other clenched into a fist behind the neck of the man hunched over her. Her arms shone ivory-pink in the gloom. Her garters had slipped off and her stockings were bunched around her ankles, They flopped over her shoes like two black hooves. Her underpants were on the floor beside the mow. She was gasping and mewling, pinned underneath a dark figure that was moving over her and doing the grunting. She must have noticed the change in the light from the doorway and looked up over his shoulder, and in that moment her eyes met mine and she wailed like a hurt pig. “Frank!”

I didn't think twice. The shovel I'd brought back from the gravesite was in easy reach and I swung it by the handle as I strode into the dark and brought it down flat on the back of the man's head. It rang like a muffled bell and he bucked and went limp on top of her with a groan of pent-up breath.

For a moment I just stared, a little awed at what I'd done. Her knees were up on either side of him, and as she struggled to one side and shoved him off of her, I realized it was Harlan. I'd knocked him out. His mouth gaped open and his head lolled away from her. He had pulled down his trousers, belt and shorts and all, and the two of them lay there exposed, side by side for a moment with his arm under her neck. Betsy was panting and staring back at me, and I consciously averted my eyes as I went to help her up, but she shoved me away as I bent down and I stumbled back out of the mow. She got herself up in a flurry of hay and rumpled skirts, pushing her arms through her sleeves and shrugging her shoulders back into the top of her dress. Her face was flushed and screwed up as if she'd been crying, and I imagined she was relieved to be rescued but humiliated and embarrassed all at the same time. "Are you all right?" Of course she wasn't, but something demanded that I ask her. "Is your mother in the house? I can get her and bring her here, if you—"

She pulled up her skirt and settled her slip, then straightened up and stared back at me, open-mouthed in consternation. There were bits of hay all over in her hair and on her dress, and a straw poked out of her collar as she did up the last button. She took a few slow heavy breaths then swallowed, and when she spoke her voice was low and angry. "What the hell were you doing standing there?"

"I went to close the door. I heard.... Are you all right?"

‘All right?’ This seemed to confuse her. It took her a moment as she caught her breath. “All right?!”

Harlan moaned on the hay-pile, blinking and squinting as he opened his eyes. One hand fumbled up to the back of his head. “Jesus Christ, what...”

Betsy took a step back and drew herself up. She wasn’t embarrassed, I realized—she was angry. She tipped her chin up and shouted at me, letting her words ring out one by one. “All right! Well that’s about the *finest* thing I’ve ever heard—all *right!*”

The trap horse, startled, jostled and snorted in its stall. Betsy spat on the ground and turned away. She bent down and hoisted one stocking into place, tying it up with her garter. She stood and looked around, furious, for the other one.

I was lost. “I thought that—I thought he was—”

She didn’t bother looking up at me. “You sure do think a lot, Frank Potter. I bet you *think* you’re some kind of hero.” She gave up on the search and pulled the other stocking up over her knee, knotting it over her fingertip and then tucking in the knot with a snap of her fingers. It fell down again immediately. “You think I needed to be saved, didn’t you? You *think—too—damn—much.*” She reached down again for her stocking, but was distracted and glanced back at Harlan, who was sitting up slowly, holding his head with one hand and steadying himself with the other. It occurred to me that I could have killed him. Betsy rounded back to me. “What makes you think I need some boy to come rescue me? We were fine until you came along!” Then she stood and took a step my way and caught the side of my face with the flat of her hand, knocking me so hard that my head spun and I stumbled aside, dropping the shovel. It clattered to the edge of a stall nearby and the trap horse started again. “What makes you think *anything?*” She stopped for a moment and

drew herself up, terrible in her anger. “You had your chance. And I’m all done with boys. *Done* with you! I wanted a *man*.”

“What in holy hell!” Harlan had lurched forward to all fours, then sat back on his knees. It took a minute for his eyes to focus as Betsy and I both stood there and watched him. He reached out for the end of the shovel, drew it up and braced it against the floor, then leaned on it as he got up, one foot at a time. He stood for a moment, swaying with both hands on the handle as if it were a crutch, then looked down as if he’d made a sudden discovery and bent to pull his pants up. For a long minute his struggle to dress himself again was the whole focus of interest among the three of us. He was nearly finished when a thought seemed to come to his mind and he stopped and looked up at me, blood in his eyes. “The *fuck*....”

That was the strongest word we’d any of us—or at least Betsy and I—had ever heard employed in conversation, and it was the first thing that greeted Mrs. Meyers and my father as they appeared in the half-open doorway, her stout bulk blocking out the fading light as he placed a hand on the edge of the frame behind her. They must have heard Betsy as she shouted at me and come out to see what the matter was. Mrs. Meyers took in the sight of her daughter and her hands flew to her face. “Christ have mercy!”

My father took a step forward, past her, his head cocked and eyes wide. I realized I had never seen him so completely at a loss, and then I thought I could feel—and I swear to it now—I could feel the earth shift beneath our feet. The barn seemed to tilt against the last of the sunlight, and the glow from the door lengthened to cast itself over the group of us. The three of us at the mow just stood there as Mrs. Meyers pushed my father aside and

advanced into the barn. “Lord all mighty!” she exclaimed as she looked back and forth between Harlan and me. “What have you done to my little girl!”

That was all the cue Betsy needed. “*Mama!*” she wailed and flew into her mother’s arms. She choked out a sob and pushed her mussed hair out of her face, then raised a hand and pointed at me, “He tried—he tried to—”

“Don’t say it! Don’t speak such a word to your mother,” Mrs. Meyers said fiercely. “You don’t have to say a thing!” She stood like a rock in the middle of the barn and stared back at me, red murder in her eyes. I looked back at the two of them, dumbstruck.

Harlan lifted his face, his eyes bleary and unfocused. “He hit me—he...” he stumbled against the shovel handle and my father stepped forward to catch his arm.

Victoria Meyers hugged Betsy close, cradling her head on her shoulder. Betsy was a good head taller than her mother, but she made the most of it, crouching and clinging to Victoria as if her knees were weak. “Leonard Potter, do you see what your boy’s tried to do—what he’s *done*—to my daughter?”

“I can see,” he said to both of them. “I can see well enough.” He kept a hand on Harlan’s elbow and looked at me. “Frank, did you do this?”

“I hit him, yes, but—”

“Frank hit him with the shovel ‘cause Harlan pulled him off of me!” Betsy said wquickly. She swallowed again and made as if she had to gather herself up. “He... he was a *beast!*” she shrieked, pulling herself out of her mother’s embrace. “He brought me here when he saw me come outside for a moment. When I came through the kitchen. I just wanted to get outside!”

“Is this true, Frank?”

“No! No, it’s not! I wasn’t even in here when—” Then it struck me with the full force of fact that I was cornered, and words failed me. What was I going to say—that Betsy had tried, in her clumsy and girlish way, to seduce me—and that I had refused? That I had left the scene and come back to find the two of them together? It was the truth but that was the least of it. How could that possibly square with the scene the three of us made? No one was going to believe me.

Betsy stood up to her full height. There was no cowering about her any longer. “You were here with me in the barn! You brought the shovel along from the grave and you held it up and you said you’d beat me! Don’t you deny it!” She threw herself at Harlan and hugged him gratefully, then lifted her head and cried to my father, “He protected me. He heard me cry out and—and then Frank...” She moaned in horror at the memory and buried her face in Harlan’s chest. Uncomprehending, he brought his hand up to the back of her head.

“He hit me.” Harlan said weakly.

I found my voice again. “I just brought the shovel back. Betsy was already out here, and then I left and Harlan—”

“Lies!” Mrs. Meyers growled, her chin down and her eyebrows raised. She had the same low angry tone Betsy had used at first. “Look at the state my daughter is in! You did this!” She reached out as if to grab at my face.

My father stepped between us. He stood still for a moment, taking deep breaths. His shoulders were hunched and his head was down as if he was thinking hard, working out the scene. Then he rested a hand on Victoria Meyer’s shoulder and firmly guided her back a

step as she stood there grimacing, her eyes fixed on her daughter. He looked up at Betsy. “You came out of the house—and went into the barn? Our barn?”

Betsy looked up, her cheek against Harlan’s chest and barely whispered, as if she didn’t have the strength to protest, “I wanted to get out of the heat—all the people inside. I sat down on that bale.” She gestured weakly to the bale broken open in the mow, then she raised her eyes plaintively, for the benefit of her audience, to mine. “Then Frank came in. And he had the shovel!” She burst into tears. “I was so afraid!”

My father shook his head. “But you just said Frank brought you in here—didn’t you? Which is it?” He looked back at me. “Did you bring her in her—with that shovel?”

It could all have ended there, but I didn’t have time to answer. Maybe because she had guessed that the chance to rescue her daughter’s virtue was now hanging in the balance, Mrs. Meyers pushed herself between Betsy and my father. She looked up, right under his face, and shouted shrilly. “Your boy Frank attacked my daughter! That’s what he did! That’s—*what*—he—*did!*” She waved an arm wildly at Betsy and Harlan. “Look at them! Harlan Walter protected her, Leonard Potter— protected my little girl’s good name—from your son!” She struck her fat fists against my father’s chest and shoved him back, away from the rest of us. It occurred to me that we’d all been creeping closer together over the last few minutes, drawing ourselves up into a clot of blame and recrimination. The trap horse whinnied again and kicked the side of its stall.

My father turned away and coughed. The sound seemed to linger for a moment and he coughed, deeply, again. He stared into space and swallowed, as if something were caught in his throat, then his eyes came to rest on Betsy’s underpants lying on the floor. He bent slowly and lifted them up. “Then what’s this?” He held them out, into the light. There

was a note of skepticism in his voice. “You tell me he pulled these off of you—all the way? While you fought him? You mean that?” Betsy’s pants hadn’t been torn off of her. They were fine white cotton with a ruffle at the hips and were clean but for a few bits of straw they’d picked up from where they landed. They had been cast aside once she’d taken them off herself, and he could see that. He held them out at the end of his fingertips, pointing at Betsy. “He tore these off of you? Is that what you’re saying?”

Mrs. Meyers snatched the underwear away, but my father turned on her and said sharply, “We’re both grown up and been married, Victoria. We know some things—and you know what I mean.” She looked back at him open-mouthed. It was as if he had slapped her, just as Betsy had slapped me, and I could still feel the print of her hand like a welt on my cheek. For a moment his words seemed to hang in the air between them, then he turned and fixed Harlan with a serious look. He was sweating heavily in the heat and his tongue sounded thick in his mouth. “Harlan, what’s the truth here?”

By then Harlan had recovered enough to understand his predicament. Someone had attacked Betsy. Her mother would have it—could have it—no other way, and Betsy knew enough that she had to pretend that it was so. That much was clear. Harlan realized it was either him or me. His arm went up again to circle Betsy’s shoulder and she turned her head and pressed her face back into his chest and sobbed—for encouragement, I suppose—and he cleared his throat and looked down. “Yes, sir. It was Frank.”

“No!” I shouted. But it was at that moment that Victoria Meyers took a dramatic step backward and, pointing to my middle, brought all debate to an end. “Lord, *look!*” she said, her voice low with horror. “The *mark* of it—the stain of his lust!”

And I—or, more accurately, the state of my trousers—became the focus of all attention. My father glanced down, then up at my face and I felt a wave of complete shame. Harlan looked surprised, as he had a right to, I suppose, and Betsy glanced at me with something that crossed from alarm and disgust into triumph. Harlan let the shovel go and it tipped back with a soft hiss onto the hay scattered in the mow.

My father wasted no more time. “Victoria, you take your daughter home. And Frank—” he turned to me, but I couldn’t meet his gaze. “You go inside.” That was the end of the matter.

We made a strange, silent parade through the yard and around the side of the house, with Betsy clinging to her mother and resting her head, straw trailing from her loosened hair, on her mother’s stout shoulder. Victoria shepherded her daughter along as if she were wounded and Betsy even contrived to walk unsteadily as she sniffed and whimpered. Then came me, keeping my distance behind them. Finally, a few paces back, once he closed the barn door, came my father slowly after us. Harlan must have plodded away to the bunkhouse, but I couldn’t look up. It seemed to take forever to reach the back door, and for some reason I expected Betsy and her mother to open it and go inside, or to say something as if taking their leave, but they stumbled past and I pulled the screen door open. I charged through the kitchen to the foot stairs, where I glanced back, into the parlor, and realized that no one was there. The house was empty. Victoria Meyers had sat out the wake, doing her full duty as she must have seen it, or waiting for her daughter to reappear, and the other mourners had made their condolences and spoken their goodbyes and left one or two at a time, finally—and perhaps not without some regret—leaving my father and Victoria

alone in the parlor, where they'd been startled by the sound of a girl screaming in the barn. I bolted up the stairs.

I stopped just inside my bedroom, the only room on the second floor, across a landing above the stairs with a hatch door in the ceiling and a hinged ladder contraption above it that folded up on springs and led up into a tiny attic. I just stood there for a moment and stared at my bed, made up with an old wedding-ring quilt my mother had sewn. The door was half open behind me and the window at the side of the bed showed the last of the day's light clearing the top of the barn roof across the yard. Otherwise it was now dark. Then my father opened the screen door and it slammed shut behind him, and I could hear him at the foot of the stairs. He started up the steps slowly, his breath heavy. I turned back to the doorway. I knew I should say something, but I couldn't collect my thoughts. So much had happened in the last few hours, after a long and confusing day, and I was stirred up and off balance. My father reached the top of the stairs, and I could see that he'd brought a lantern. The light cast his shadow on the wall outside my door. For one wild second I wondered if I was in danger from him and I looked over at my gun, a child-sized twenty-two in a rack above the dresser. I couldn't remember the last time I'd used it. Probably when a bunch of us boys had set up tin cans or bottles on rocks at the edge of the desert—the same place, or just about, where the movie people were camping tonight. I recalled that I had a box of bullets in my top dresser drawer, but dismissed the thought as a ridiculous exaggeration. In any event, my father didn't come through the door quite yet. He stood for a moment at the top of the stairs and set the lantern down beside him before he reached up to the handle on the attic hatch and pulled it down and unfolded the ladder into the middle of the landing. I could hear the old springs uncoil themselves and the

wooden rails hit the floor outside my line of sight, and it occurred to me that I was trapped there in my room by the ladder. I did the only thing I could think of: I sat down on my bed and waited.

He had come to a decision, I knew, and there was little I could do to argue my case. It was all too perfect: Harlan had looked into the barn out of curiosity when he saw me leaving. He would have known from my parting comment to Betsy that someone was in there and he'd found her, maybe still undressed—but who would ever have believed that Betsy, of her own free will, had met up with two men, both Harlan and me, in the course of a few minutes in the barn? It wasn't something anyone would have suggested at the time, much less say in his defense in front of her mother. We'd been neighbors all our lives, though we'd never had much to do with each other, and my father had known Betsy's mother long before I came along. They had grown up and gone to school together just as Betsy and I had. So who would have believed, but for Harlan and Betsy and me, what had happened in the barn had been at Betsy's purpose? All three of us knew the story, but I was the one with the weakest claim. I wasn't sorry I had left her there, but Betsy had been reasonably sure that things would have gone otherwise—and why did they? I looked down at the stain on my pants and thought of the pale figure in the willow branches. What had come over me?

Something hit the floor on the landing. It took my father a while to climb back down, and as he folded the ladder up, his breath was coming in quick, deep gasps. When he released the hatch and let it spring back, the effort had seemed to wind him for a moment, even if the springs had done most of the work, and his shadow was still after he'd closed the hatch again. I listened to him breathing, and it sounded familiar, as if pulling the air

into his lungs was using up more energy than it provided. All of a sudden I knew that this wasn't sadness or shock, or the strain of anger and embarrassment: my father was sick, just as my stepmother had been. He had spent the day—and maybe the night before, when he'd sat up through the dark with her body laid out in the next room—feeling the influenza coming on, growing increasingly out of sorts and then consciously ill. He'd kept that with him throughout the morning, during the funeral and all through the wake. Perhaps the seriousness of it was only just dawning on him as he greeted the movie people, but he'd covered it well. He had kept it close out of duty, I imagine, for as long as he could.

He leaned against the wall as he gathered his strength, then bent to pick up what he'd thrown down onto the floor and pushed open the door of my room. He stood there for a moment, panting and holding something big and dark in front of him. The lantern was on the landing floor and he loomed above me. Then he dropped what he'd been holding onto the floor between us. It was my mother's old carpet bag. "I could believe you, Frank," he said. "But no one else will. And Victoria—she's going to call the sheriff—she'll figure she has to—if she sees you around the place." He stared distantly at me for a moment. "Pack up your things," he said between breaths. "There'll be an envelope on the table. You can sleep here tonight—if you want—but be gone by the morning." He turned and walked out of the room, and I caught a glimpse of him in the lantern light, looking tired and shrunken—and that was the last thing he ever said to me.

I sat and stared at the bag for a moment. I understood. He had weighed what he saw, weighed the best of his hopes against the evidence for my incrimination, and had come to the only honorable decision he could make. There was no room for an apology or an explanation: my situation was unarguable. And there was the fact of the land, of the

border between two farms. That was also unarguable. He could fire Harlan—and I'd guessed he probably would—but that would only spread the word faster. I had to go. I picked up the bag and set it on the foot of the bed. I turned the brass hasp at the top and its mouth sighed open. I had to go.

The whole operation didn't take me long. I threw off my funeral suit and folded it carefully, soiled as it was, before rolling the pants and jacket into a smooth bundle and lodging it in the bottom of the bag. Everything I owned—a few changes of clothing in three dresser drawers and the odds and ends a child collected, or at least what I chose in the moment to take with me—wouldn't fill half of that bag. I made short work of the clothes, pulling a pair of overalls from a drawer and putting them on as I packed, Then I took a look around and considered what, among my meager possessions, would be of potential use. A map of the world, already out of date, was pinned to the wall behind a toy airplane made of balsa wood and tissue paper turning slowly in the air as it hung from a string on the ceiling. A torn print of van Gogh's almond blossoms hung to one side. Under a wooden chair in the corner was a cardboard hatbox that held my old kinoscope. I put that in on top of my clothes, then pulled down my mother's books from the shelf above my bed. I arranged them into a neat stack, from largest to smallest, as I laid them in carefully beside the box. They were heavy and I didn't know where I was headed or what I'd do with them, but they were nearly all that I thought of as my own. When I was done, I looked around for a moment. Then I clasped the bag shut.

But the longer I had packed, for as little as I folded up and laid in the bag and as quick a work as I had made if it, the angrier I had grown. I was angry at Betsy and at her mother, of course, and at Harlan, too, for what he'd said, but also for having taken what had

been my place—as ridiculous as that might sound now—and for having taken advantage of Betsy when he shouldn't have, and for how coarse the scene in the barn had been as I now pictured it, and at myself, for that matter: maybe there was nothing I could have said and done, since Victoria Meyers was a lost cause if her daughter had to save herself (and I knew that was how we all saw the issue). But I had failed to defend myself, short of my denials, and I had let myself become a victim. Even though I now knew that he guessed different, when the time had come I had failed to stand up and reassure my father that I wasn't what I'd been accused of being. And while I was angry at him, too—for not having sat down beside me and asked for my side of the story, improbable as it might seem, and for his decision, as right as it was—I realized that he was the creature of Betsy's accusations as much as I was. None of it was fair and none of it was right—and none of that mattered the least to me now, as I thought about it, and I hoisted the bag off the bed and gave it a rough shake as if I had Harlan by the scruff of his neck and was about to march him to the end of the drive and shove him out, onto the road. I didn't know it then, but I had finally found myself, I suppose, and by the time I was done I had set my mind in order and my thoughts were clear. I knew where I was going.

At the top of the stairway I blew out the lantern and descended in darkness. It was the most familiar route I'd ever known. I could see that the house had been straightened up and set to rights—you'd have never known we'd had a full day of visitors—that the neighbor-ladies had taken care of that, as they'd take care of my father, I was sure. I walked straight through the kitchen and out the back door, ignoring the promised envelope on the table and not encountering my father, who had retreated to the bedroom of which he was the now the sole occupant. The screen door slammed shut behind me and I crossed the

yard—but I didn't go to bunkhouse, where Harlan had likely already dragged himself and was, I supposed, nursing a goose-egg with a damp rag and bottle of liquor in his shabby room. And I didn't go to the barn. Instead, I crossed the yard and retraced the path I had taken earlier, out through the orchard to the rise that overlooked the stream, following the trail of my footprints trodden through the long grass, to where I knew I would find the film crew gathered in their camp. I broke past row after row of trees, pushing my way through the branches in the very last of the daylight until I emerged from the other side and felt the ground rising under my feet toward the ridge. I didn't look back, and when I reached the crest I bounded over it, bag in hand, and skidded down the slope until I was just across the stream from the line of tents, the mountains in the distance dark against a field of stars rising in the night sky ahead.