

Early Warning

1953



THE FUNERAL WAS a riot of floral exuberance—not just lilies, but daffodils and tulips and sprays of apple and pear blossom. Frank Langdon sat with his daughter, Janny, about six pews back on the right; his wife, Andy, and their month-old twins, of course, couldn't come all the way to Iowa. Janny, two and a half, was behaving herself. Frank took his hand off her knee, and she stayed quiet. The broken sounds of tears being suppressed rose all around him. Frank's sister Lillian, her husband, Arthur, and their four kids were two pews ahead on the left. Mama was sitting in the front pew, staring straight ahead. Granny Elizabeth was sitting next to her, alone now—Grandpa Wilmer had died in the summer; in the intervening nine months, Granny had traveled to Kansas City, St. Louis, and Minneapolis. His mother liked to cluck knowingly and say, "She's blossomed, hasn't she?"

His brother Joe's baby, the same age as his twins, looked like she weighed what they did together. Joe's wife, Lois, and her sister, Minnie, passed the baby back and forth to keep her quiet. Frank stared at Minnie for a moment. He had known her his whole life, walked to school with her for years, known always that she was on his side. Maybe she loved him still. Frank cleared his throat. Annie, the child's name was. Janny couldn't get enough of her—she talked to her and stroked her head if she got a chance. Across the aisle from Minnie

were Frank's brother Henry, his communist aunt Eloise, and Eloise's daughter, Rosa. His sister Claire—fourteen, nineteen years to the day younger than Frank himself—kept turning her head and looking at Rosa, and why not? The girl was at her peak at twenty, severe and slender, with the look of a French actress. She made Henry, who was only months older, look like a girl, Claire look like a sheep, Andy, even glamorous Andy, look like a frump. Rosa was much more alluring than his aunt Eloise had ever been. Frank looked away. It was his father's funeral.

After the interment (where Janny wanted to walk from grave to grave, smelling the daffodils in full bloom; Frank didn't stop her), Frank calculated that he'd kept that sad smile on his face for eight solid hours. He held his drink, Scotch and soda—supplied by Minnie, who was now assistant principal at the high school and lived here, apparently comfortably, with Lois and Joe. Frank watched the neighbors come and go. This house, much grander than the house they'd grown up in, was industriously clean. The famous dining room with the sliding French doors that had been the envy of farmers around Denby, Iowa, all through Frank's childhood, still had flowered wallpaper and heavy moldings. While he was pondering the double-hung windows, Arthur Manning came up to him, as if they were merely brothers-in-law who just happened to see each other at a family funeral. Frank often wondered if his sister Lillian had any idea of what her husband talked to Frank about, or the uses he put him to.

Arthur held Tina against his shoulder. She was three months now, wiry and active, as if she planned to head out the door any moment. Arthur's tweed jacket was festooned with a folded diaper. Arthur jiggled and comforted a baby the way a great athlete hit a ball, as if his adept grace and evident reproductive success were the easiest thing in the world. Tina burbled and muttered, wide awake and not crying. Frank admired this.

Arthur said, "How are Richie and Michael doing?"

"Coming along," said Frank.

"What are they now?"

"A month. But they were four and a half weeks early, so let's call them newborns."

"Precocious, then," said Arthur, with a straight face, and Frank

smiled a real smile. He said, “It’s a good thing Mama hasn’t seen them. She might suggest putting them down.”

Arthur’s eyebrows lifted.

“Mama’s strict about babies. If you aren’t good-looking, you could be carrying something contagious.”

Arthur kissed Tina on the forehead.

“Don’t worry, Arthur,” said Frank. “Tina would pass.”

Arthur laughed. But Frank could see it—even at his father’s funeral, Mama doled out words and smiles like stock options. Annie and Lillian were the preferred stock; Timmy, Arthur’s oldest at six, the class-A common stock; Debbie, five, Dean and Janny, both two and a half, the class-B common stock—not much of a risk, but not much of a dividend, either. Tina, who could still turn out to be blond, could rise in value or decline. As for Frank himself, well, he had taken his company private, and Mama didn’t have much of an investment there at all—a peck on the cheek, a reassurance that everything was going to turn out fine. Frank lowered his voice: “Have you talked with Eloise?”

Arthur jiggled Tina again. His voice was low, too. “We clinked glasses, but we haven’t exchanged actual words.”

“Were you congratulating each other on the death of old Joe?” Stalin had been dead about two weeks.

“I think we were.”

“Did your organization have anything to do with it?”

“Not that I know of,” said Arthur, seriously. “Just dumb luck, I suspect. But we will take the credit if it is offered to us.” He shifted Tina to the other shoulder. “Maybe he doesn’t matter, though. There’s no sign that things have changed or that their ambitions have waned.”

Frank nodded, then said, “You know what we said in the war? Two Russkies die, four more pop up. Why would Stalin be different?”

“You know that, when Hitler and Stalin were playing footsie, Hitler promised him Iran, right?”

“I didn’t know that.”

“He did. Now Mossadegh hates the Brits so much that he’s heading that way, too. However Iran goes, so go the rest of them.”

“Truman would have let them have it,” said Frank. “He let them have Eastern Europe. Maybe Ike has more balls.”

“Zorin is in Tehran now. He was in Prague in ’48. Coups are what he does.”

Frank half expected Arthur to ask him to do something, but he couldn’t imagine what that would be. Jim Upjohn, the savviest investor Frank knew, had recently put a lot of money into Getty, but Getty was based in Kuwait and Arabia—nothing in Iran. Arthur said, “I’m ready for bedtime. How about you?”

Frank said, “Always.”

But dinner was served. Once they were seated, Janny between himself and Minnie, who kept putting bits of food on her plate, Janny seemed to cheer up. She ate everything Minnie gave her, and asked for more of the canned corn. There was plenty, as always—beef stew, beans, rolls, the newest possible potatoes, an angel-food cake. When everyone had eaten their fill, Joe told a story—the kind people tell at family dinners after a funeral, about the person who died. “One time, Papa sat me on our horse Jake, and then led me to the apple tree and had me pick apples. I would hand them to him, and he would put them in an old feed sack.”

“Oh, that was the Arkansas Black,” said Rosanna. “So good. Only cropped every two years, though.”

“When Walter showed up to propose to you, Rosanna,” said Eloise, “I remember he wore the strangest hat.”

“It was a derby!” exclaimed Rosanna. “Very stylish.”

“I was looking out the window. I thought he was wearing a turban.”

“How did that look like a turban?” said Rosanna.

“I didn’t know! I’d never seen a turban, either.”

Everyone laughed.

Minnie said, “What about the rattlesnake?”

“What rattlesnake?” said Joe.

Frank suddenly remembered this.

Minnie said, “Frankie and I were picking pole beans. We were maybe seven. There was a snake under the bottom of the fence, a step from where we were. Walter must have been watching us, because, as soon as I screamed, this long, forked stick came down and pinned the snake’s head right to the ground. We ran away. I don’t know what Walter did with the snake.”

Frank said, “He cut off the head with a hoe. I remember him saying that the cut-off head could still bite.”

Debbie said, “What do you remember, Mommy?”

“Well,” said Lillian, “one time when I was working at the drugstore, I was at the counter late at night, adding up what I had sold for the day, and someone sat next to me, and kind of leaned into me, so I moved over without looking up from my figures, and he leaned into me a little more, so I moved over a little more, and he elbowed me in the side, so I whipped around to tell that guy to get away from me, and it was my papa, grinning like mad that he had played a trick on me. We laughed all the way home.”

Debbie nodded. Frank had never thought of Walter as playful.

Henry said, “When I was about nine, we came out the back door in the morning, and Papa said, ‘Look at that.’ He was pointing at something. Then he moved his finger in a curve and said, ‘See that sheen?’ and it was a huge spiderweb covered with dew. It must have been ten feet across, and perfect.”

Claire started crying. Rosanna said, “We could have lost him long ago.” She dabbed at her eyes with the hem of her apron.

Everyone sat up.

She nodded. “Papa fell into the well. He was standing on the cover of it—the old well—and it broke away. He flung out his arms to the sides and caught himself. That well out by the barn—that’s a deep one. He climbed out and never said a word about it until a couple of years ago. He told me he hung there, trying to decide. I asked him, ‘Walter, what were you trying to decide?’ He said he was trying to decide how to get out, but I’m sure he was trying to decide whether to get out, because I’m telling you, back in the Depression, it seemed like either a slow death or a quick one were the only choices.” She shook her head. “So—I tell myself we had twenty extra years. That’s what I tell myself.”

The memory of his father that came to Frank was of having his pants pulled down and being beaten with the belt—no memory of pain, only of Walter looming over him, the muscles of his forearm twitching and bulging, the words matching the rhythm of the blows, Frank’s close-up view of the hairs on the back of Walter’s hand.

LOUIS MACINTOSH LOOKED LIKE about ten people that Frank knew—that was, he was not tall, not fat, not thin, not handsome, not

ugly, not dark, not light. He was not surprised to see Frank and Arthur when they showed up at dusk at Stewart Air Force Base, so Frank wondered what MacIntosh's handler had told him. They boarded the plane, a De Havilland Comet, a sleek-looking airplane (Frank considered himself somewhat of an amateur expert—he worked for Grumman, and he had been taking flying lessons for a year). A simple blue stripe was painted along the fuselage, but no other identification mark. There were ten seats to each side of the aisle, and an unmarked canvas bag sat on each seat, belted in. Frank's and Louis's seats were behind the bags; the toilet was behind their seats. Frank did not have a suitcase, nor did Louis. After Arthur left, someone closed up the plane and someone flew it, but Frank didn't meet or even glimpse the crew. When they took off, Frank saw only the edge of a dreary sunset over the dark lumps of the Catskill Mountains to the west.

Unusually for him, Frank got no feel for MacIntosh, but maybe that was because Frank was better at picking up details at a distance. They both sat quietly, the narrow aisle between them. The canvas sacks of money were uniform—clasps turned and locked, tops folded over, the outline of the square corners within just barely visible. Whoever had packed up what Arthur had said was ten million dollars, Frank thought, was an orderly person. Louis dozed off.

They flew east. The Comet was a quiet plane. Frank was interested to note how they'd installed the engines—not under the wings, which was what he was used to, but within them. And the wings themselves reminded him of some sort of swooping bird—a barn swallow, maybe.

When Louis woke up, he shook his head and looked around, then shifted in his seat with a groan. After a moment, he stood and went into the toilet. As soon as Frank heard the door lock, he was on his feet. He felt all the pockets of Louis's jacket, which was draped over the back of his seat, and all the pockets of his coat, which was folded into the open compartment above their heads. No wallet—that would be in Louis's pants. No briefcase. He looked in the pocket of the seat in front of Louis, and he felt under Louis's seat. Nothing. He sat down again as the lock turned in the door of the toilet, and stared out the window. Below them, the vast Atlantic, black under the moonless cascades of stars.

Frank had intended to beg off this time. Arthur's earlier "assign-

ments” for Frank had been convenient and interesting, and getting to know Jim Upjohn might have been the best thing that had ever happened to him—Jim Upjohn was not only a good friend and a great connection, he was also endlessly eccentric, and fascinating as only a wealthy man at the center of what Aunt Eloise always called “the ruling class” could be. This job—making a very long-distance delivery—had no evident purpose (at least, evident to Frank) and seriously interfered with his day-to-day routine. As usual, the only payoff was giving Arthur what he wanted, and getting Arthur’s gratitude in return, and once Arthur got your attention, he could be very compelling.

But Frank’s resistance had been momentary. All he had to do was think of spending yet another evening at home with Andy, Janny, and the twins (not yet six months old, but six months felt like an eternity, and twins seemed like quintuplets if you never thought, waking or sleeping, about anything besides feeding, diapers, bathing, burping, crying). Andy was always either tending to one of them or out on the back deck, smoking a cigarette. She had risen to the occasion, no two ways about it—the nurses they’d hired for two months had taught her to order her every moment and the twins’ every moment; the boys were thriving, but at the expense of all that was idle or easy. After much hemming and hawing, he and Andy had bought a house in the winter. It was an airy, modern split-level with plenty of windows, contemporary furniture, and wall-to-wall carpet. It felt as bleak in the summer and the spring as it had in January, when they moved in. Doing this job for Arthur felt like playing hooky—returning to his younger, sharper, brighter, and more restless self. If only Andy—the Andy of two years ago—could have come along.

When they stopped to refuel in Sardinia, he wanted to walk around, smell the air. What was her name, that girl, the love of his life? Joan, it was. Joan Fontaine, he had called her. A whore. But it was foolish to daydream about a woman who was lost; instead, he sat quietly and waited for Louis to make a move. When the door opened, Louis stood up and scuttled forward. It was, indeed, Mediterranean light here. Hard to believe that he hadn’t been to Italy or France since the war. It was as if he had no idea that Italy would have changed or recovered since he last reconnoitered this cratered city or that blown-up house, looking for Jerries. He had treated stories of post-

war renewal in newspapers as unsubstantiated rumors without even realizing it. The airfield was barren, just a long stretch of concrete with a rudimentary tower at one end, not far from the fuel tanks.

Louis hunched down the steps. Frank went into the toilet and pissed without flushing—flushing would release onto the tarmac. He went back to his seat and ate half of his sandwich. When Louis returned, he brought a couple of Cokes. Frank took one.

Louis sat down and buckled his seat belt. Frank said, “This reminds me of the war.”

“You in the European theater?”

Frank said, “Africa first, then Italy.” Someone closed the hatch. Frank could hear the crew shouting something.

“Pacific for me. Midway. Philippines. Nimitz was a great man.”

“Not so many cats to herd,” said Frank. “At the time, I was a big fan of Devers, and I couldn’t figure out why Ike stopped us at Strasbourg, but now I understand a little more about outrunning your fuel supply.”

Louis nodded, then said, “I think you had the prima donnas with you. Montgomery was a fool.”

They sniffed simultaneously. The plane began taxiing down the runway, and Frank turned to stare at the beach and then the ocean, so much paler here. Louis said, “Can’t say I’m all that comfortable in this aircraft.”

Frank turned and looked at him. “Why not?”

“That BOAC Calcutta crash.”

“I didn’t hear about a Calcutta crash.”

“No? Last May sometime. Everyone killed—crew, passengers, everyone.”

Frank again glanced out the window at the engine.

Louis said, “Here’s the creepy part, you ask me. Witnesses say, when the plane went into the Indian Ocean, it was on fire”—Frank couldn’t help looking at him now—“and the wings were gone. Just say this: let’s hope we don’t encounter a hurricane.”

“Let’s hope that,” said Frank. They were quiet. And it was odd that they were using an English plane, given the antipathy the Iranians were supposed to feel toward the Brits. On the other hand, it was the fastest plane Frank had ever been in—twice as fast, if you included takeoff and landing, as a DC-6. Frank looked out the win-

dow past the wings this time, and imagined a hundred thousand hundred-dollar bills fluttering in the air.

THE SUN WAS GOING down again—Frank checked his watch. For him it was about nine or ten in the morning, but here, where the Mediterranean ended and Asia began, it was darkening and reddening toward nightfall.

He had dropped off, but it had been a restful if alert sort of doze that not only reminded him of his time in North Africa but made him remember what it felt like to be twenty-one rather than thirty-three. He undid his seat belt and stood up, allowing himself to yawn. He cocked his head to the side and slid toward the bathroom, opened the door, went in. He gave himself a bit of time, but not too long, and then he stood up, flushed, waited another moment. He unlocked the door. Louis was sitting just as he had been most of the trip, rereading his copy of *The Saturday Evening Post*. Frank saw at once that the angle of the folded top of the third bag forward on the right—Frank's side—was slightly different. And the middle of the three clasps had not been twisted as tightly as before. The other clasps were unchanged. This was why Arthur had hired him—to notice things. Frank sat down again. Louis paid no attention to him. Frank had no idea what Louis's self-defense skills were. Frank also had no idea how his own skills might have deteriorated since he was actually twenty-one and could grab some guy's fist almost before the guy decided to pop him one.

The Comet landed in a different kind of dark from American dark—much deeper, no glow of nearby cities or streetlights or even headlights making their way from one empty spot to another. Wherever they landed—it was August 13 here, almost the 14th—Frank knew they were somewhere in Iran, but it was not a base or an oil field. It was a quiet place, dry-smelling. The door opened. Three men came up the stairs and began carrying away the sacks. When the man picked up the last two of the ten sacks, Louis stood up to follow him. Frank stood up to follow Louis. Louis had his jacket on, and when he came to the top of the stairs, he slipped into his coat, but that didn't stop Frank from noting the rectangular outline just barely discernible against Louis's chest.

At the bottom of the stairs, Louis broke into an easy trot. The three men with bags were dim in the dark, almost out of sight. Frank was on Louis in a moment, grabbing his wrist and pinning it high and tight behind his back. Louis grunted. Frank said, "I can break your arm, Louis, easy as pie." Louis twisted, and Frank lifted the arm even higher. Louis bent over, and Frank reached around with his left hand and slipped it inside Louis's coat and jacket. He felt the stiff rectangle and pulled it out. There was only one. He stepped away from Louis and flipped through the packet. Louis stumbled forward, caught himself, but didn't do anything other than press and rub his right shoulder with his left hand. He said, "You dislocated it."

"Want me to put it back in?"

"What the fuck do you care, Freeman? It's not your dough."

Frank smiled. Arthur had rebaptized him yet again.

A car pulled up—something nondescript and old, but heavy. The driver got out and opened the trunk, and the ten bags of money were piled in it. The trunk was closed. The driver then opened the back door on the passenger's side, and Louis got in. The driver closed the door. The driver had a beard. He didn't say anything. The three men who had transferred the bags came over and stood rather close to Frank—as close, say, as New Yorkers would stand, closer than Iowans would stand. He felt mildly uncomfortable. After about two minutes, the passenger door of the car opened again, and Louis got out. The man to Frank's left gestured for him to get in. Frank got in. The door closed with a thud.

The fellow in the car was wearing a U.S. Army uniform, two stars on his collar. He held out his hand, and Frank shook it. "Mr. Freeman. Thanks for your help. Arthur speaks highly of you, and, my Lord, we couldn't do a thing or take a step without Arthur. If this shebang goes over, we have Arthur to thank, once again." He cleared his throat. "Looking iffy at this point, I must say. Why this had to come to a head in August is a mystery to me. Must be the hidden hand of the Soviet menace. You got anything to report?"

Frank shook his head.

The man stared at him, the hardness of his gaze belying his casual tone. But how long had Frank been telling lies? As long as he could talk. Finally, Frank said, "Routine operation, sir."

The man nodded. His jacket strained over the pistol in his armpit.

Frank waited for him to hold out his hand for the packet of bills, but he didn't. He rubbed his forehead, as if he had a headache. He said, "Well, then. MacIntosh is staying with me here. I believe you are going back via Majorca. To Cuba? I can't remember. I had some food put on the plane. Good luck to you."

The man knocked on the ceiling of the car, and the passenger door opened. When Frank got out, he was alone beside the plane. Louis and the three men had been taken away, and now the big car drove off, too. It was dead quiet. Even the air was still. The only movement was the flight of two huge birds, probably some kind of vulture—they landed maybe thirty yards away and picked over a carcass for a minute, then lumbered into the air again. Frank had seen vultures before, but as he watched, something about the air and the light entered him and terrified him. The crew of the plane could easily shoot him and leave him here; he would be bones in a day or two. But that wasn't it, exactly. He looked upward, at the endless stars across the flat sky, and recognized nothing—not the Milky Way or the Big Dipper or even, for a moment, that dishlike sliver that was the moon. For thirty-three years he had thought that the unknown was a friendly thing. Now that idea vanished in a millisecond. He swallowed hard, then ran his hand down the side of his trousers and felt the packet of money in his pocket. His assignment. It was reassuring.

By the time they landed at Stewart, his watch had run down. Arthur was there, as if he had never left, at the bottom of the stairs.

"Nice plane," said Frank.

"Something borrowed," said Arthur. Frank took Arthur's right hand and slapped the packet of hundred-dollar bills into it. Arthur barely glanced at them, just put them in his pocket. He said, "You met McClure?"

"Two-star general?"

Arthur nodded. "Tell me everything he said."

"Well, he thanked me for coming, and—"

"No, I mean his exact words."

Frank repeated all of what the general had said to him, understanding at once that this was why Arthur had sent him—his eidetic memory. What else any of it meant to the government, he had no idea and knew Arthur wouldn't tell him. Nevertheless, he did ask, "What's the money for?"

Arthur said, "Popular uprising." Frank thought he saw the ghost of a smile, but only that.

Arthur dropped him outside the split-level just at dawn. He picked up the newspaper, eased in through the lower entrance, then went up to the kitchen. All was quiet for once. On page two, the paper announced that Mossadegh had won the election in Iran. There was no mention of unrest, but as he watched the coup unfold—Mossadegh was out by the end of the week—Frank couldn't stop thinking of that human cipher Louis MacIntosh, who was exactly the sort of person Frank would never have entrusted with buying a gallon of milk at the grocery store.

WHEN HE GOT BACK to Iowa City for the fall semester, Henry Langdon went to a place on Iowa Avenue that sold old things and looked and looked until he found a wooden box with a lock (and a key) for storing his letters from his cousin Rosa (at Berkeley) and carbon copies of his own to her. His were typed, but hers were handwritten. The question of typing had posed a real dilemma—you wanted your personal papers to be handwritten, because they were more, well, personal that way, and also because future literary scholars (the career Henry was preparing himself for) would be able to get a better sense of your personality and character from your handwriting than they would from typing. But it was almost impossible to make a good carbon copy by hand, and it was easy with the typewriter. The box was cheap but roomy. In it, he placed the letters as they had been written—his, hers, his, hers—then, on top of them, that Indian-head gold dollar his father had given him, eleven years ago now. The date on the dollar was 1888. Looking at the dollar, Henry wondered if his joy at being back in Iowa City was some kind of betrayal, especially since here he didn't think of his father or the farm more than once or twice a day. ("And a good thing, for heaven's sake," his mother would say.) He thought of "The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle," he thought of the Venerable Bede, he thought of Defoe, he thought of Rosa Rosa Rosa.

He hadn't seen Rosa since his father's funeral in the spring, but they wrote twice a week. He hadn't counted on Rosa's visiting Denby (meaning "village of the Danes"—it gave him a bona-fide sense of

pleasure to know that), or on himself traveling from Iowa to California, so he couldn't say that he was disappointed, exactly, not to have seen her.

The tone of her letters was satirical but good-natured, always affectionate. She now referred to her mother, his aunt Eloise, as "Heloise," never "Mom," and "Heloise's" adventures were a source of amusement—"Tuesday, Heloise ran out of gas on the Bay Bridge, and lo and behold, she had left her purse on the kitchen table, so she waited in traffic with a piece of paper in her hand ('OUT OF GAS PLEASE HELP') and who should stop to pick her up but Gary Snyder, who is a poet, maybe our age. He was riding a motorcycle, and Heloise got on the back and rode to the gas station! She told me he was darling. I am guessing she is going to fix me up with him any day now."

Henry's own letters left something to be desired, he thought. They were detailed and earnest, and quite often he found himself going on too long about things that excited him, like how the system of Roman roads in England dictated subsequent linguistic boundaries, even a thousand years after the end of the Roman Empire (another difficulty with carbon copies—no erasing). But she wrote faithfully; her letters were as long as his and as frequent, and though she often talked about meeting various guys at coffee shops or poetry readings (everything free—no Hollywood trash movies), she never mentioned any name in more than two letters.

Henry knew that Rosa knew that Henry loved her. He signed his letters, "Love, Henry." She signed her letters, "Yours, Rosa." For six weeks, he dreaded Thanksgiving, when she and Aunt Eloise would be coming to the farm and he would have to see her.

On the Wednesday he left for Denby, he spent the whole morning deciding what clothes to take, aware all the while of his roommate's bag beside the door, full of dirty undershorts heading back to Dubuque for their once-a-semester laundering.

Rosa was wearing what she always did—black shoes, black pants, black sweater—though her dark hair was cut in a different style, shorter than Henry's now, showing the nape of her neck. Her neck was long—he hadn't noticed that before. Or the mole on her cheekbone, or that her fingernails were bitten, or that her eyes were brown. They had exchanged 160 letters, counting both hers and his, and he might not have recognized her on the street. She hugged him and

kissed him on both cheeks, and he stood stiffly. I'm such an Iowan, he thought miserably.

Thanksgiving Day itself was like the funeral had been—everyone on their best behavior, sitting at the dining-room table for a long time, and lots of talk about his father. Papa was in every room, every sentence, every holiday dish. In an odd way, he was in everyone's face, even the faces of those who had never been said to look like him. Every face except Rosa's. Maybe that was why Henry kept staring at her.

Henry hadn't expected to hold Rosa's hand, or to sit next to her; he'd imagined a conversation about *Waiting for Godot*, which Rosa was reading, or *Paradise Lost*, which Henry was reading. That hadn't happened by Friday morning, which was maybe why Henry was still lolling in bed when Aunt Eloise came over from Granny Mary's by herself for breakfast. Since his supremely orderly, book-filled room was off the kitchen, he could hear them quite well. Almost the first thing his mom said was "How does she expect to find a husband, dressed like that? And with that hair. Look at it, it is so short." His aunt Eloise was seven years younger than his mother, but it could have been twenty, given Rosanna's bossy tone. Henry covered his mouth with his hand so as not to make any noise.

Aunt Eloise said, "Come on, Rosanna. She's twenty. I'm not worried. And anyway, you know who Audrey Hepburn is, don't you? That look is all the rage."

"I'd had Frank by the time I was twenty."

"Look how that turned out." Eloise coughed. Henry knew she was joking, and could imagine his mother waving her hand. "Anyway, I was almost twenty-five when I met Julius. You don't take the first one who comes along anymore." Point to Eloise, thought Henry.

Now there was a silence, and Henry eased himself upward on his bed to hear better. Eloise went on. "In a big city, you have to . . . well, you can, pick and choose."

"You picked and chose Julius?" Point to Rosanna. Henry bit his lip. He didn't remember his uncle Julius very well, except as having that delightful English accent and imposing, articulate English manner. Henry would have picked him, too, he thought. But Julius had died in the war, early, in the failed invasion of Dieppe, when Henry wasn't quite ten.

“I did,” said Eloise. “If you want to know, yes, I pursued Julius, not the other way around. You thought Julius was strange, but I thought he was elegant. From the first time I saw him.”

Their voices were still good-natured, or at least level.

“Well,” said Rosanna, after a moment, “he was argumentative.”

“I know that,” said Eloise. “But, then, that was what I was used to—growing up with Mama and Papa, and living here.”

Point to Eloise, thought Henry.

A chair got pushed back, and then, a moment later, the spigot turned on, so it was his mother who’d gone to the sink. Henry picked up his book, and then Eloise said, “Ma knew I had another friend. I’m surprised she never told you.”

The sound of the water stopped. Rosanna said, “No, she didn’t. What happened to him?”

And Eloise said, “He went back to his wife.”

Henry thought he might really have to wander into the kitchen just to see the looks on their faces.

“Did Ma know about that?”

“She knew everything. She gave me advice.”

After a moment, Rosanna said, “What in the world was Ma’s advice?”

“Did I know where to find some Queen Anne’s lace? And did I know the difference between that and poison hemlock?”

“Everyone knows the difference who was raised on a farm.”

Now there was a silence, and Henry thought about the fact that maybe he did not know the difference. Finally, Rosanna said, “Did you ever have to act on Ma’s advice?”

Eloise said nothing; maybe she shook her head, or nodded, but her answer was not for Henry to know.

In the end, Henry had to settle for mostly admiring Rosa from afar. Every so often she gave him a look or a smile. She laughed when he laughed, and teased him once or twice. To Eloise, she said, “Don’t you like Henry’s sweater? It’s so classic.” She called him “Cousin Henry” a few times, as a joke, and then it turned out she was reading a book of that name, by Anthony Trollope, so they did have one tête-à-tête, though the only Trollope Henry had read was *Orley Farm*, extra-credit for his Victorian-literature class. The best thing was that, the day after he got back to Iowa City, there was a letter in his mail-

EARLY WARNING

box, postmarked Denby, from Rosa. She wrote, “Dear Henry, I’m sitting at the dining-room table, here at Uncle Joe’s. Baby crying. You think I am doing calculus problems but really, I’m watching you. You are reading something with gold lettering on the spine. Every so often you look at Heloise. I wonder what you’re thinking. . . .” It went on for three pages, and it was signed, “Love, Rosa.”

1954



TINA MANNING WAS HAVING her first-birthday party. Debbie Manning had drawn the invitations with crayons on cards, and then she and Timmy walked all over the neighborhood by themselves to deliver them. Timmy was a good boy, for once. He stood while they looked both ways when they crossed the street, and did not pretend to run in front of cars. He had never actually run in front of a car, but sometimes he would stand on the curb, jumping up and down, and then jerk his body like he was going to do it. In the summer, a lady who was passing screamed when she saw him, and then Debbie herself screamed, and then Timmy fell down laughing. Debbie hoped that the lady would stop the car and get out and smack him, but she just shook her head and drove on.

Fifteen invitations had taken Debbie three days of hard work. Mommy had had to give her Oreos to “keep up her strength,” but Debbie was happy to do it, because Tina was a wonderful child. She had walked at ten months, could already say “Debbie,” and would stick out her foot and let Debbie put her sock on or take it off again and again. Very soon, Debbie thought, she and Tina were going to have a horse, which they would keep in a silver spring. Debbie had a picture of this silver spring hanging above her bed—she’d used almost her entire gold crayon for the horse and her entire silver crayon for the spring. Debbie made sure that the gates at the top and the bottom

of the stairs were always closed, so that Tina would never tumble down them.

Debbie put on her red velvet Christmas dress for the party and zipped it up the side all by herself. Then she put on her white socks with the lace around the tops, and her black Mary Janes. She looked in the mirror. She looked very good. She opened the stair gate and closed it and locked it, then went down, holding the railing just in case Timmy came along and pushed her. At the bottom of the stairs, she opened the gate and closed it. The clock on the mantel said six o'clock. She was the only girl in her kindergarten who could tell the time every time the teacher asked. Even though he was a year and a half older than Debbie, Timmy said that he could not tell the time or recite the alphabet, but Debbie knew that he could.

When the doorbell rang, Daddy came in from the dining room, called out, "Just a minute," then kissed her on the forehead. She gave him her hand, and they went to the door. Daddy opened it. Outside, in the cold, the Meyers were standing on the step, the two boys behind them, their mom and dad. Their mom said, "Oh, Arthur! You look ready to have a good time!"

Daddy said, "Mary! Darling girl! Step right in! Hi, boys! Lillian and Tina are holding court in the dining room so that you warriors can use the living room for your battles." Debbie mouthed the name "Mary." Four girls in her first-grade class were called Mary.

This was how it went for a long time. The doorbell rang and they went to the door, and people came in, and most of the time they handed Daddy a bottle and handed Debbie a wrapped present, and said, "So—where's the birthday girl?"

The birthday girl was standing in her playpen, and as each set of guests brought in their present, Debbie arranged the stack in front of her.

Soon, all the parents were laughing and talking very loudly, and the other kids were running from room to room, playing tag. Timmy loved tag—he was always It. If he tagged you, you had to sit down in the nearest chair and pretend you were dead. The last child to get tagged would get a prize, but the prize was just an old toy cowboy or something like that.

Finally, Mommy came over and said, "Deb, I need your help with the cake." Debbie followed her to the back hall, and then Mommy told

her to hold out her hands, and into them she placed the yellow cake with pink frosting they had made the night before. “Happy Birthday Tina” was written across the cake in green letters. The cake was only one layer, and not heavy. Debbie carried it carefully on its silver platter into the dining room, and all the children and parents started clapping.

Daddy had gotten Tina out of the playpen and stood her on a chair at the head of the table. She had a big white napkin tied around her neck, and her hair was sticking out all over her head. Debbie set the cake in front of her on the table. Everyone sang “Happy Birthday,” and Tina stared all around for a moment, and then, right when they got to “dear Tina,” she flopped forward like a rag doll and put her face in the cake. When she stood up again, she had cake in her hair and on her chin. Mommy said, “What a clown!” and everybody laughed much more than Debbie thought they should.

At that very moment, Debbie decided that she did not want any of the pigs-in-a-blanket she had helped make, or the carrot-raisin salad, or the other cake, the two-layer one meant for eating. She backed away, slipped through the living room, unlocked the gate, locked it again, and tiptoed up the stairs. In her room, her dolls were quiet on her bed. She got out of her red velvet dress and put on her Minnie Mouse pajamas.

In the morning, the whole downstairs was a mess—all of the ashtrays were full of cigarette butts, and where the glasses were not tipped over, they, too, had butts dropped into them. Tina’s presents had been unwrapped and piled in a stack in the playpen. Mommy and Daddy were at the kitchen table with Tina, who was eating zwieback. Daddy said, “Here she is!”

Mommy said, “Oh, my head hurts. How did so many people get here?”

Debbie said, “I didn’t like that party.”

“Out of the mouths of babes,” said Daddy.

“I’m surprised there are any secrets at all,” said Mommy, “given the level of the drinking.”

“There aren’t any secrets,” said Daddy, “but, thankfully, no one can remember what they heard once they’re sober again.”

Debbie went to the refrigerator and found an egg in the door. Mommy groaned, but she did get up and find a pot. Poached were Debbie’s favorite.

ROSANNA, who was watching Annie while Joe was out plowing and Lois was in town, saw him sitting on the front porch railing. His stoop and his sidelong glance told her it was Roland Frederick, looking about a hundred years old. She opened the door and said, "Roland! We thought you were dead!" His eyes bloodshot the way they always got when a man had given himself over to drink.

He said, "Well, I ain't."

How long had he been gone? Years, anyway. He was Minnie and Lois's father. Maybe they had all assumed he was dead. But this was his house, wasn't it? Annie was upstairs, napping. Rosanna picked up the sock she was knitting. Four needles, eight points; she grasped them tightly and kept her hand beside her waist. You never knew with a drunk. An angry drunk especially, of course. She said, "So you must have some travels to tell about."

"Could be," said Roland.

His mouth dropped open a little as he looked around, and there were plenty of teeth missing. Roland Frederick had been a handsome man and a handsomer boy—he and his father, Grafton, had driven around town with a matched pair of grays when Rosanna was—what?—twelve or fourteen, and they sat up square every moment—never rolled about on the seat, laughing and making fools of themselves, like her own Augsburgers. Roland had disappeared during the war—too overwhelmed by his wife, Lorene's, terrible stroke to stick around and do his job. No one had been surprised, maybe least of all Minnie, though she hadn't talked about it. Rosanna said, "Would you like a glass of water, Roland, or a cup of tea?"

He stared at her, then said, "Your Frank married into this house here?"

Rosanna laughed. "Heavens, no. Frank's off making a million somewhere. Joe is married to Lois. They have a little girl. Let me get you something. Lois made some biscuits just this morning, and there are shortbread cookies, too. Come on into the kitchen, and tell me what you've been up to."

He allowed himself to be led, but kept looking around, as if he found the place strange. He said, "What are you doing here?"

“Oh, I come over. My house is a little lonely now. Since Walter died.” She didn’t think it was a good idea to mention Annie.

“When was that?” He spoke abruptly, as if insulted.

“Just over a year ago. Heart.”

She set a plate in front of him on the table, a biscuit with some butter and cherry jam, two little square cookies. She had left her knitting on the dining-room table, but she knew where the knives were. However, inside the house, Roland seemed harmless.

“Walter always thought he knew everything.”

Rosanna felt herself prickle. “Well, I don’t know about that, but he always admired this farm you had, Roland.”

“Wanted to get his hands on it, I’ll be bound.”

“I think Walter knew his hands were full.”

“Who planted that north field out there?”

“My son Joe, and also my brother John.” She made her voice clear and bright. You never knew what a drunk could remember. She went into the pantry to find the tea.

She hadn’t thought of Roland Frederick as having a point of view. He was an efficient farmer with a beautiful farm, and then he wasn’t. He had the most beautiful house and the most admirable wife; everyone in the neighborhood had thought of them as Mr. and Mrs. Frederick, never Roland and Lorene. When Mrs. Frederick had her stroke it had been an impersonal drama, tragic but wordless, the sort of drama that farm country abounded in. Now, looking at Roland, Rosanna knew that he had a story, too, something howling and painful that could make a claim on her, on Joe, on Lois, on Minnie. On Annie. Whatever Minnie said, this was his farm. Rosanna poured out a cup of tea and pushed it toward him, but he stopped it with his hand, so she took it back and folded her own hands around it. She said, “Well, I wish you’d tell me some of the places you’ve visited.”

He ate one cookie and half the biscuit, rolling bits around in his mouth and then swallowing them.

Finally, she said, “Are you working now?”

“At the stockyards. Omaha.”

“That’s steady work.”

“I shoulda left this place when I first had the chance.”

“When was that, Roland?”

“Was all set up I was going to Chicago to work for a man my father knew in the shoe business. Before the first war. Start by doing the books, then go on the road, selling shoes. Well, my dad died right then, and my uncles hated to see me go, so they made it real easy to get going on the farm. Lorene was my second cousin, you know. From over around Grundy Center, where three of the uncles lived. Oh, they suckered me. Everyone was just scared to death of the sins of the world. Lorene was a good girl—she would watch over my spirit.” And then he put his head down on the table, his old, dirty gray hair right on the little plate, and he started bawling. Rosanna moved the plate. She said, “I’m sure they thought they were acting for the best.”

“They never had any doubt about it. Or about anything else.”

“You were a good farmer. Walter respected you. And Minnie and Lois are both such good girls. There’s more to everyone than meets the eye. But there is what meets the eye, too.”

Roland took a deep snort and sat up, then pulled a dirty bandanna out of his pocket and wiped his nose. Rosanna picked up the plate, carried that and the teapot to the sink. He was out of the room just like that, and she skittered after him, not quite knowing what she would do if he headed up the stairs, but he didn’t. He went straight to the front door and left without another word. Rosanna closed the door behind him.

Through the window, she saw him go down the steps, look around, and make his way to the car parked there—a Ford, maybe a ’48. He sat in it for a long while, and then drove away. The car was gray. She wrote that down on a scrap of paper.

It took her two days to tell Minnie. Really, it was that she didn’t want to see the very thing she saw when she related the incident—Minnie’s nostrils flaring and her eyes hardening.

Minnie said, “He’d better not come back.”

“He might not.”

Rosanna didn’t ask who owned the farm, where the papers were. Worse came to worst, they could vacate the house for a few years, the few years that Roland had to live. She said, “Your father is pretty far down the road now, Minnie.”

“That’s the good news, then.”

“I suppose it is, yes.”

Rosanna never knew if Minnie told Lois or Joe. As for herself, Rosanna thought of telling Granny Elizabeth about it, maybe just as a way of hearing more about Roland's uncles—she would have a thing or three to say. But in the end she said nothing, feeling each time she opened her mouth that there was some species of betrayal in it.

THE TWINS WERE eighteen months old now, walking (and standing and staring and screaming and sitting) just like other children more or less their age, and Andy found herself increasingly preoccupied with those baby scrapbooks her brother's wife had sent when they were born. Andy had gotten Janny's to the six-month mark—the last photo was of her sitting up in the baby bath with her fingers in her mouth. Richie's and Michael's—not even birth pictures. Birth pictures of the twins existed, but they reminded Andy more of mug shots than of baby photos, naked in incubators, little skinny limbs and odd heads, no hair except where it shouldn't be, on arms and back, like monkeys. She had stuffed the scrapbooks onto the upper shelf in the closet in Richie and Michael's room, and every time she slid open that door, she would see their spines, white, pink, and blue, the silliest objects in her very modern house, ready to get thrown out.

But she couldn't do it. Throwing them out would be giving up forever, acknowledging that her maternal instincts didn't exist, had never existed, would never exist, no matter how affectionately she spoke to her children, or spoke *of* her children, no matter that she touched them gently, petting them as if they were cats, smiled at them, nattered on in baby talk like the book said to do, no matter that she followed all of Dr. Spock's suggestions religiously, the way she had followed rules her whole life. Her mother still laughed about the time when she was eight and they had had a screaming argument about Andy's cleaning up her room. Her father walked through the kitchen, picked up a piece of stationery, and wrote down the rules (in Norwegian), then tacked them to her door:

1. Elske Gud
2. Adlyd din eldste
3. Elske din neste
4. Bo ren i kropp og sinn

5. Alltid fortelle sanheten
6. Sett bort sinne

“Love God, respect your elders, love your neighbors, be clean in body and mind, always tell the truth, put away anger.” The joke was that, as soon as they were written down, she followed them to the letter. That paper fluttered on the door of her room for years, a joke to them and a burden to her.

There was so much that she did not know about her children. She could run down the list right now, sitting in the living room with her cigarette in one hand and her ashtray in the other (she always emptied her ashtray after one smoke; she stubbed out the butt over and over until it was cold and flat—what if an ash leapt for the curtains and burned the house down?). She did not know if they were cute. She did not know if they were smart. She did not know if they liked her or each other or Frank. (And what did they really see of Frank? Not much.) She did not know if they were happy or difficult or spoiled or behaving appropriately for their ages. Take this example: Michael, who now weighed twenty-three pounds, twelve ounces, walked past Richie, who weighed twenty-three pounds, eight ounces, and knocked him down. Richie sat suddenly on his bottom and began crying, then threw himself on his back and started kicking his legs. Did Michael mean to knock Richie down? Did he intend Richie to feel pain? Did Richie feel real pain, or was he just angry? When Michael started to cry a few moments later, was he responding to Richie’s tears? Then, when Janny’s door, up the stairs of the half-landing, slammed, was that because she had slammed it? Could a three-year-old slam a door in anger? Andy never had, she was sure. Was Janny angry about something? If there were less crying in this room, would she be able to hear whether Janny slammed her fingers in the door?

Andy stood up from the couch and walked to the bottom of the stairs. She could not hear crying, so probably Janny was all right. She had already asked Janny if she was all right three times since lunch.

She walked over to Richie and set him on his feet. She took him by the hand and led him to the toy box, where she found his favorite book (this she did know—it was *The Night Before Christmas*). She opened it to the page where Ma in Her Kerchief and I in My Cap were

lying in bed. Richie sat down with a bump and stared at the picture. She could take the boys outside and strip them down and sit them in their little pool—it was a hot day—and she could make sure that there were only two inches of water in the bottom and that she was looking at them every single moment, in case one of them fell over.

The doorbell rang, and Andy leaned forward. She saw Alice Rosen shade her eyes and press her nose and chin to the window beside the door. The bell rang again. The garage door was open, and the Rambler was parked there, so Alice knew she was somewhere nearby. Alice was funny and kind. Maybe it would be good to have Alice come in the back, find her where she was standing, and dose her with a box of cannoli—that was something she often wanted to share. But Andy did not move, and so Alice disappeared. There was the sound of a car leaving. Andy felt the oddest thing: something in her body draining away, as if she had been feeling pleasure or anticipation without knowing it, and now she was disappointed.

Michael had heard the doorbell, too, and he knew what it meant. He walked toward the stairs, and when he came to the top, he stood there looking down and said, “Daddy!” (Maybe they saw more of Frank than she gave Frank credit for?) Then Michael turned and knelt, putting his hands on the top step, and made his way backward down the five carpeted steps. Frank didn’t believe in gates—why live in a split-level if you were going to restrict their freedom? Any kid could fall down five or six steps and live to try again. Michael turned, sat on the second step from the bottom, and kicked his feet. Richie pushed his book aside and stood up. Whatever Michael was doing, Richie had to do, too. His diaper was full, but she wasn’t quite ready to change it. Instead, she went over to the table and got her ashtray and her pack of Luckies.

1955



ON A QUITE SNOWY DAY (for D.C.) at the end of February, Lillian Manning found Lucy Roberts, only four, sitting on the couch in the playroom at seven-thirty in the morning, waiting for the cartoons to begin. Lillian felt the little woolly feet of Lucy's sleeper; they were cold and wet. She found some of Deanie's PJs in the laundry (Dean and Arthur had gone to Dean's third skating lesson), then called Betsey Roberts, who was sound asleep and hadn't realized that the front door to her house was unlocked and wide open. Fortunately, the Robertses lived across the street and down one: not much harm done. Betsey said Lucy could stay, so Lillian gave her a couple of pancakes and some orange slices. While Timmy and Debbie were eating their cereal, the knocks on the front door began. By the time *Bugs Bunny* came on, there were twelve children cross-legged on the floor staring up at the TV. They sat quietly for *Roy Rogers* and *Sky King*; then some of the girls went up to Debbie's room, taking Tina with them, and a couple of the boys went out to the backyard with Timmy to slide down the "ski slope" Arthur had made.

Lillian carried Lucy home in her dried-out sleeper. Betsey seemed a little embarrassed—Lucy, she said, was such an active child, and she talked about Debbie every day—where was Debbie, was Debbie coming, what was the name of Debbie's teddy bear? Lillian and Betsey laughed together.

When she got home, one of the boys had a scrape on his elbow. Lillian washed it off and put some mercurchrome on it, and though Lillian could see tears frozen on his cheeks, he dashed out to play some more. They were standing on their sleds now, teetering at the top of the tiny slope, and then raising their hands and yelling as they slid down. Five inches of snow—no more—but Arthur had sprayed it with water and let it freeze overnight. Lillian watched out the window while she did the dishes. Arthur had installed a Dishmaster on the spigot of the kitchen sink; the water ran through a hose to a brush with a button on it—when you wanted to scrub, you pushed the button for suds, and when you wanted to rinse, you stopped pressing the button.

Dishes done, Lillian went to the bottom of the stairs and listened. All was quiet. Maybe they were dressing up, which was fine with Lillian, who threw all of her old heels and slippers and blouses and skirts into Debbie's dress-up box. She decided to check on Tina, though really she was checking to see if the girls were fighting yet.

Tina was lying on her back at the top of the stairs, her blanket in her hand and her thumb in her mouth, sleeping. Lillian opened the gate without a squeak and gently picked up the toddler. Tina awoke only long enough to snuggle against Lillian while she carried her into her crib. It was one-thirty-five. She would sleep until three, Lillian guessed. Tina had such thick hair now, it was down past her shoulders and dark, like Arthur's. In fact, she looked so much like Arthur, and had so many of his mannerisms, it was almost uncanny to watch her. Arthur hardly ever disapproved of anything, but when Timmy did intentionally hit a tennis ball into the front picture window just to see if it would bounce ("It wasn't a baseball! I thought the tennis ball would, I really did!"), Arthur's eyebrows made a V-shape over his nose, and the corners of his mouth turned down. Tina made the same face when she saw green beans on the tray of her high chair.

The four girls were playing nicely—Debbie in charge, as usual. Lillian watched them from the doorway, smiling when anyone looked at her. Debbie was a strict child, but fair. Once, Lillian had pointed out that maybe her friends, unlike Timmy, did not know the rules to some game and were not actually flouting them; Debbie was amazed. When Lillian then suggested that if Debbie knew more than other children it was her job to be patient and teach them,

Debbie understood immediately. She was a good girl. No one in this room reminded Lillian of herself or of Jane, her first friend. These girls had always been in neighborhoods populous with children who were not cousins. Mama had pitied the children Lillian knew, and why not? During Lillian's Depression childhood, there had been plenty of kids in rags or in shoes with flapping soles—Jane's parents ordered the family shoes out of a catalogue once a year, and when the children grew out of them, they wore them anyway. Children had disappeared—the farm was lost, said Papa. Lillian had hated those words, imagining that a farm could be lost in the woods, like Hansel and Gretel. Now Margie Widger marched her third piece up the last tunnel into the Sorry! home base (which looked rather like a bomb shelter for the four members of the Yellow family), then glanced at Lillian. Lillian said, "When you girls are hungry, I've got peanut butter, salami, and chicken-rice soup."

But there was no peanut butter—Timmy and the boys had found it and eaten it, digging it out with carrot sticks and celery. While she was cleaning their mess up, Arthur came in with Dean. Dean was larger and stronger than Timmy had been at the same age, though not as daring, so Arthur had decided Dean would start at four and soon be playing hockey for, as Arthur always called them, "Les Canadiens." Arthur had not actually been to Montreal, but he also declared that Dean would begin his French classes in the summer. He called him Doyen and sang to him in French—"Alouette," "La Vie en rose." Arthur now also went about asking people if he himself didn't look very much like Yves Montand, but younger.

Lillian said, "How did he do?"

Arthur said, "How did you do, Doyenny, *mon fils?*"

Dean looked up at Arthur and said, very carefully, "Tray bun, papaaah."

Arthur grinned, then came over and hugged Lillian and said, "You are such an exceptional broodmare, *ma chère.*" He kissed her on both sides of her neck while Deanie stared. Lillian extricated herself and said, "You must be hungry, Dean."

Dean said, "Is there ham?"

"*Jambon!*" said Arthur.

Lillian said, "Please go out back and check the boys for broken bones and missing teeth."

“They’ve been having that much fun, huh?” He went out the back door. Dean went to the table and climbed into his chair. Lillian knew what that broodmare remark meant—he was in the mood for another. Bob and Bev D’Onofrio, at the end of the street, were about to produce number eight, and the Porters, three streets away, had a child in every grade at the elementary school. Lillian knew more about how babies were made now, and at a certain time of the month, she did a little more late-night sewing or pretended every so often to have fallen into a deep, deep sleep. Four was enough, she thought. If he got really importunate, she would give Arthur a puppy—he was a big fan of *Rin Tin Tin*.

Lillian put Dean’s plate in front of him, then sat there, chin in hand, smiling, as he ate. He was methodical but thorough—she put her hand out and stopped him when he picked up the plate to lick it. She asked, “Did you skate well?”

“I let go of Daddy’s hands two times.”

“Good boy!”

“I was strong.”

“I know you are. Do you like it?”

Deanie nodded. Then he said, “*Je swiss un bun garsson.*”

Lillian said, “*Oui!*”

“Can I watch something?”

“You can go see what’s on.”

He got down from his chair and went into the playroom. Lillian took his plate to the sink. Outside, there were six boys now. Arthur formed them into two teams. The team to his left had to pat their stomachs with their right hands and rub their heads with their left hands. The team on the right had to pat their heads with their right hands and rub their stomachs with their left hands. It took about one minute to get everyone laughing and falling in the snow. Lillian laughed, too.

AFTER LESS THAN a semester at Berkeley, Henry decided that he hated the place. He did not want to believe that he was so shallow it bothered him that his clothes were slightly off, though how he experienced it was that everyone else’s clothes were slightly off—too aggressively casual, or dirty, or black, black, black. But perhaps they

wore black because it was so cold all the time? Colder than Iowa—clammy, moldy, creeping into your joints, and the sunlight just for color. The landscape irritated him, too: up, down; up, down. The sky was very closed in, almost trapped. He kept his eyes on his feet.

The teachers and his fellow students always smiled after he told them where he'd done his undergraduate work. Henry knew what they were thinking: wasn't it a relief to be here, in Berkeley, the promised land? He even had one teacher who spoke more slowly and clearly to him than to the other students—Professor Pradet, a man who had never heard of "Iowa." And when he did well in Old English, that teacher always gave him extra praise, as if he were consistently exceeding expectations. In that class, two students had come from Harvard and one from Stanford; the only public-university graduate was from UCLA. In his Chaucer seminar, there was another outcast, Pat Clayton from Ohio State. But Pat wore the same clothes every day, was about to become a father, and talked only about rents, food prices, and the scarcity of jobs in medieval lit. Henry had nothing in common with him, either.

It didn't help that, before Christmas, Rosa embarked upon a highly volatile romance with an older man (well, he was almost thirty to her twenty-two), named Neal Cassady, who was very handsome but also the sort of person whose life was a performance—or, you might say, a mess, Henry thought. Aunt Eloise disapproved, too, which may or may not have egged Rosa on. Henry said a small thing ("I see what you see in him, but what do you see in him?") in an almost sincerely inquisitive tone of voice. Rosa slammed down the phone and didn't speak to him for a month. Then Cassady went back to his wife, and Rosa called Henry to insist that Neal Cassady was *nothing* like her father, and if Heloise said one more Freudian word, Rosa would wring her neck. When Henry said, "That's very Greek of you" (he was thinking of Electra, Orestes, etc.), she suddenly laughed, and then started crying and asked if he would go away for the weekend with her, because she couldn't "stand it anymore." He made himself pause as if hesitating before saying yes.

He thought he accepted that he and Rosa were not going to advance their own relationship past the epistolary stage. He had accepted that they were cousins, that there was scandal awaiting them if they went any further, and he had decided to see it as his partic-

ular fate that he should fall hopelessly in love with his cousin (but there was plenty of precedent in Romance literature for forbidden love, and maybe it was the least inconvenient kind). Once he moved from Iowa to California to be in the same city as Rosa, and had even moved to Rosa's neighborhood, off Shattuck, he was forced to admit that she was hot-tempered, selfish, and not terribly neat. But he loved her even more, and could not sincerely turn down a chance to be with her. She said she would pick him up in twenty minutes.

Rosa was driving Eloise's car, a gray Deux Chevaux that normally she laughed at. Henry had expected Rosa to look ruffled and distraught, but she looked normal. She leaned over to give him a peck on the cheek and peeled away from the curb, then zipped to Telegraph Avenue. When they turned south on Route 27, he remembered to ask where they were going. She said, "Carmel." Henry perked up. Maybe his hatred of Berkeley was specific. California was as big as France, and, everyone said, as various. It was his own fault that he had not even gotten on a bus or a train and gone somewhere.

And, sure enough, soon he observed that the lie of the land south of the Peninsula was different from San Francisco, and the weather was warmer, too, brighter and drier. Beyond that, though, he could take no interest in the local language, history, geology, or products—he only had eyes for Rosa. The more normal she seemed (Did she usually smoke three cigarettes in an hour, or was he only noticing that now? Was she looking thinner? When he said something about Francis Drake repairing his ships in California, was she making a face?), the more he focused only on her. They walked Carmel Beach, a flat, golden expanse at the foot of a pleasant, clean town that was much more Spanish-looking than San Francisco; he stared so deeply into her face that he fell into a hole some child or dog had dug in the sand, and went to his knees. Rosa laughed for the first time in hours as she held out her hand to him. Maybe he was good for something, then, he thought.

She had money. They ate sole caught nearby for supper and went to a movie in downtown Monterey. Henry watched Rosa's profile as she gazed at the screen. She seemed to follow the plot, but Henry only noticed that it was about Grace Kelly somewhere in South America.

The rooms at the hotel Rosa found in Carmel were small, fake adobe. Without commenting or seeming to notice that this was

unusual, Rosa put on her pajamas and got into bed with Henry. She was so businesslike and quick that he hardly got a look at her breasts, her thighs, her derriere, but he tried to think that this was his dream come true. She pressed herself into his arms and fell asleep. But it was like nothing—worse than that, uncomfortable. Even though he felt the breeze from the open window on his forehead, he couldn't disentangle himself from Rosa to get up and close it. It was strange to feel her breath on his neck, strange to sense the weight of her head pressing his arm into the unforgiving mattress, strange to feel her knee push between his legs, strange to take in her scent (she hadn't bathed before getting into bed), a combination of salt and sweat and the detergent her pajamas had been laundered in. She slept like a rock—an unconscious weight tilting the bed, so that finally he had to ease backward, toward the wall, and contain and balance himself there all night, until Rosa woke up, sat up, and said that she had just been dreaming of waffles. After breakfast, Rosa said that she thought they should drive down the coast, but Henry said that he had an exam the next day and absolutely had to get back to school, to the library, and to something (he kept this part to himself) that he understood.

He did not look at her on the drive home, only out the window, and he decided that maybe California was as interesting in its way as everyone said it was.

LATELY, Joe Langdon kept wishing that he had a photograph of his father when Walter was thirty-three, the age Joe was now. What he would look at was not the hairline or the wrinkles, but the belly. When had Joe's come on? He could not remember. His mother said he was getting to look more like Walter every year, but she was talking about worry lines between his eyebrows. She said, "Well, you had to be a farmer, didn't you?" And he always said, "You could have married more commercial bloodlines," and that shut her up for a day or two. He knew she knew he was referring to the Crests, who had the grocery store in town. Dan Crest was rumored to have had a crush on Rosanna, which was why he gave her more for her eggs and butter all through the Depression than he gave anyone else. Maybe the farming came from the Vogels—his grandmother Langdon cared so little about farming now that she had plowed under her rosebushes in

case she got the money to go to Europe all of a sudden. His mother's brothers, alive and dead, were as wedded to the land as Joe was, so who was Rosanna to talk?

He might pat his belly with regret, but when he stepped into the kitchen after kicking off his boots on the back porch, the Parker-house rolls cooling on the table looked damn good, buttery little half-circles, crispy on the bottom and the top. You didn't have to put another dab of butter on them. He shouted, "Lois?" But there was no answer, so he went through to the living room and looked out the window. Lois had set Annie's playpen on the porch, in the middle of a patch of sunlight. Poppy, the six-month-old spaniel puppy, was in there with Annie, sort of flopped on the toddler's legs, with her head back and her tongue hanging out. Annie was stroking Poppy on the chest with both her hands—nicely, as Joe had taught her. Annie seemed to be a real dog-lover—if there was a dog in the room, she wanted to be with it.

Lois got good cream from the Whiteheads, who had several Jerseys. She thought chickens were disgusting, but eggs were divine, and she didn't waste her egg whites on angel-food cake—she preferred meringues and soufflés. As for the yolks, well, nothing like a smooth hollandaise or some vanilla ice cream. When Rosanna came over on her birthday, and Lois served chocolate mousse with whipped cream instead of angel-food cake, Rosanna didn't say a disapproving word, ate every last bite. Lois's *Joy of Cooking* had already fallen to pieces; Minnie had bought her *Betty Crocker*, which Lois read after dinner as if it were a novel. Then Minnie brought home a copy of a magazine for gourmets, which were people who liked to eat, and Lois pondered these recipes, whispering words to herself—"mortadella," "tagliatelle," "scaloppini." She made one recipe, noodles with a fancy sauce. They had all the ingredients (beef, pork, veal, bacon, onion, carrots, celery), except for something called a truffle, which Minnie maintained was like a mushroom. At the end, she stirred in some Jersey cream. It was good.

Now Joe saw her looking up into the butternut trees, though they wouldn't blossom for another month. Her mother had baked with butternuts all the time, and so, last fall, she had done it herself, and Joe had to admit that the cookies were delicious. Rosanna wouldn't taste one; she had said, "Is there poison ivy in the salad, then?"

Lois saw him and called out, "Did you see my rolls? I think they turned out fine."

To go with the Parkerhouse rolls, she had warmed up the pot roast from the night before with the last of the spinach. There was less than a cup of peas—the first of the season—but they were sweet, light, and delicious. For dessert (how could Lois serve a meal without dessert?), there were some shortbread cookies. Joe took only one of those. Annie ate happily—a serving of pot roast, a spoonful of peas, half a roll, half a cookie, a cup of milk. Like Lois, she was lean and tall. Lois herself ate only a roll, a bite of pot roast, and some peas.

Joe said, "Are you feeling okay, Lo?"

Lois shrugged, then said, "Okay enough. Just not hungry." She reached over and wiped Annie's mouth. Then she said, "I have something to tell you." She said it in her normal way, calmly and straightforwardly.

Joe waited.

Annie wiggled, and said, "Down!"

"Down, please!" said Lois.

"Please!" said Annie.

Joe stood up and removed the tray of the high chair and set Annie on her feet. She ran into the living room. Lois said, "I'm pregnant."

Joe sat down again, and pushed away his plate. Then he said, "How long?"

"Couple months."

"So . . . due in November?"

"Mid-November."

Joe nodded, got up from his chair, and carried his plate into the kitchen, where he set it on the drainboard. He went out the back door. The weather was warming up—a nice breeze from the west was fluttering through the daffodils and the apple blossoms. He stepped into his boots. He thought about putting his jacket back on, but decided he wasn't going to be needing it. Two more days of warm weather and he could plant the long field north of the house that had been in beans last year. Corn this year. Not seed corn, but field corn. Mid-November. Well, that was a good time. All the fall work would be done by then. Annie would be almost three. Joe had heard that three years was a good space between two kids. Close enough to be friends (eventually), but far enough apart not to be in each other's business

every minute of the day. On balance, the news was good. Joe pushed his cap back and headed for the barn, trying not to be too happy, trying to remember a farmer's first principle, that many things could go wrong, to focus on the fact that there were a few things that he could stand to fix on the planter—little things, nothing major. But he skipped a few strides, just because he couldn't contain himself.

THIS YEAR, Frances Upjohn had talked Andy into spending August on Long Island—the Upjohns had a big place on Gin Lane in Southampton—but Andy had refused to be a guest for thirty-one days, so, because they were late getting started, all they could find was a house in Sag Harbor, and nowhere near the beach, which was fine, said Andy, because she hated the beach. It was a dark place, facing north, with beat-up summer-house furniture. Frank came Friday nights, went home Sunday nights; today he was looking after the boys while Andy and Janny went shopping.

Frank sat about halfway up the stairs, nursing a beer, watching them. They had eaten lunch, and now they were watching TV, Richie rolled up in his blanket and Michael sitting cross-legged. Neither was quite as far along as their cousins Timmy and Deanie had been at their age—Frank had to admit that Timmy was a phenomenon in some ways, the son Frank would never have. When Timmy was two and a half, which was what Richie and Michael were now, he had liked to get up on the back of the couch and walk along, pretending he was on a tightrope, his hands above his head. Richie and Michael ran around, but Richie sometimes stumbled and fell for no reason, and Michael had a sort of rolling gait—nothing efficient. Andy told him he was too critical of them, but he liked them better than he liked Janny, who was stiff and remote, the spit and image of his father right down to the tip of her rather large nose. She had started kindergarten early, though, and could now read “at fourth-grade level,” and that would serve her well. He could send her off to Rosemary Hall for high school, then Radcliffe, and then her equally boring uncle Henry could find her something to do.

No, it was true, Frank thought. You didn't have to be a farmer or the son of a farmer to know that breeding was always a gamble. He and Andy should have begotten a race of gods and goddesses. He fin-

ished his beer and called down to the boys, "Wanta have a contest?" Richie, with rounded, placid eyes, looked up the stairs.

Frank moved a couple of armchairs, then pushed most of the dining-room chairs against the wall. He took one of them and set it in the middle of the kitchen. The boys were still lolling. He turned off the TV—it was one he hadn't seen before coming to this house, a portable GE with a clock. He took each of the boys by the hand and stood them up. Richie knew better than to cry when Frank took his blanket away from him and tossed it toward the stairs.

Frank said, "Okay, fellas, here's the course. You start here, at the bookcase, and then you run to the green chair—that's the green chair—turn right—this way"—he demonstrated right—"and then run straight into the kitchen and go around the chair, and come back to this spot." With his toe, he pointed out the threshold between the dining room and the living room. He said, "Let's try it."

Still grasping the boys, he led Michael and half dragged Richie over to the bookcase. Then he trotted them (slowly) toward the center of the room, turned right at the green chair, and trotted them (even more slowly) through the dining room into the kitchen. Michael stumbled as they went around that chair, but regained his feet right away. Frank exclaimed, "Come on, boys! This is the home stretch! Put on some speed!" He dropped their hands, and they half ran across the "finish line."

"Okay!" said Frank. "That was the warm-up!"

He walked them back to the base of the bookcase and stood them about a foot apart, both facing ahead. Now he whispered in Michael's ear, "Keep your feet—you can beat him easy! Got me?" He backed away, made eye contact, and stared at Michael until Michael nodded. Then he whispered in Richie's ear, "If he stumbles, Rich, you just keep going. Slow and steady wins the race. You listening?" Richie nodded.

Frank stepped back and held out his arm, then he said, "Ready? Set? Go!" He dropped his arm, and the two boys took off. Richie understood the course better than Michael—he did make the right turn and head into the dining room while Michael was still wondering what to do—but then Michael spun around and overtook him at the chair in the kitchen, and, in fact, poked him in the side with his elbow, causing Richie to stumble. When they got to the finish line,

they were about a step apart, Michael in the lead. Frank stood in the middle of the living room, scowling and shaking his head. He said, “What a pair of slowpokes! This race is going to have three heats. That was number one. Go back to the start.” He pointed to the bookcase.

He sent them off again. This time, Michael had learned something—he turned at the proper spot and headed for the kitchen with Richie on his heels. But Richie had learned something, too, and when they came to the chair, he turned his hip and popped Michael, sending him sprawling. He crossed the threshold by himself, grinning, and said, “I won! I won!”

“You did!” said Frank. “You won! Can you beat him again?”

Richie nodded emphatically.

Frank said, “Okay, then. You each had one win. Richard, you go stand by the bookcase and wait.”

He went into the kitchen, where Michael was sitting on the floor, his face hot and flushed. Frank squatted down and said, “Michael? You mad?”

Michael nodded.

“Are you really, really mad?”

Michael nodded again.

Frank said, “Okay, then, you go beat him. You are faster, and you can do it. You got that?”

Michael nodded and clambered to his feet. When he arrived at the bookcase, he stuck his tongue out at Richie, who responded in kind. Frank said, “Save it, boys. Just run fast!” Then, “Ready? Set? Go!” This time, the squabbling commenced almost immediately—Michael bounced Richie into the green chair, but Richie kept his feet, followed Michael, and grabbed his shirt. Frank said nothing. Michael smacked Richie on the arm and then pushed him, but they both kept running through the dining room and into the kitchen. At the kitchen chair, Richie did a smart thing—he pushed the chair a couple of inches, so that Michael had to duck to one side to avoid it. In the meantime, Richie, having shortened his own course, was two steps into the dining room while Michael was still going around the chair. But Michael was faster, and when he caught up to Richie, he reached out and grabbed his hair and pulled him down. Frank barked out a single laugh. He had to give Richie credit, though—instead of crying, he crawled forward as fast as he could and grabbed Michael’s

pant leg and brought him down. Then he crawled over the finish line first. Frank now laughed out loud, and both boys turned and stared up at him. Frank said, "I guess Richie wins. Richie wins by a neck." Richie started laughing, too, but Michael's face began to crumple, so Frank said, "What's the prize, boys? What does the winner get?"

Both boys looked at him. He said, "The winner gets tickled!" He fell upon Richie and played his fingers over the tiny ribs until Richie was squirming away and laughing. After a moment, Frank stood them up. He wiped tears off Richie's face with the tail of his shirt—he didn't want Andy to see those—and then he got a Kleenex and wiped both their noses. "You boys tough?"

Both boys nodded.

"Are you really tough?"

They nodded again.

"All right!"

But they were still angry at one another; when they went back to watching TV, Frank had to sit them on cushions a couple of feet apart so they wouldn't continue the argument. By the time Janny walked in, and then Andy, they were quiet enough. Andy said, "Whew! It's nice and shady in here. We could have stayed home, it's so hot. You guys have a nice afternoon?"

"We did," said Frank. The boys nodded; undoubtedly, "nice" was not the word to describe the particular pleasures of their time together. But "nice" was not for boys, Frank thought. "Educational," "stimulating," "active." Right out of Dr. Spock, Frank was sure.