

Now, Now

The light from our refrigerator spills onto the floor of the dark kitchen and onto my shoes. I stand looking down at them in the wedge of light and hear my father's voice. "What are you doing?" he asks.

"Nothing," I say.

The previous days had been very long. On Saturday morning, my father and mother had come out of their bedroom. A blanket covered my mother's shoulders and hung to the floor around her. She leaned on my father, shaking and moaning. My father held her against him to keep her from falling. Her face was pale, her eyes red and watery. Her hands clutched the blanket. My brothers, sitting in front of the TV with their bowls of Cheerios and Rice Krispies, looked up, their eyes as big as pies.

"I'm taking your mamma to the hospital," my father said. He moved slowly with her toward the door. "It's all right, now, now."

"Watch your brothers," my father told me over his shoulder, his voice strained. And they went out the door.

Panic rocketed through my veins, pressing my heart hard against my chest again and again. An electric current hissed and fizzed behind my eyes and burned my mouth. For a fleeting moment, before I could push it down, I was struck with an awful notion that life, like a loose lace, was about to come undone.

"You boys get your shoes on, Aunt Mary is coming for you," my father told us when he returned a few hours later.

"Where's Momma?" someone asked.

"Momma's at the hospital. Now get your shoes on right now."

My mother's big sister, my Aunt Mary, lived thirty miles away in a little town even dustier than ours. She and my Uncle Morris lived with their four children in a house that was not quite big enough for the six of them.

My Uncle Morris came walking up our driveway a little later in the morning. He always wore a Massey-Ferguson cap. When he dressed up for weddings and funerals, or when Aunt Mary could get him to go to Sunday services down at the Baptist church, he replaced the Massey-Ferguson cap with a felt cowboy hat and put on black boots instead of his usual brown. Aunt Mary wouldn't let him light his cigar in the house, but he kept it in his mouth anyway, soggy and coming apart at the end near his lips. My brothers and I piled into the car with Aunt Mary and Uncle Morris and our cousins.

Later that afternoon, Uncle Morris led Aunt Mary over to his big recliner in the den. No one but Uncle Morris ever sat in the chair. His habit was to park himself there at the end of a day, calling out every now and then for Aunt Mary to bring him a glass of iced tea or the paper or something. When the volume or channel needed changing on the TV across the room, he would holler in a voice you could hear a mile away for one of my cousins to come and take care of it – maybe get him a piece of pie while they were at it. He sat Aunt Mary in his chair and leaned the recliner back. Aunt Mary lay there with her hands on her chest.

When the sun went down, Uncle Morris went around and turned on a few lights. The phone on the kitchen wall rang, and he lifted the receiver and listened. He went into the den and leaned down

to Aunt Mary's ear. She made a gasping sound, and she sank deeper into the big chair and moaned, "No, oh no," over and over into her hands.

I sat with my brothers in the church pew, wearing scratchy new clothes. My Aunt Shirley and my Uncle Jimmy had come the day before to take my brothers and me downtown. We met a man who opened the locked door of his store, and Aunt Shirley found Sunday pants and shirts for us. Uncle Jimmy and the man who owned the store stood whispering together on the other side of the store, shaking their heads. They kept looking at us, then looking away.

A month before, a rare snowstorm had come and gone in the night, leaving our world blanketed in a white silence. My brothers and I bounded into the yard and threw snowballs at one another until my mother and father came outside onto the porch. Then we threw snowballs at them, and they scurried back inside. They soon reemerged, wearing boots and coats. My brothers and I threw snowballs at them again, and this time they threw snowballs back at us. My mother laughed and shrieked like a little girl and jumped behind my father to hide from snowballs that flew at her. We laughed and pointed at her and taunted her without mercy for throwing like a sissy. Ice crystals clung to her dark hair, the hair of my very first memories, when it had fallen over me as she bent to lift me out from my crib; when its scent filled my head as I napped beside her. I dimly remember reaching for her hair with my tiny fists, trying to pull the strands into my mouth. "No, stop that."

Now we sat in the church wearing our new clothes, with my father, my aunts and uncles, my cousins, and many other people from our little town. I thought about how my mother had thrown the snowballs and how she had laughed, and I thought about her dark, scented hair, and in my mind I again reached for its strands.

A man climbed the steps at the front of the church and opened his book. "She was twenty-nine years old," he began.

Aunt Mary, sitting next to Uncle Morris, who held his felt hat over a knee, clenched her hands in her lap, rocked back and forth, and began to shudder and moan.

There is a time in your life when you can run outside early on a Saturday morning with a Pop Tart or a piece of cinnamon toast with butter and sugar on it, and you can jump on your bike and pedal madly down the brick street in front of your house. And you can keep going, on and on, until you finally reach the main road, at the point where your mother has told you that you can't go any farther. And so you turn around, and pedal lazily back toward home, with the sun on your face and the taste of cinnamon in your mouth. And you can stand up on the pedals and feel the wind in your lungs and in your hair. There are some things you want, but you don't really want them that badly. And the trees and the grass and your own heartbeat are as they should be – like they have always been. It's early, so it isn't yet hot. But it will get hot, and you know that when it does you can drop your bike in the yard and run into the house and your mother will give you a glass of Kool-Aid.

"No, you can't have any ice, we need it for supper," she will tell you.

And if you are lucky she will have made some donuts from a can of biscuit dough, and covered them in sugar.

"Don't eat all those. Leave some for your daddy."

And you know that when the sun goes down and it gets too dark for him to see what he's doing, your father will come home. And everyone will sit at the big table and your father will put pepper sauce on his beans, and you will try some on your beans and it will make you sneeze. One of your

little brothers will laugh, and then everyone will laugh. Your mother, your father, your brothers, and even you are as they should be – like they have always been. All this is what you know.

But when your life comes undone, when the things that you see, and hear, and touch, are not the way they have always been, what then? The things you knew to be true are not true any longer. You wake up in the morning and sit up in the bed, and for a moment you wonder if you have been having a bad dream and everything is really all right. You want to run down the hall and see that your mother is there. Then the awful truth comes crashing through, its weight pressing in on you from every side, and you know that everything is not all right, and you wonder if you are still dreaming and if you might never wake up.

My father closes the refrigerator door and the kitchen is dark again. He takes my arm in a big hand, its skin like the bark of a tree. I look down at my shoes, where the light had been. My eyes overflow and tears run down my cheeks. My chest heaves and shakes, and I feel like something inside me has burst.

My father puts his rough hand on my shoulder. “Now, now. Now, now.”