

Pam Durban

In Darkness

The summer Jennifer was ten, her grandfather Turner said she must learn to be silent with the rest of them. It had been a summer of abrupt decisions — loud voices, suitcases packed in the middle of the night, lights snapped on — and she'd discovered that the way to get along was to make herself small and to follow wherever they led. In May, when her mother and father had decided that she must spend two months in Hamilton with Grandma and Grandpa Turner because Mommy was going away for a while and summer was Daddy's busy season at Kodak and besides wouldn't it be fun to visit in Hamilton for that long, she said yes because she understood that was the only answer they'd hear. And when her grandmother said she must choose one dress to wear to meeting on Sundays, she chose a plain blue dress with a round collar and red smocking at the waist and wrists. And when her grandfather said she must learn to be still with the other Quakers, she left behind the colored pencils and paper that had distracted her through other summer meetings, and she sat with her hands folded with the rest of them and waited, watching the sunlight slowly take the room, one wall at a time, dissolving the white boards in light.

The meeting house was a gaunt one-room building with gray benches and plain tall windows. The people (like their house, she thought) were also plain and clean. Sitting among them that summer, Jennifer counted the colors in the room — her red smocking, green shutters, red stove-pipe on the wood stove — and felt secretly proud to find herself among the colors. The women wore dark dresses, muted patterns; the men smelled smoky, wore white shirts, gray pants. After the greetings, the shifting and coughing had subsided, they were quiet together. At first, it was just the ordinary comfortable quiet of people sitting together in a room. But then, the silence seemed to come to life. Every Sunday, she listened and looked for that moment but she always missed it. Instead, it was as if the silence had always been and the people came into it. Once it had begun, the silence moved among them almost like a breeze. From the bare polished floor to the sharply pitched roof, the silence moved and when the quiet filled the room, when the people were inside the silence, listening, their faces changed, softened, rested, as though the silence itself had become human for a moment on each of their faces. No longer fierce, sad, hungry — the way her mother had looked before she left for Pittsburgh — they looked like people who'd found something they'd lost, something they recognized. Her grand-

father said they were resting from toil. For Jennifer, the moment when the silence was deepest, when the room was so full of silence it seemed to be a brimming glass that could be spilled, the moment when something flashed up among them out of the middle of the silence, had a pure sweet feel, like dunking yourself in cold water. Every time, a small cold shiver danced straight up her back and she wished she could stay there. She shut her eyes then and tried to hold onto the feeling but it receded in front of her and was gone by the time someone said Amen.

At home, in her grandparents' house, she often checked her own face, expecting a change. She stared into the dark bright eyes and sometimes just as she turned away from the mirror, she thought she caught a glimpse of another reflection, an expression similar to the one on the people's faces when the silence was deepest.

Every Sunday as they drove home, she'd ask: What were the people looking for? And every Sunday, Grandpa Turner prompted her, his eye with its wild white eyebrow fixed on her in the rearview mirror: What do we say?

Light, she'd say, bored with the answer. The leaves of the young willows that lined the streambed beside the road flashed silver when a breeze stirred them and she wondered if that was the light they meant, the underside of what you could see.

That's correct, he always said. We call it light.

But where does it come from? What's it for?

Sometimes her grandfather would only say that the light was invisible, and this light was what made us live.

How can you see it then?

With other eyes, he'd say. She giggled at the thought. He looked stern as a mountain when he talked that way. He said the people were looking for the light inside them and the only way to find the light was to be very still, to go into the dark and look.

The dark?

What you see when you close your eyes, he said. That's what we are, and the light is why we are and the light is inside the dark.

Her Grandmother Turner would get impatient then and say, It's what we have in common, Jennifer. It's what we all have been given and what we want and give to each other. But no one could describe this light or say it starts here, ends there, this is its shape and if we all had it in common, then why did we have to work so hard to find it, why did we have to be so still?

Because, he said, that's how we're made. This is the light that banishes the inner dark, he said.

What's *banish*? It sounded black and cold and far away.

Sent away, he said. She understood then. Love did it. And love was what you waited for too. Just you wait, they'd say. Just wait till your mother comes home, what a good time you'll all have again.

So she waited. She couldn't remember a slower summer. The days in Hamilton had passed as thickly quilted as the man who came in June to set the beehives in her grandfather's orchard. Dressed in padded gray clothes, with a net over his face, the man moved among the apple trees in his clumsy dance. She envied him his clothes. Even the bees had seemed sluggish that summer. Some years, they worked fast, speeding from blossom to blossom, their legs furred with pollen. Some years, they buried themselves so deeply in the blossoms you couldn't tell them apart from the flowers. But that year it was cold and damp until late June and the bees, if they left the hives at all, flew clumsily from tree to tree and dropped heavily into the flowers. It wasn't even fun to run after them because they were easy to follow and nothing happened when you caught them. That was the summer she found out about waiting. The Quakers waited too but they got what they wanted. She waited but the trouble was, she didn't know what she was waiting for, only that it would be different. It seemed she'd have to wait even to know what she was waiting for.

Late in July her father came and took her back to Webster's Crossroads. Her mother arrived August 11 on the 2:05 bus from Pittsburgh and Daddy took a vacation so he could be with her. They talked from the time they left the bus station in Rochester until they passed the last suburb and dropped into the valley where Webster's Crossroads lay. The closer they got to home, the less her mother talked and the more she stared out the window. Finally, even her father was quiet. They'd taped balloons to all the door frames and they'd lettered a paper banner that read Welcome Home. Her mother blushed and smiled and fingered the edge of the banner and then she set her suitcase in the front hall just inside the door. When Jennifer and her father grabbed the handle she said, Just leave it there, please, I'll get it later.

Not on your life, he said.

Mommy got very patient then. She pressed her lips together: Just leave it there I said. But he picked up the suitcase anyway and he said: Margaret, it's all right, really, just relax. Her mother walked heavily upstairs then and took a shower and had a drink and Jennifer understood, with a sinking feeling, that normal was over even before it had begun.

And later, after dark, she gathered Jennifer up into her lap and tried to tell her their story about the great tree that grows between heaven and earth and about how the stars over the valley behind the house are really the buds and leaves of the tree. But she forgot one part of the story and mixed up another and Jennifer grew more and more restless until finally she interrupted: Mother, she said, you know Pegasus? Well, he's just stars in the *shape* of a horse. Her mother sat very still then, blinking hard and then she leaned over and kissed Jennifer on the top of her head and said, Right you are, honey, and then she went in-

side. And that was her mother's first day at home.

The second day was no better, nor the third. By the third day, Jennifer wondered if normal ever really existed or if they'd invented something called normal to stand in place of what they really meant. For two days, they'd visited every boring place they'd ever been. They visited the two wineries nearby and as usual her parents sipped wine and allowed her one small sip. They visited every musty antique store along the highway. She knew the contents of these stores so well she could have walked through the rooms blindfolded, naming the things no one ever bought: stuffed rooster, butter churn, dented milk pail, photograph made on tin. That was boring enough, but Coneseus Lake was the last straw. She and her father had been there to swim almost every day. She had to be ordered out of the car and lifted into the rowboat — the Hughes III, named after the three of them. She would have been content to wait on shore, to look up and find them, shading her eyes against the glare, and to arrange the freckled pebbles that brought the dim cool feel of the lake home to her thumb, into her own pathways.

But no. Her mother snapped, her father scowled. They hustled her into the rowboat and her father said she was part of this family too and she might as well get used to it. And he rowed them into the center of the lake where the water is deep and, even in August, cold. And he made them bow their heads and hold hands and swear: Death do us part, again, he said. And when he said *death*, she thought *the lake*, he means the lake, and she felt a chill, as if the sun had set without warning and the night cold had seeped through the bottom of the boat and was swirling around their ankles, like fog. He squeezed her hand and she squeezed back and squeezed her mother's hand but neither of them opened their eyes. She looked around and saw that they were alone on the lake, the sun really was sinking and the shore seemed far away and rapidly darkening. A loon flew overhead, trailing its clear mournful call. Then there was only the sound of the small waves lapping against the sides of the boat. The quiet, the dark water seemed to Jennifer trackless as the silence in Quaker meeting had been. Light, her grandfather said. The light is hidden inside the dark. She closed her eyes then and looked for the light and she saw the lake, a dark circle drawn around them, and saw the three of them. They gathered the light into the boat and held it there till they were the only spot of light on the lake. As long as they were there, she thought, the lake would never be completely dark because they could never be completely dark the way water can be, or sky. They were different.

As her father rowed them back to shore she felt very solemn and grown-up.

The cookout to celebrate her mother's homecoming was Sunday night. They were grilling hamburgers in the backyard. Her father tossed the long-handled spatula with one hand and caught it behind his back with the other. His wedding ring glinted on his hand. Her mother didn't know, but Jennifer knew, that he'd rummaged through the house looking for the ring he'd taken off when she'd left. That broad band of white skin left by the ring had been the first thing she'd noticed when she'd come home from her grandparents' house in Hamilton. They'd said their rings were a sign of the love that would always be inside them. Well, what did the missing ring mean? No, it wasn't that love was gone. Love doesn't do that, he'd explained one night not long after Jennifer came home from Hamilton. She couldn't sleep, had called to him. The night sounds — wind, sleepy birds, a big hoot owl, loud radio music downstairs — seemed amplified, confused. She'd tried to concentrate on one sound but another intruded, then another, and the sounds tangled with a memory of her mother in her long dress with her white lacy shawl around her shoulders, until the night was as tangled as the branches of the tree that had snagged and drowned the girl, a summer friend, over in Hamilton.

It changes, her father had said that night. Doesn't mean that Mother doesn't love us or that we don't love Mother. He'd smelled of beer and sounded distant. No, I care too much, he'd said. And he sounded angry then, as though he were arguing with someone, the way her mother had sounded when she'd said she loved herself too, and that's why she had to go away for a while. That night Jennifer thought he wanted to hit everything, only he couldn't decide where to begin. Then he'd shaken himself. I'm sorry, he'd said. Daddy's sorry. He'd smoked his cigarette carefully and knocked the ash off into his palm and sat there rolling it lightly so it didn't break up. I believe time will prove me right about this, Jennifer, I do. And you must believe too, he said. So believe was what you must do. Believe in what? Love changes, he said, but it doesn't go away.

All summer, she'd watched the band of lighter skin darken, but it never blended with the brown of his hand. There was something repulsive about the white skin, something dead or private-looking, a mark that people shouldn't see.

Well, when Mommy said she was coming home, he sang "I'm Getting Married In The Morning," he put back on his wedding ring, cleaned the house, mowed half the lawn, and rushed to Sears and bought a porch swing that he hung on the back porch just off the kitchen. She has always wanted one of these, he said. That had been on Thursday. His ring fit perfectly down over the blank place, but Mommy didn't care for the swing. Now, Margaret asked why the swing, Ed, it's almost autumn.

Got a porch, got to have a porch swing, he said. He fanned the charcoal till it glowed. It's like two plus two, he said.

Equals sixteen, Jennifer shouted.

Not so loud, her mother said.

Right you are, her father said. There are porch swings, sweetheart, and true love, flags, blue skies, the tall corn of Iowa, fathers and daughters, mothers and fathers, summertime, wheat fields, Webster's Cross-roads, New York, and snowdrifts, he said, and apples, and even Buffalo, New York.

So far so good, Jennifer thought. She yelled Daddy, what's those.

Are those, her mother said. It's just a tide of silliness, Jennifer, she said, shooting her daughter her shy, darting, sideways look, just a tide and a flood of silliness. He's capable of that sometimes too, no matter what he says. She looked happy, Jennifer thought. The tense lines around her mouth and the dark look around her eyes were gone. She winked at Jennifer.

It's a new day, Maggie, her father said. Daddy's being happy and trying to find words for it, she thought. She remembered about happiness. Happiness was something to believe in. Happiness was part of the story that would start again — only it would be better — now that her mother was home. Happiness made the story go. Her father came from the South; they'd met in college and fallen desperately in love; they'd been so happy. Now they lived in New York state and Jennifer was born and everybody loved her because she was so pretty and sweet and made everyone happy. Mommy and Daddy loved Jennifer with all their hearts. And happiness was also what Mommy wanted when she went away — a chance, she'd said, some happiness of my own. But Jennifer wondered. What does happiness do? What is it that sent Mommy away and brought her back and made them speak to each other in tense voices? They said love did it.

Her mother went into the kitchen. They listened to her knocking around and swearing to herself. Mommy's pretending she's forgotten where things are, her father whispered loudly to Jennifer.

Mommy's not pretending anything. Her puzzled voice preceded her to the door, a slender woman in jeans and a green tank top piped in bright rainbow colors. Where have you hidden everything? she said.

Have I? he said. I thought I put it all back in the right places. He winked at Jennifer.

Oh you, her mother said, and she ducked back inside.

Mommy went to Pittsburgh, Jennifer said, carefully, quietly, and her father's hand bore down on the top of her head.

Yes she did, he said. And now she's back and that's what we need to think about, isn't it? Jennifer nodded. *Gone*, they said, was simply a gap. When gone ended, things returned to normal. They said *normal* with thankful voices. But now gone was over, but normal hadn't come back. She couldn't explain. It wasn't like going to her room anymore and finding it familiar; it wasn't like crawling into bed and taking a nap

between them. Since her mother had come home, something didn't fit.

Found it, her mother said, holding out a wooden salad bowl. His eyes changed, a light seemed to pass over them and he grabbed one of Margaret's fingers and wiggled it. Eureka, he said, and he held onto the tip of her finger. She almost stumbled, frowned at her feet, at the two of them in the swing, and sat down on the porch's bottom step.

Jennifer climbed down from the swing and went to her mother who was sucking an ice cube with her knees drawn up close to her chest. She put her arms around her mother's neck and kissed the back of her head and rubbed her nose in her mother's hair. It smelled of milk and made her drowsy. She leaned, her mother turned, and Jennifer kissed the air. Honey, her mother said, honey, Mommy loves you but she doesn't want you leaning on her right now, all right? It's too warm.

Come here, baby, her father said brightly. Daddy'll hold you. He grabbed her up under the arms and she felt slack and gloomy. He pulled her close and she felt his heart beating against her back. Stuffy, Jennifer said, and she slid off his lap.

Did you hear that, Mother? he said. He laughed but it wasn't funny. Our daughter's growing up. She said my holding her made her feel stuffy.

Is that so? her mother said. She sat still, listening. *You're a part of this too*, he'd said. Part of what? Jennifer wondered. Of their love for each other and for her? Of this cheerfulness then and of what crouched below what they said? Her heart gave a big thump. She was certain they'd heard, that she'd given herself away and she looked up, waiting to be discovered. But both of them were staring off in the same direction — past the hemlock trees and over the broken fence that marked the boundary of their yard.

You know, believe it or not, Jennifer, Mom and I have discovered we have a lot in common over the past few months, he said. He spoke to Jennifer but he frowned at the back of her mother's head.

What's *in common*? Jennifer asked.

You, her father said, and he dove at her. She squealed and ran, sure she was pursued, knees pumping high in panic until she was past the hemlocks and found herself alone and crouched and watched them. From there, they looked like two ordinary people — almost without faces, the way it used to be, her parents who loved her with a love that was vague and warm as the days she washed through dimly. But now, since her mother had gone away and come back, every time she looked at them, some big question stared back. She unfocused her eyes and tried then to make them strangers whose soft hands and eyes spelled *love*, into whose midst she'd tumbled one day, a small stone from the sky. She would have liked to be that way again. When she was little, they'd played a game that her mother called "Just Imagine." Just imagine you aren't my parents, who would I be?

A little speck, a little girl speck.

Would I have a name?

Only to yourself, one you made up.

Would I be lonely?

Very lonely.

Who would my parents be?

The wind and the rain.

But who would I be?

Nobody.

And so on, round and round and back again. And what if it were true after all? Her mother lifted her heavy brown hair off the back of her neck. Her father swung and puffed his pipe. Under her breath, she commanded them to freeze.

They froze. Her father's pipe smoke hung suspended and she was Jennifer the magical, the powerful, and they would wait for her, she would make them wait until she caught up with them or they became themselves again, until they told her what was different though nothing seemed to be, who spoke when they seemed to speak, how this love that had taken her mother away and sent her back was the same (they said so) as what had created Jennifer in this world. Her mother slapped her knees and stood up. She pressed a finger to her lips and frowned and then she went inside. Jennifer ran back. What are you and Mommy talking about? she said.

Nothing, her father whispered. Have we been talking?

Not funny, she said.

Not supposed to be funny, he said.

She was about to reply when she was struck by a wish, a wanting so potent she thought that if she could just have that one thing, she would be happy. She wished she could be the boy she knew in Hamilton who cut pictures of motors out of magazines and carried them around in a shopping bag, who could dump them out and explain them. All kinds of motors — washing machine motors and the engines of cars, giant turbines and the tiny motors that drove electric clocks. He understood what they were for, said only he knew why they worked and all the children were afraid to make fun of him. She wished she could be that boy.

You know Mommy, her father said, nodding toward the door where her mother had gone.

Daddy, don't talk, she said. Don't talk. She put her hand over his mouth. Startled, he grabbed her wrist. Jenny, he warned. Then he seemed to remember, loosened his grip. Mommy will be back, he said. She's inside, she's coming back. Jennifer studied him, struggling to match another time with this time: both times, Mommy was coming back and what was about to begin again was something fine, better than before. She remembered. He'd said the same thing at the bus station when Mommy had left.

He'd held her hand tightly there too, so tightly his strength seemed to scare him, so tightly the bones had crunched in her hand and she'd understood then, it crowded in on her and made it hard to breathe: why, he's afraid. And then she'd been afraid too, afraid the way they said two people were afraid when they were drowning and grabbed onto each other and they both drowned. That day at the bus station, she'd tried to pull her hand away and she thought for one crazy second, as the lights began spinning overhead in small brilliant orbits and he'd loomed over her, that he might topple on her. The bus sighed, released its air brakes with a sharp rush and he said I can't help it, can you understand that? And he looked down at her with his terrible forehead and his unseeing eyes and he said: Mommy's gone to collect herself, Jennifer, Mommy's coming back. At times like these, that terrifying picture returned: an exploding Mommy, then Mommy stooping, collecting herself, putting the pieces in a brown paper lunch bag, bringing the pieces home. Love did it. And now she was back. That was love, too. Someday they would explain. Later, Jennifer. Just have faith.

I'm hungry, she said. The screen door slammed behind her and her mother came out, drying her hands on a dish towel. Me too, her mother said. Daddy too. Just as soon as your daddy finishes cooking, we're going to eat.

Over the valley behind their house, the sun was setting in a swirl of blue and gold. It was the kind of sky that prompted her mother to sigh and declare their view the prettiest view in the world. Down below, at the beginning of the woods, where it was already dark, a mole-gray mist climbed the wheat field. When the mist reached their house, Jennifer thought, night would begin for them.

When the hamburgers were done, she refused to sit on the ground. Fine, her mother said impatiently, then sit on the bottom step here and pretend we're on a camping trip and we're the only people in the world.

Jennifer shook her head no.

OK, her mother said. Just sit there and be stubborn then.

Thank you, she said. She'd noticed that when people didn't want to do something, they became polite and then there was a fence around them that no one could cross.

They gave her a plate with the world's biggest hamburger on it. It was like a cartoon hamburger, the kind she ate with her father every Saturday at the drugstore: no onion, no mustard, a frill of lettuce and the reddest red tomato. Twice she tried to bite into it and twice the bread slipped and a pinkish mix of catsup and mayonnaise splattered onto her plate. It was the most beautiful hamburger in the world, but she couldn't eat it. She began to whimper. Well what is it? her father said.

Can't, she said.

Course you can, her mother said. Her father watched her mother but

her mother looked at neither of them, just kept chewing her own hamburger in small fierce bites and staring straight ahead.

Honey, you like hamburgers, her father said. You've always liked hamburgers. I've never seen a kid cry so much over nothing, have you, Mother?

Yes, she said.

Well for Christ's sake, what's she got to cry about, he said.

Why don't you ask her, you're the word man, her mother said. This was a joke between them: You're the word man, her mother said to tease him. You're in word-processing, you're *into* computers, you figure it out. But she wasn't teasing now.

I'll do just that, he said. Jenny, he said. Jennifer Lynn. Stop that now and tell me what's wrong. But Jennifer couldn't stop. She was away and flying down that long intake of breath that tries to fill the empty place that always seems deeper than the breath that tries to fill it. Her mother knelt beside her. Breathe, she said. Jennifer, breathe. She clapped her daughter on the back and Jennifer breathed and wailed and jerked her shoulder out from under her mother's hand. It's too big for her, her mother said wearily. She rose from her knees like an old woman, first one leg, then the other. She wants you to cut it up for her, her mother said.

Well doesn't she know how to ask?

I don't know, her mother said. Where'd she learn this trick? Who taught her anyhow? She didn't do this before I left?

That's right, her father said. What did you think, that she'd just sit here and wait for you?

Right, her mother said.

Right, he said. And the way they said it, *right* was a big engine that pulled a long black train out of a tunnel. You saw the engine and you sensed by the way it labored that it was pulling a weight, but you couldn't see, you couldn't, and you trembled against that seeing.

OK then, love, the man said. He sounded tired too. Against the sky where the stars were backing away, his face looked worn and huge. When he picked up the knife, she shrank violently and flung herself sideways on the grass and cradled her head in her arms. Well, Christ, he said. Now what?

She felt her mother kneel down beside her again. It won't work, she said. There's no reason for any of this, Jennifer. She opened one eye and stared at the ground. Oh God, her mother said and she began to rub Jennifer's back in wide, smooth strokes. Jennifer felt drowsy and warm; she knew she was exactly where she belonged and wanted to be. For the first time since her mother had come home she felt safe again, back in the darkness with nothing to do. Her mother's voice went on and on, gently now: You've got a mouth, she said. See. She pried Jennifer's face away from the ground and held her chin and pointed

to her mouth. See, she said. You've got a mouth like my mouth and like Daddy's mouth. You can use it like we do and ask for things, she said. Jennifer rolled over. Where her shirt had hiked up, moist dirt clung to her stomach, and the sky kept going away away away and below the sky, poised at the edge of the valley where in winter, when the green was gone from the surrounding land, their exposed house looked so frail a hand could flatten it, in that place there were only herself, her mother, her father and the silence where the secrets of things lay hidden. She hated her mother's words then, hated the whole idea of *what you want*, of needing or wanting anything, of having to crack that silence and ask and want, with a cold and definite hatred. And they called this love — what you needed and could neither ask for nor understand; what you closed your eyes and felt for blindly. She vowed to herself then, as solemnly as if she'd written the promise on a sheet of paper and dropped it into her secret place, the knothole of the basswood tree near the creek, never to want anything. Her mother searched her face and Jennifer stared back at her and with the power of the knowledge of the new way she would be warming her, in pity and anger she said Your mouth, Mother. And thought — that's a curse. When they said *don't curse*, they meant what she'd just done, not the words but the feeling that caused the words. That was a curse.

Her mother grabbed the knife out of Ed's hand and chopped the hamburger into pieces and slapped the plate back onto Jennifer's lap. Now *eat*, she said. Eat, I said, before you dry up and blow away. Jennifer relaxed. What a wonderful thought. What fun that would be, to become small and weightless, to catch every breeze that happened by.

Well, her father said. No long faces now. You can eat later, he said and he scooped her up and carried her back to the swing.

Ed, her mother said, I just got her settled down, honey.

Well, she's upset, he said. She can eat later.

Margaret flung her arms in the air and gave up. Jennifer sneaked her thumb into her mouth and gave over to the drowsiness and the cool dark. She was too old to suck her thumb but they wouldn't notice because they were talking to each other and rocking the swing. Softly the peepers, with wild chilly voices, chimed in over and around them, first in small groups, distinct chirpings from different corners of the yard, then louder, more unified and soon the night was riddled with their noise. He said: Not to change the subject, Maggie, but I saved something just for you because I know how you love those lakes. Her mother said she loved the Finger Lakes because they were classrooms. She went on nature walks and bird walks and flora walks, saw Canada Geese, loons, killdeer and heard the lunatic pheasants chuckling as they ran, followed the reedy marshes west and south and came home with a knapsack full of leaves, feathers, stones, roots that Jennifer had danced and begged to hear about. She said they each had a language. Her father

wincing at that. Well, I have to have something that speaks to me that way, she'd say. Someday, her mother would say, you can go with me, Jennifer. Now Jennifer thought: The next time she asks, I will say no thank you. She felt the satisfaction of that refusal as if it had already come true.

Are you listening? her father said.

Don't I look like I'm listening? she said. He shoved his face close to hers then and studied her. Now that you mention it, he said. She blushed and bit her lip.

Anyway, he said. They took a sounding in the middle of Seneca Lake last month and guess what? There's no bottom to the damn thing, at least not one they could find. I have a newspaper clipping somewhere.

Imagine, her mother said. Must be an underground river or something down there, imagine that.

Monsters, Jennifer said.

No, no monsters, her mother said. Creatures, maybe, but no monsters.

Monsters, Jennifer said. Anything could be monsters, she thought. Sometimes the peepers were monsters. Sometimes it seemed they tried to shriek louder than anything around them. Once her father had been playing the stereo on a summer night much like this one. Her mother kept shouting at him Turn it down, turn it down. He pretended to misunderstand her — you want it what? — cupping hand to ear like an old man. The more she shouted, the louder he turned the stereo, the wilder the peepers sang. It was like a chain reaction.

You're quite some philosopher, her mother said gently. I missed something, Jennifer thought. He looked pleased. He tucked his chin and beamed at her. They're trying to do something impossible, Jennifer thought. They're doing it right now.

Where does the lake go? Jennifer asked. They looked at her blankly. She felt her face redden. Well, maybe once in awhile you could want a simple answer, as long as it wasn't about you *personally*.

We're just talking, her father said. Who knows? China, the center of the earth maybe.

Oh no, her mother said. The water would turn to steam at the center of the earth.

Right, he said. Only I wasn't talking about *really*, Margaret, remember?

At least you think, her mother said, as though pursuing some thought of her own. At least you do that. A lot of people don't, you know. They're the miserable ones finally, don't you agree?

Oh I don't know about that, he said. They may be happier, especially if they've never known much.

I don't think so, her mother said.

Well if they don't know, he said, and a sly soft look came over his face, how do they know they don't know?

I think you always know when something's missing, she said. Just

because we don't know if the lake has a bottom doesn't mean it doesn't. And if I may be allowed to finish a thought, we act like it has a bottom and so nothing matters. Whatever you want, fine, do it. I think we should be more cognizant of the fact that maybe it doesn't have a bottom and how should we act then? Then what do we do? You know what I mean?

What's *cognizant*? Jennifer asked.

Aware, he said. It means a person knows things.

That's what I am, Jennifer thought. Cognizant. It seemed quite a responsibility — to be cognizant and at the same time to want nothing.

You don't do so badly yourself in the thinking department, he said. He stroked her thigh with a faraway look on his face.

Thank you, she said. She reached to tuck up her hair.

You learned a lot while you were away, he said. She folded her hands suddenly. I learned enough, she said.

Enough?

Enough, she said.

Was that hard to learn?

The swing stopped and her mother stared at him. She looked at him as though she were measuring him, as though she were trying to decide whether she liked him or not. Why did they talk this way? What was it for? Jennifer felt the boat, the way it had rocked the instant he'd said *death do us part*. It was her mother pushing the swing again.

OK, he said. Don't get mad. I just want to know, that's all.

It's too complicated, she said. You don't want to hear right now. It's late, she said. I'm tired and I'm not thinking clearly. Besides, don't command me that way, Ed. Really, I don't like it.

Who's commanding? he said. Look, I'm fine, I'm happy. Look, here's to us, he said, raising his glass of water. All right then, to us, he said again. To us and to whatever you learned that brought you home.

Stop it, Ed, her mother said.

Do you want me to understand or are you just talking, he said. I just need to understand, that's all.

Of course I want you to understand, she said. Later. Let's just enjoy ourselves for once. Jennifer nodded. That was good. If she were in charge, they would just listen to the peepers and to the night, to the wind in the hemlocks. Because the longer you talked the more you had to talk, the more you wanted to know and then you had to go on. You turned into one of those people at Quaker meeting. Or you turned into Mommy and Daddy, always looking, always wanting something.

Great, her father said. Fine, great. I'll forget it. Remind me if I step out of line.

Eat, her mother said, and she shoved Jennifer's plate back into her hand. Carefully, Jennifer began to peel the bits of hamburger free from the soggy pieces of bun and to lay them in separate piles, not touching

one another. When she finished that chore, she picked off the tomato and lettuce and started to work on the catsup, squeezing the bun, scraping the goo with her thumbnail and wiping it on the side of the plate. She wanted the plain bun again.

Her father pushed the swing. Her mother pulled Jennifer close to her. She began to sing, *Sweet and low*, she sang, *sweet and low, wind of the western sea*. Jennifer's lullaby. When her mother sang, the wind blew across the western sea, that dim, milky sea, smooth as a brow soothed by a dim hand. Only tonight, when she closed her eyes and waited for the western sea, she saw the shore, and there were people walking up and down on the shore, turning shells with their toes, and the houses that lined the shore were brightly lit. She saw it as clearly as if she were there. She kept her eyes closed, trying to find that calm smooth place the lullaby always made, the cool place, smooth as a northern pebble. But it was no use. As her mother sang, the people walked up and down the shore of the western sea. Her mother's voice couldn't stop them.

So come on, Margaret, could you tell me, please, what you meant back there about what you learned?

Whenever you care to listen, she said, I'd be happy to tell you.

What should I do, telephone first to make sure you're free?

Oh stop it, she said, won't you?

No I don't think I will this time, he said. He stood up. I don't think I will stop it just now. I think I'll hear what you have to say. He watched her as if he were having trouble seeing her, but he kept looking. Her mother sat still and seemed not to breathe. Then she clapped her hands. Jenny, she said, time for bed.

Her mother's hand stopped her protest. She'd been tricked. So this was the end of *what you want*; it ended in some big secret. No fair, she said.

No fair is right, her mother said. Now kiss us and go get ready for bed and we'll come up and kiss you goodnight in a few minutes. Her mother held her. She held her for a long time, and she let her go and then she held her again. Don't slam the screen, she said.

Jennifer lingered in the kitchen, listening. Go on, Jennifer, her mother said. We'll be there soon. The burnished copper bottoms of the pots on the wall shone back at her and the quart jar of honey shone like congealed sunlight. She lifted the jar off the shelf and held it close to her face and tipped it so the pale gold honeycomb settled heavily to one side. She turned the jar slowly, trying to follow one cell all the way through the comb. She traced it with her finger on the outside of the jar, keeping her eye on that one cell, following until she came to the point where that cell met another and she lost the one she'd followed among all the other, all intricately, delicately, surely connected to one another. Jennifer, her father called. Are you dawdling?

No, she said.

We're waiting, he said.

It wasn't like any going to bed she'd done before. It wasn't like being carried piggyback up to bed and certainly it wasn't like being lifted out of the car half-asleep and being carried up to her room so that the trip between the car and the room was lost in the warm blot of her father's body and the covers closed over her like warm water. That had happened to another girl. No, she was going on her own this time, toward the small blue night-light in the upstairs hall. And then her room opened in front of her, yellow and white, like summer — yellow toy chest, bookshelf, yellow and white checked canopy over the bed. And there was the windowsill, the ant farm, the turtle asleep on his rock under his plastic palm tree, and beyond the windowsill, across the ghostly fences, over in the dark, the ponies at the farm down the road still cropped grass. She was sure of it. And beyond the ponies and the grass and the last lights, to the east, there was Hamilton and her grandparents, dressed in their plaid flannel bathrobes by now, and beyond them, yet connected to them, the meeting house, gaunt and silent and dark now, and waiting. But below her window, underneath the slanted tin roof of the porch, her parents were talking. She couldn't hear them. She pressed an ear to the screen and listened. She thought she could almost make out their voices, low and quiet at first, then angry, sharp. Her mother said All right then, Ed, all right. And then he asked her something, he wanted something, and their voices dropped and there was only the keening of the peepers, going wilder and higher, as though the whole sky would funnel down the broad whirling throat of the sound.

Then the porch light went out. One minute the grass was white, the next it was dark. Jennifer drew back from the window. They were gone. She heard them come inside. They always said Jennifer's a brave girl. Well, she guessed she knew a little bit now about being brave, why you had to be brave. It had something to do with the light's going out that way. It was because of love somehow, and because of what you wanted. You had to be brave, you had to wait and have what her grandfather said was faith which was a special kind of waiting, a special kind of bravery and love. You stood in the dark, in the silence; the light was inside you. That was wanting. So you had to be brave on account of two things — what you didn't know and what you had to do.

She heard them start up the stairs. She jumped into bed and turned out the light. It was important that they should pick their way through her toys and books in the dark to find her. She pulled the covers over her head and saw them coming up the stairs. They had their arms around each other. Her father's arms were dark and his shirt was white except where her mother held onto a handful of cloth at his waist. Soon they would stop at her door and see the mound of covers and catch on to the game and they'd say: Well, where's our Jennifer? Who's that underneath those covers?

Let's call her, Daddy, her mother would say. And they'd call — Jennifer — they'd call softly, making their voices sound far away. And call again while they tiptoed across the room and she waited, shivering with excitement close to terror, for what was sure to happen. For the moment when they'd each take a corner of the bedspread and draw the covers back slowly and say — Well look who's here. For the moment when they'd pull back the covers to reveal — Jennifer the fair. She hid her face with her hands, to keep from them how it shone.