Jacoba Hood

Send Me Meat

Ellie lived with her maternal grandmother, Cleta Schaefer, and once I had counted up the modern conveniences in their house — a radio, a refrigerator, and two electric blankets. Over there I got good at opening cans with a knife. Mrs. Schaefer and Ellie were related to everyone in Hennessey, Oklahoma, but they were a burden to all their kin, a mind-boggled old woman and a little girl who'd been known to go into the houses of her aunts when they weren't home. The aunts were relaxed enough not to lock their doors unless they were leaving for the weekend, but they weren't so very casual that they liked coming in to find Ellie standing before an open dresser drawer or inside a closet, with her hands full of their nylon nighties or with their dressy pantsuits slung over her elbow.

Once when Nelrita Berrong had been putting up groceries, sorting the different kinds of Campbell's soup, she'd heard splashing and singing and found Ellie deep in the bathtub, soaking off the grime she'd accumulated under the beds. Nelrita complained about it to me in the post office later that morning. "She claimed she wasn't snooping around for anything in particular, and I know it's true she hadn't taken anything because I searched her pockets good before I let her leave the house." Nelrita made a clucking noise from behind her mouthful of dim teeth and gave me the once-over; I was taller than she was, and I had the impression that only my height convinced her that I was mature enough for the implications of what she wanted to say next. "But there are some things we've all got that a niece or your own child for that matter just doesn't need to see."

I had hardly planned to get involved with an eight-year-old with a bad name. But after the insurance company my father worked for transferred him from the Talihina office, I didn't have any real friends except the ones I'd left back there, and every girl my age in Hennessey seemed to have all the friends she wanted. Besides that, I was an artist, and artists did not beg for company.

Ellie and I fell in together one day in October. I'd left study hall one afternoon to drive home and show my mother the back of my head. Somebody had thrown some chewed gum into my hair, and by the time I made it to the girls' room and pulled the stuck-together strands up so that I could see them in the mirror, I looked as though I had a bagworm. From the car I'd spotted Ellie, dawdling on some porch steps that didn't belong to her, all buttoned up in a sweater so yellow it sizzled. She could have been sighted by every teacher from there to Kansas.

By that time I'd heard about Ellie from people besides her aunt Nelrita and I suddenly realized that it was Christian to save her from both her sneaky tendencies and all the hateful people in town. At the same moment it came to me too that my well-kept mother might think differently of me once she saw what I was bearing in to her in my hair. She might reason that I had brought everything on myself somehow, that I wasn't charming enough or sophisticated enough or pretty enough to avert anonymous pelting.

I stopped to talk Ellie into getting in the car to do me a favor with my manicure scissors, my mother had been less appalled by the ragged spot than she would have been by the hairy gum, and one thing led to another. Four months later in the home ec fashion show, Ellie was modeling a dress I'd designed and sewn for her, a jumper in China blue that she prissed around in everywhere she went until eventually she ripped the side seams in outgrowing it. She was also figuring heavily in my portfolio. I posed her swinging a basket

of apples, petting the kitten I gave her, or disappearing in a cloud of butterflies. In a different mood, I occasionally sketched a garden of dead flowers around her, hoping that in a hundred years someone would find my picture in an attic and say, "A soul in agony drew this."

By spring I'd reformed Ellie. She didn't play hooky any more and she didn't slip through houses uninvited, examining whatever she could unearth. On that last point I was adamant, since I'd personally been warped by a discovery in my own basement in Talihina about a month before we moved.

My family had been preparing for a garage sale to thin our belongings before we packed, and Mother and I were going through our old curtains and slipcovers, mismatched spoons and discolored plastic roses. I opened up a cowboy novel, and a photograph of an imposingly pregnant woman fell onto my right foot. It was a shot from the throat to the knees, and the woman wore nothing but garters, hand-tinted, clumsily, in red and black. I saw brown stretch marks, distended brown areolas with big browner nipples, pubic hair as dull as iron. I had only learned to orgasm, laboriously and unreliably, a few months earlier, and the world was full of secrets, and properly so. I held the photo up to my mother.

"Who's that?" I asked.

She took the picture. "Beats me," she said. I watched her closely. She was no blusher, but her expressions were infinite, and she could betray herself with one of them. She grinned. "Reckon we could make a dollar on this?" she asked me. I snatched the picture from her and tossed it in the throw-away pile. It was of her, it had to have been, and all that was left me was to pray to God that my father was the photographer. The picture landed face up, and my mother's belly was so swollen it seemed to bulge into real space, as though the paper had bubbled.

The stone house where Ellie lived with grandmother was so old that it seemed to be held up only by the ivy that clung to it, and I always half-believed it was about to turn to sand that would just spill away from the vines. After I tapped on the front door on the morning of her tenth birthday, the last one I'd ever spend with her, I rubbed my forefinger against the wall and pressed an odd bronze grit into my skin.

Ellie didn't come, and I tapped again as quietly as I could, hoping her grandmother wouldn't hear me. I waited for a minute or two, holding my hair up with one hand so it wouldn't stick to my neck in the heat. There was no question that they were home. Ellie was expecting me to take her to the Oklahoma City Zoo, and the grandmother never got away from the house except to attend church, depending on Ellie to run to the post office or pharmacy or wherever. But I was there a little early, getting out of our apartment where my mother's voice flowed from her body to gently twitch my nerves no matter what room I was in. It wasn't that she spoke so loud, but our walls were like paper.

I took Ellie's screen door by the handle and banged it. Perhaps the grandmother wouldn't let her come to the door. Sometimes she remembered what my mother never forgot: that in April I had talked Ellie into answering the altar call at our church's annual revival. It had been a seeming triumph for me, saving Ellie's soul, but my mother hadn't liked it, and she didn't like it any better after Ellie's priest came over in person to our apartment. He'd explained to my family that Ellie had been baptized when she was eleven days old — he insisted that I read the certificate, as though my mother hadn't convinced me — and when he left, Mother went to the kitchen and chewed up six aspirin.

I had taken myself to my room and left my father alone with her. It wasn't just the priest and the aspirin. The pattern my mother had wallpapered the kitchen in, carrots and beets in hard-hitting oranges and purples, always made me feel like I was about to fall down. My

mother had never gotten over thinking of color schemes in naive terms, orange and purple, yellow and green, red and black. To see aqua and coral together nearly frightened her.

"Sheila, I've loved you all my life," I heard Daddy say. "Only this evening do I find out that middle-aged virgin men unnerve you. Have you any other secrets you've been keeping to yourself?"

"I wish I were a middle-aged virgin too," said my mother.

"Sheila," Daddy had said. "You talk yourself into more emotions than you discover that you actually have." I pictured my father flicking his blue eyes in her direction as he said this, then closing them, as though staring inward. With exquisite self-possession, my father refused to look at anyone, ever, for more than a second.

Finally Ellie's grandmother appeared, carrying a glass of iced tea. Her nose was very large, swollen at the tip. Seeing it always reminded me of one of my father's remarks, that ears and noses continue to grow after death.

"Well, what do you want?" Mrs. Shaefer demanded.

"I've come to get Ellie to go to the zoo," I said.

"What's your name?"

"Chrystal Anderson," I said. Occasionally the old lady couldn't even piece together who Ellie was. "Can I take Ellie to the zoo?"

"She's in the bathtub."

"Can I come in and wait for her? It's pretty hot out here."

"Oh, I don't know what's right," said Mrs. Shaefer, stepping aside a little so I could enter. The living room wasn't cool, but the ivy that crept up the outer walls and brushed the edges of the window panes seemed to hold back the worst of the mid-August heat. The armchair and the couch gave me the creeps, though; whenever I sat on them, the cushions gasped out a smell of people, and there was a deep long hollow in the couch,

as though someone had slept there for years and years. "Are you coming to save us?" the grandmother murmured in my ear as she moved past me into the center of the room.

My brain swelled like dough. "We're not going anywhere near the church."

"The grass in my yard is going to cover us up. We'll never be found, and somebody'll have to account for it," said the grandmother. She pressed the tea glass to her mouth with both hands and drank. "Jewell's coming home some day and mow, but I can't say when."

The old lady went over the tiny front lawn two or three times a week with a lawnmower that was probably thirty years old, the kind with paddles and no motor. Jewell was Ellie's mother. She'd run away from her husband with Ellie to live with the grandmother, but then she'd run away from the pair of them too.

"I hadn't noticed that the grass is so tall," I said. "Maybe you ought to get some of your ivy to grow on the ground. Then you wouldn't have to mow at all."

"I'm too old to get something like that started. You do it."

"I don't know how," I said, feeling as though I'd been asked to heal the sick, or raise the dead. I wasn't a gardener, and why didn't their priest, who understood perfectly the art of making house calls, come over here and look after their yard? "I'm going to get Ellie," I said, worried that the old lady would order me to mow the grass next.

"I don't know what that girl's doing in the tub so long. What's your intentions?"

"I'm taking her to the zoo in Oklahoma City," I said. "For her birthday. She's ten today."

"You don't take after anybody around here," said Mrs. Shaefer, coming close. She picked up a strand of my hair and tugged it, as though she might place me by its smoothness or tension. "Don't you have any people?"

I didn't see how I could possibly resemble my par-

ents much, my father with his flicking eyes, my platinum-topped, red-lipped mother. Anyone who caught sight of them would think they'd been raised in the slums of Gomorrah — not that Mrs. Shaefer was ever likely to have seen them, as housebound as she was. "My parents are here. But I guess I don't look much like them," I said.

The grandmother grinned so widely that her nose seemed to wag. "You might just as well be living here with us, and it'd be all the same."

"I suppose so," I said. "I'm going to call Ellie, okay? Ellie!"

"The varmint! The varmint!" said the grandmother. "I wish you'd try. But you'll have to change the sheets on Jewell's bed."

"Oh, I can't stay here," I said. "My mom and dad wouldn't let me."

"They've got to turn you loose soon. What are you? Thirty-five?"

"Eighteen."

"Ellie was walking when Jewell was eighteen. So you two are real close together."

"Oh," I said. The grandmother looked at me. "See, I'm leaving for college in two days."

"I'll change the sheets myself."

"Mrs. Schaefer, I'm sorry. I just can't."

"You better not be deceiving me," said the old lady, turning and walking slowly away. She bumped into that trough of a couch as she went along and freed its fleshy smell. "I'll go get Ellie so at least you can take her with you."

"Well, we'll be back before midnight. My folks, they won't let me drive in the City too late at night."

"Could be that's where Jewell went," said the grandmother, sneering. "If you see her, tell her to come back, providing it doesn't put you out overmuch."

Mrs. Shaefer staggered down the hall. "*She* looks like us," she called. Marylove, the calico I gave Ellie at Christmas, crept out from behind the armchair. Ellie

had wrapped a floral chiffon scarf around her neck so tight that her head seemed squeezed as far from her body as a giraffe's. I picked the knot apart and unwound the scarf.

Jewell doesn't have a corner on looking like Ellie and the grandma, I told myself as I squatted on the floor, ruffling up Marylove's neck fur. Any given individual in town was lucky if he had one feature to call his own. Ellie had extraordinary copper-colored eyes, but otherwise she was just another example of the Schaefers and Berrongs that filled Hennessey up. She'd been spared her grandmother's limber nose, and we could be grateful to her father for that, at least. While Marylove caught her breath, I remembered that my mother had said in December that Ellie couldn't take care of a pet. I always felt so dreary when my mother was right. I wished I'd never given Ellie a cat to be named something Catholic straight off the bat and now to be choked.

After Marylove started scratching her ear, thumping at it with her back leg like a rabbit, I stood up and went around the room to see what else Ellie had done since I'd been over last. But the only other mischief I found was familiar. On the bookshelf lay a huge old Holy Bible. It included the Apocrypha and, what was just as bad, a dust cover that Ellie had made in Wednesday night religion class. She'd crayoned a brontosaurus on it, and my hair stood on end every time I saw it, literalist that I was. I'd have torn it up ages back, but Ellie would have been crushed, especially since it was a fairly good brontosaurus, if one believed in those things. Anyway, God had so much to put up with already that He'd surely tolerate a little more.

Still, I held it against the elderly nun that taught Ellie's class. She could have made sure beforehand that Ellie knew to draw a poodle, say, or a horse, because every soul in town understood that Ellie needed constant supervision. Instead she always let her get away with anything. But with me everything had to be just

so. I had gotten that from my father, and I couldn't shake it, though he himself had proved to me that the practical consequences could get strange. One evening right after New Year's, while I experimented with hair styles in the bathroom, my parents' voices kept drifting in. When my chignon fell to pieces, I'd gone ahead and pressed my ear to the wall that separated me from their bedroom. I heard him tell Mother, "The end of my peter looks like bad baloney."

Anyone else would have picked the easy simile, weiner or hot dog, but my father was caught up completely in a dogma of exactness. Afterwards, though, my father was different, changed into a man with genitals like spoiled lunchmeat, a man who used his genitals, took notice of them, and made my mother notice them. I recognized in my father a man who had done much more than fool around with a camera when she was pregnant.

About ten minutes had passed since Mrs. Shaefer had gone for Ellie. Tired of waiting, I looked down the hallway. As quiet as it was, I might have been all alone in the house — it wasn't like our apartment, where every word spoken found a home. I walked toward the bathroom to see what was the matter.

A roll of paper in her lap, the grandmother was sitting on the toilet, sipping her tea. Ellie lay flat on her back in the bathtub with her feet where her head should have been. There was the small hairless cleft at the top of Ellie's thighs and then there were bubbles that rested under the faucet, completely burying her face.

"Oh my Lord!" I gasped. I looked to the grandmother for help, but she only lowered the glass from her lips and stared at me. Already dreading the memory of not knowing how to revive her, I made a dive for Ellie, hauled her up, and slapped the suds off her face.

"Hunh?" she asked "Chrystal! I didn't know you were here!"

"I was getting her," Mrs. Shaefer told me. "But my kidneys trouble me. Hurry up to the store and fetch me

some Cranapple."

I took a deep breath. The air in the bathroom was thick with water vapor and the scent of the dish-washing liquid that Ellie used for bubble bath. "What do you think you were doing under there?" I asked her.

"Nothing," she said. I stepped back, and she leaned over the edge of the tub toward me. "I didn't do anything. I was just listening."

"To what?"

"That noise in the water going thum . . . thum . . . thum."

It came to me after a few seconds. "You're listening to your own heartbeat, you little sap," I said. "I don't care if you lie in the water, but what got into you to stick your head under the bubbles? I thought you'd drowned."

"They're just soft," said Ellie. "I always do it."

"You're going to gald your lungs, girl," said Mrs. Shaefer.

I left the bathroom and went into Ellie's bedroom, where I picked clothes from the drawers, culottes because that was what I had on, so Ellie would want to wear some too, nylon panties and a blouse. Nothing was very clean-looking. Her thongs that I found under the bed were positively ratty. Ellie walked into the room backward, luring Marylove along with her trailing towel and with bubbles still clinging to her head. "Go rinse the soap out of your hair," I told her. When she came back I combed out the tangles. Her hair was short, coarse as rags and cork-colored when it was dry. Though her chest was flat — she had nothing but ribs, really — her nipples pooched out. I made a mental note: *Start wearing a bra.* "Why'd you tie that scarf around Marylove's neck?" I asked.

"For decoration."

I sliced a side part into her hair. "I took if off. She was practically blue in the face. Don't you tell my mother about it. Are you looking after your cat and feeding her right? She can't live on just potatoes and

Spaghettios and things. Give her some milk every single day. How long ago did you tie that scarf on her?"

"If we go quick, Memaw won't make us go to the store."

"Is she sick or what?"

"She can't act ever since yesterday."

"What's that mean?"

Ellie swung Marylove from the floor onto the bed and pushed her down on her side. "She can't use the restroom in either direction."

"Get your clothes on then, for Pete's sake, I said.

Ellie flopped down on the bed and lay limp while I threaded her legs into her panties and culottes and hung her thongs on her feet. But I got tired of that. "We don't have time for all this!" I exclaimed. "Your grandma's going to get off that pot and come in here."

Ellie hoisted her blouse over her shoulders, buttoning it as we sneaked up the hallway. Neither of us spoke or answered the grandmother's call from the bathroom. Outside, the sunlight fell like spears, loosening the grip of the ivy that wrapped around the stone house, chipping the stones to sand, and forcing my eyes closed. For a split second, crazy in the light, I wanted to hold Ellie's hands; I thought that either of us could yank a fistful of vines and spin the house into a dust devil.

"You mutilate something when you misinterpret or misname it," my father had said to me one night. I believed almost everything he told me, and during my senior year I worked on enhancing my vocabulary. I knew more words than anybody else in school. I became nearly as expressive as my father and as self-conscious as my mother. Exact and challenging words didn't make my classmates like me, but they weren't so careless of me. There was little need to fear chewing gum after I spread it around that one Pammy Lee Scarlet, my special enemy, wore a merkin.

"You are rutilant," I said to Ellie as we ate supper

beside the goldfish pool at the zoo. I could have as accurately called her piggish. She was on a feeding streak, showing off. She'd eaten three corndogs and a medium coleslaw. On her paper plate were two more dogs, a pile of Fritos, and a pickle. She'd bragged that she would eat half of the Jiffy branch chocolate cake that I'd baked for her birthday. She ate like that two or three times a week, but she seldom threw up and she never put on any flesh. She was very skinny and looked the way many poor people do, as though she were composed of wedges.

"Rutilant," said Ellie. "What's that one mean?"

"It means your hair has a reddish glow in this light," I explained. I didn't say it, but what always had a reddish glow, even in the intense clarity of noontime, were those eyes of hers. The irises were the size and color of pennies. Someday that could be attractive, if she wore the correct eyeshadows, but I wouldn't be around to pick them out for her. In a couple of days I'd be at Oklahoma Baptist, training for art and *femme fatale*dom. My mornings would be passed in studios and my evenings in continental restaurants, I had little doubt.

Ellie imagined I'd be home every single weekend. And really, I didn't know myself just how often I'd come back, but it seemed wise to keep a list of instructions for her. *Avoid pink, white, and purple eyeshadows* I thought to myself several times, so I'd remember to write it down before I left. Between Fritos, Ellie played with her little box of birthday candles as if it were a kaleidoscope, shaking it, looking through the plastic window on the front to see how the pinks and blues and yellows had fallen, shaking it again. She jiggled the square cake pan, so that sunlight would swirl across the foil covering as though it were disappearing down a drain.

I moved the book of matches from the middle of the table and set it by my own plate before she actually started getting on my nerves. Sucking on the ice from my Coke cup, I wondered what that cake had changed

into after a summer day under the car seat. Deep in the pool, the goldfish nudged each other, scattering at any quick move Ellie or I made, calm a second later. The babies were slim, pale and yellow, not yet ripe, but the old ones were as round and bright as the marigolds that bloomed all around the edge of the pool. I didn't see how the fish kept from cooking during the heat of the afternoon. Only a mimosa on the west side threw some shade into the water.

At my left a man I guessed to be in his mid-thirties sat across from a woman with coiled black hair. Their lips were heavy and pink, shiny from the tabouli they were eating. Then the man, lifting his green eyes to the woman, lifted also a clothespin from a king-sized sack of potato chips and quietly said, "Would you cry out if I put this on one of those beautiful nipples?" He waved the clothespin around, opened it and looked at it, then showed it to the lady. "I don't think it'll open wide enough though."

The lady chewed her tabouli without a care, but I turned back to the ice in my cup, feeling the squeeze myself — my own nipples were as big as acorns. I'd inherited them from my mother, who refused to wear a contour bra even in winter, who ignored the bumps in her sweaters or, more probably, got a kick out of them. Behind Ellie were a couple of boys my age or a little older. Like us they'd ordered corndogs, and they were pitching the flat wooden sticks at each other like darts. It was 1971, and they were late-blooming flower children. Their hair grew only long enough to run down inside their collars. Peace signs in bad greens were sewn to their shirts. "You know what I like about milk, Dennis?" asked the one with the weak chin. "Fish don't fuck in it."

When I sang "Happy Birthday" to Ellie, the man and the woman at the other table swallowed their mouthfuls of tabouli, wiped their glistening lips, and sang too. By the time we got through all the jingles at the end, they were holding hands across the table, the

clothespin poking out from the hollow their palms made. I ate the last piece of my ice and sent Ellie for more Coke.

The boy who liked milk threw a corndog stick into the goldfish pond, and the other one got up from the table to get it. When he glanced in my direction, his face was red. That could have meant the circulation from his head was pinched because he was crouching over the water, trying to rake the corndog stick toward himself without falling in or it could have meant that he was ashamed about the litter and his loud and uncouth friend.

He looked perfectly ordinary, an overgrown brunette boy, a little darker than me and big-boned, with thick thighs and long feet. I remembered his name was Dennis. He got hold of the stick and walked away, slinging water from his hands. The breeze shifted a little, bringing the bitter scent of marigolds, a scent that had some authority in it, mixed as it was with something the boy had stirred off the surface of the pool. The woman with the coiled back hair put the leftover tabouli away. The man cut a watermelon, rolling it along the table as he worked his pocketknife through the rind.

The man had barely scooped the heart of their watermelon onto their plates when Ellie rushed back to me screaming, half our Cokes slopped out of the cups. Gray goo ran down one cheek. "A bird!" she whispered between outbursts. "A redbird! Oh Mary, he-elp me!"

"Shut up," I hissed, trying to find a place on my paper napkin that didn't have mustard on it. Ellie's voice, when lifted, could pierce one's skull like a drill — my father often said that it opened his sinuses. At their table behind her bench the two semi-hippies were staring at us and flinching.

"He-elp me!" Ellie wailed. "Mary!" I was ready to sit on her. In just two days, I told myself, I'll be at OBU.

"Can I help you too?" asked the man. Frankly smiling, he stepped over to our table, pulled a handkerchief from his hip pocket, and poured a little Coke over

it. He removed the mess from Ellie's face with the deftness of a doctor. Melon juice and bits of melon flesh made his fingers twinkle in the fat light. In the heat of the summer evenings, the smell of his perspiration nearly lifted me toward him. Ellie gasped several times, trying to quiet down. The two boys quit watching us steadily.

"There. I bet it won't even raise a blister." The man tilted his head in my direction without actually turning his green eyes on me. "The acidity of the pop counteracts the alkalinity of the feces."

"Honestly, Blaylock," said the lady. "There's no chance of her getting a blister, Coke or no Coke," she told me.

"Parasites, then," Blaylock offered.

"Most unlikely."

"I'm kidding." He stuffed the handkerchief back into his pocket after only folding it once and gave Ellie a five-dollar bill. "Go get us all another pop."

"Don't walk under any trees," said the lady.

"Keep your head down and the Coke close to your chest," Blaylock added. Ellie went trodding away, bent over, and steering clear of the maples that lined the sidewalk between us and the concession stands. "Well, Mary, your little sister is learning that into each life some excrement must fall."

"She meant Chrystal," I muttered. I didn't feel like explaining that Ellie wasn't my sister, much less that she had been addressing not me but the Virgin. Not that I wasn't one just as well, but that was none of the clothespin man's business either. He and the lady looked at me, and when Ellie returned with their soda pop, they went back to their watermelon and their conversation.

I only listened long enough to find out that the lady's name was Rebecca. Ellie swatted at a fly that wanted to land on her cheek, on the sugary place left by the disinfecting Coke. I knew she would never make it as an adult. I drank my pop and sweated and prayed for the

breeze to increase or for the sun to drop faster. I wasn't bored — boredom would have been a relief — but I was uncomfortable, and I'd have given anything to be eating in a pizza parlor at that moment, or staying cool and entertained in some movie theater, or rollerskating.

Ellie slumped in front of me, picking at her last corndog. Once in a while she touched the place on her cheek, as though she couldn't believe she'd been cleaned up, or as though it didn't matter, once she'd already been soiled.

"Remember those big old hawks we saw on the drive down here?" I asked. "What if one of them had splattered you?"

"Quit it."

"Hawks are raptors." When she didn't ask what that was, I said, "Meaning they are predators. Meaning they are meat-eaters. Like you, eating all those corndogs. A hawk would fly a mile for your corndog."

"I wouldn't give it to him."

"Maybe he'd just pick you up along with it. I'd be running along underneath, waiting to catch you when your fingers finally slipped off the stick."

"Draw me."

"I didn't bring paper. What other birds did we see?"

She pondered for a second. "Sparrows."

"Yes," I sighed. Sparrows were certainly a safe guess. I'd wanted her to say grackles and get perked up. We'd driven right by a whole harvested wheat field of them, iridescent black birds that seemed to have to jerk their heads in order to walk. "Rockytop" had come on the radio just then, and Ellie had said that the grackles were dancing to the fast music and had bobbed her own head around the way they did theirs.

We'd seen lots of other birds too, but she never remembered anything. We'd seen a little covey of quail, their wings cutting the air, and six or seven blue jays that we'd honked off a barbwire fence. White egrets had been wading in the Cimarron when we crossed it. For all I knew, Ellie was having to take my word for it

about the hawks, though I'd pointed them out to her, how they perched at the very tops of trees and watched us drive past, their great breasts as pale as the moon. But she should have at least thought of the grackles. "Don't you remember those grackles?" I asked.

"Let's sing 'Rockytop.'"

"Forget it, little girl," said Blaylock. "Hillbilly songs weren't composed of altos, as I noticed your sister is when she sang 'Happy Birthday' to you."

So that explains it, I thought. I'd never figured out why I couldn't tame the chorus of that song. Ellie said at the top of her lungs, "She's not my sister. She's my mother."

Blaylock and Rebecca carefully kept their eyes open, their lips parted, just so much, to conceal their horror. "She's playing around," I breathed. "I only bring her to the zoo and things."

"Mama," said Ellie.

"Oh, grow up." I smiled as well as I could at the couple and noticed that the two boys behind Ellie were watching us once again. The next thing I knew I was telling Ellie, "Now you know you're ten and I'm eighteen" in the exact simper that I recognized as the one silly young mothers use when disciplining their two-year-olds in company. I wanted to pinch a chunk out of her.

"My dear," Rebecca said to Ellie, "do you know that even birds have belly buttons?"

Ellie cut her eyes at me.

"If my lady friend here says so, believe it," said Blaylock. "She has a college degree in birds."

"Even the cruel raptors have belly buttons," Rebecca said. She put a finger on a wedge of watermelon rind and pushed it into a slow spin, and what flesh was left on the rind seemed ready to seethe in the heat. It wasn't plain now whether she was speaking to Ellie or to Blaylock. "You know, a belly button is really a scar, and each bird carries a scar under its stomach feathers where it once was attached to the white of its egg."

I was seized by the desire to throw in a word about goat-suckers (also known as whippoorwills and night-jars), those large-mouthed, nocturnal birds once thought to such the milk from goats, but I realized just in time how vulgar that last part would make me sound and also that Rebecca would certainly fill me in on anything else there was to know about the so-called goat-sucker. I was outclassed, and I sat nodding in a well-bred, half-wit way, while Ellie batted her eyes at me, not to make up with me but because she was stunned.

"The raptors, cruel as the cross," said Blaylock, pleased. "As the cross, as the cradle, as crabapples you bite into with a sore tooth. What else?" he asked. He sniffed the air. "I can smell a poem coming on, the way some people can smell an approaching storm," he told Ellie.

"You smell marigolds and zoo animals," Rebecca observed.

"As cute as Chrystal," said Ellie. "As cute as cake. As these!" She grabbed her box of birthday candles off the table and shook it like a rattle.

"I guess I'll give you your cake now," I told Ellie, winded by all that playfulness. Already, though, she was peeling the foil from the edges of the little square pan. "Give me that!" I said, taking it. Her early threat to eat half the cake was still fresh on my mind.

Ellie leaned over the table to watch the foil come off — her tenth birthday, such an occasion for her. She'd counted every blue candy decoration as I'd stuck it on, and I'd used three packages' worth. But I could hardly look, after it had sweltered a full day in the heat. Sure enough, every rose, every letter, and all ten candleholders had gone drizzly and seemed sunk into the white frosting. I worried that we'd get sick, while in an ecstacy of fumbling and wax-bending, Ellie poked her candles into their holders and about a third of the way into the cake.

"How pretty," said Rebecca. "Doesn't somebody love you."

After we'd sung to Ellie once more and she'd made her secret wish and blown her candles out, I found that I had nothing good to cut her cake with. I made some passes with a plastic fork in the air over the roses and figured I would end up stirring the whole mess into a paste — cake, decorations, and all.

"Help them, Blaylock," said Rebecca.

Blaylock came over to our table with the pocketknife he'd sliced the watermelon with and some extra napkins. "'Happy Birthday, Ellie,'" he read aloud from what used to be the candy letters but were now mostly just blue stains on the frosting. "Ah, Ellie, you should have flowers on this most important day." He glanced over Ellie's head to the boys behind her and said, "One of you bring us some mimosa blooms. We won't get into trouble for picking those."

The mean one stared down into his lap, but after a moment the other one, Dennis, stood up and walked to the mimosa on the west side of the goldfish pond, as stiffly as though he'd been asked to dance. I wanted to object, but Rebecca threw me a look, as though I were much older than eighteen, and Ellie seemed flattered to pieces, twisting around to watch him pick her some flowers and not even paying attention to Blaylock as he dragged his knife through the cake and swerved to miss the roses.

The mimosa pompons riddled the early evening air with coral. The texture of the sunlight grew creamier every instant, and all the shadows were tinged with violet. When Dennis got to our table he was maroon, he was rose, he was magenta, he was every color of purple and red there is, and I thought that he would stop my heart, coming straight to me with his hands full of all those flowers.

He tipped the blooms out into a little pile in front of me and gave Ellie a strangled "Happy birthday." He took some change out of his pocket and gave that to her too. Ellie held the coins, two quarters, up for me to see, and I nodded wisely, as though I held great in-

sight into character, into who it was safe to take money from. "Thank you very much," Ellie said to Dennis. He smiled and hurried back to his table.

"Come here to me," I told Ellie, and when she did I put her quarters into my purse so she wouldn't lose them, and then I arranged some of the mimosa pompons behind her ears. Leaving two or three for me, Ellie gathered up the rest of the flowers and took them back with her to her side of the table.

Blaylock lifted a huge irregular piece of cake, oozing with roses, onto a napkin and asked, "Can anyone here think of a word with two meanings which cannot be reconciled?"

"I assume that one of us already has," said Rebecca. She wet her fingertip on her tongue and slipped some straying sprigs of hair back into her coil.

"Ellie, I have cleaved a slice from the middle of this cake for you, and when this wonderful woman marries me, she will cleave only unto me."

"Do you imagine I cleave unto anyone else now?" Rebecca teased.

"You'd kill me if you ever did." Blaylock spread out five napkins into a fan pattern and started loading them up with cake. Ellie was eating roses, tilting her head back and letting one blue blossom at a time slide off her fork and into her mouth. The rich evening light struck the pompons behind her ears and made every coral thread of a petal shimmer, and whenever she moved, a little golden dust was shaken from the tips of the blossoms. I'd never seen anything as beautiful as those mimosa flowers, and even Ellie began to seem like other children, soft and looked-after.

Blaylock gave me some cake, then carried his slice and Rebecca's over to their table, leaving two pieces out on napkins for me to worry over. I handed my cake across to Ellie so she could eat the frosting and then she handed it back. I ate my cake and let Ellie scrape the pan. I rolled a mimosa bloom stem between my thumb and forefinger to make the pompon flutter and

wished that Blaylock had taken charge of the two extra pieces of cake that he'd seen fit to cut and which Ellie kept staring at. Finally, expecting to trip and fall in the goldfish pond or something at least as graceless, I got up and took the pieces of cake in their napkins to the two boys behind Ellie.

The one I disliked didn't watch me walk toward them, as though he couldn't believe I was doing it, but Dennis was awake, his eyes welcoming my cake and me. He seemed precious in some way, in his anxiety to be nice and to deserve regard. The light that changed everything at that hour made the world spring up around him, so that he fit into its space and wasn't overgrown any more. I was amazed that at first I'd thought he looked ordinary.

"Cake?" I asked.

The one boy didn't answer, but Dennis said, "It looks good. I like lots of frosting." And I stood there chatting with him while he ate it, while Blaylock and Rebecca kept Ellie entertained, and I even managed to insist on wrapping the remaining piece of cake with another napkin, one of his, for him to take home later.

When Dennis finished, he sprinkled the crumbs into the goldfish pond. The fish swarmed to the surface as though they'd been waiting to fill their navelly bellies with chocolate cake since they swam out of their eggs. "I'll show you something," said Dennis, and so we crouched over the edge of the pool to touch the water with our fingertips. The fish raced to us and raced away, flirtatious things giving us cool baby kisses, dissatisfied with the taste of us.

Ellie swung her legs over the bench to face me where I sat visiting with Dennis. The light was less charged by that time, and all the colors with it: the mimosa pompons on the trees and behind Ellie's ears were peach, her copper eyes were a tempered mahogany, the goldfish were bleached almost white. Suddenly the breeze picked up and blew away all the accumulated heat of the day. "Can I wade in the water?"

asked Ellie.

"What? No. The zoo people will gripe us out."

"I want to," said Ellie. "Let me."

I made a summoning gesture and when she walked over to me I put my face into her hair and flowers and whispered, "You were so shook about that bird poop. What do you think the goldfish do in there?"

Ellie turned her head enough to look at the boy who preferred milk over water, and I could hear the word "fuck" in her voice, though she was still only drawing breath to say it. And then she would ask me out loud what it meant — it was another crazy word I'd know. I said, "I don't care if you go wade in the water. Wade in it." She shook her thongs off her feet, I lifted the pompons out of her hair so they wouldn't get wet or lost, and she was off, stepping down into the goldfish pond.

I sat half-listening to Dennis as he described his summer job at the Frontier City theme park across town, and I was half-watching Ellie as she walked in water up to her knees. After a while she sat down in it, too abruptly for me to tell her not to, though I'm not sure I would have anyway. I thought of more instructions to add to the list I was making for her: *Be kind to Marylove, Remember not to sneak in people's houses, Don't breathe bubbles.* I looked at the pompons in my lap and decided to advise her to someday wear coral eyeshadows. Copper and coral, I said to myself, wondering how two colors that should never have gone together went together.

I saw Blaylock point up toward the mimosa tree. "See that spider?" he asked Rebecca. She and I both turned to look, while Dennis's voice went on, pleasant and calm. After a few moments I found the spider, a big round one, poised in a web that was invisible in the twilight. "He's waiting," Blaylock told Rebecca. "'Send me meat,' he says to his god."

I didn't know then that I'd become an art historian and not an artist, that I would be a virgin a long time

yet, or that I wouldn't be taken out to supper in a continental restaurant until I was twenty-six years old. I didn't know that in two short weeks Ellie would present me with a sketch of herself wrestling a brontosaurus for a corndog, and I didn't even know yet that sweet as Dennis was, he'd forget his extra slice of cake and leave it in the napkins on the table. I was still looking at the spider's ball of a body when Ellie slipped up and hugged me, squeezing water into my shirt and culottes, pressing her bones into my side.

She ran back into the goldfish pond. A fly chewed the skin on my thigh, a blue jay swooped down very low among us. We all talked, but with longer and longer pauses. Ellie kept on playing in the pool — somehow she'd beaten some foam up onto her lips from the water — and the wind passed over the wet place she'd left on my clothes, drying it away and cooling me off more than I liked. I hadn't yet discovered what growing up would bring me to. I did realize that in half an hour Ellie and I would be driving home past white-breasted hawks, maybe dozens of them, asleep on leafy branches.