

THE ROUND BARN: A NOVEL

by

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## ABSTRACT

*The Round Barn* is a novel in two parts that tells the story of two Iowa farm families during the period 1915 to 1929, a volatile time in the history of the American farm. The first part of the novel tells the story of Joe Marshall, a young man in conflict with his hard-working farmer father. At sixteen-years-old, he must choose whether to leave the farm to pursue his own desires or to stay where he is needed to help keep his financially strapped family afloat. Part two focuses on Mae Allinson, a woman in her early twenties, who has willingly accepted the responsibility of raising her sister's child after her sister dies in childbirth. By doing so, Mae forsakes the man she was to marry, the man who would take her to Chicago and away from farm life.

The round barn, built by Joe Marshall's father in the opening chapter of the novel, serves as a through line linking all the chapters and connecting characters to a specific place. The round barn, in addition to being a stage setting for the action of the novel, has its own story arc, literally rising out of the Iowa soil in the first chapter, functioning as a working barn through the central part of the novel, then finally falling into disrepair by the end.

In the novel, Joe and Mae each seek their own identities within their families, identities that put them in conflict with a family dynamic that is focused on the survival and prosperity of the family as a whole. This conflict forces each character to define for themselves what love, power, freedom, and obligation mean and how far they are willing to go in pursuit of these things. In addition to functioning within their own families, the main characters must also contend with larger issues that pressured the American farm of

the time (economics, war, social change, and migration to the urban areas), factors that push and pull the characters in different directions.

By telling the story from the positions of two different characters and by spanning the number of years that it does, the novel seeks to show how events and the passage of time transform the individuals, their families, and the American farm.

In memory of Hazel and Charlie,  
whose true Iowa story was finer than anything I could have written.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: JOE**

**Spring, 1914**

The Marshall family's round barn rose from the Iowa soil like the half-buried skeleton of some great beast. To fifteen-year-old Joe Marshall the bare, wood frame looked like the spine and ribs of an animal waiting to be covered with hide. Of course, he knew it was merely waiting to be covered with a shingle roof, just as soon as the barn builder's men finished nailing the frame together.

Constructed of hollow tiles fashioned from the near-black Iowa clay by the Johnston Brothers Clay Works in Fort Dodge, it would be the first round barn in Iowa Rapids and only the third such barn in the central part of the state. That was the litany Joe heard over and over, first from Max Bancroft, the barn builder, then from his father. The barn, with its forty-foot tall central silo, a hay mow held seventy-five tons of loose hay, and a more efficient system for feeding the animals, should improve conditions around the farm.

Joe watched every day from his spot behind the old, plank and fieldstone barn as the new one grew with each course of bricks. This afternoon, the builder's men crawled over the brickwork, working quickly to finish the frame before the weather changed and they lost the fair April day. It was sunny and warm with just enough breeze against Joe's skin, without the persistent Iowa wind that could interfere with the barn work.

Joe had grown used to hearing his father referred to as "that oddball building that crazy barn." But his father would have the round barn, or whatever else he wanted. Even



now, Sam Marshall gestured with his arms wide, shouting at Max Bancroft and his workers. He leaned his tall, heavily-muscled torso into Bancroft; his face, with the broad forehead and triangular nose, was only inches away from the other man's face. This was the way his father operated.

Joe, who most of the time couldn't bear to be looked at by other people, wondered how he could be related to this man. When Joe was thirteen, he had gotten so lost in a book he forgot the afternoon milking. His father had said to him, "How can I leave this farm to you when you can't even remember we have cows?" Sam Marshall was absolute, so sure of his own place in the world.

Joe leaned back against the rough stone of the old barn and watched the pantomime of the workers. The round barn was indeed innovative and the activity of its construction certainly broke up the never-ending farm routine, but it was, after all, just another farm building designed for utility. Like the people of the Marshall farm, it was be expected to perform, to produce.

"You think he's crazy, too?" The voice behind him belonged to Uncle Rex, his father's younger brother. Uncle Rex usually materialized out of nowhere when Joe was lost in thought.

"I think, as usual, he's in charge," Joe said.

Uncle Rex propped himself against the wall of the old barn, a looseness in his body as he casually hiked his leg up on a fieldstone that stuck out of the barn wall. He leaned an elbow on his knee, at ease with himself.

Eight years younger than Joe's father and unmarried, Uncle Rex had played the prodigal, working in the vineyards of California for three years, then returned to the farm

a year and half ago. Uncle Rex was shorter than his brother and not as broad in the shoulders, less likely to go to fat, as most farmers did when they eventually stopped working the land. Joe thought of Uncle Rex as “lighthearted,” but he’d come back from California with a scar on his torso where it looked like he’d been cut with a knife. Joe had seen the scar several times when Uncle Rex had stripped off a wet, dirty shirt to put on a clean one. But he’d never asked his uncle about it.

The afternoon sun was dropped in the west. If he didn’t get to work soon, his father would say he wasn’t pulling his weight. Joe sighed and hitched himself away from the wall. One of the men, scurrying across the barn skeleton suddenly lost his balance and pitched two stories down onto the hard ground with a thud Joe could hear from across the field. Joe ran forward, anxious to see if the man was moving.

The crowd of men huddled around the man on the ground, a boy not much older than he was, nineteen or twenty. He looked German or Scandinavian, fair haired with sunburned skin – perhaps a recent immigrant. He did not move and blood trickled from his nose, a dark, crooked line splitting his cheek. One arm was twisted at an unnatural angle, clearly broken. Max Bancroft bent over him, speaking his name, trying to rouse him.

“Get him up,” Joe’s father said, pointing to Kenny Talbot and Fred Hansen, the Marshall’s two hired men.

Talbot hesitated. “Maybe we should get a doctor first.”

“Move him out of the way. Then we’ll have the doctor,” he said, motioning with his hand that they should pick him up. “Into the first stall in the old barn. Plenty of hay in there.”

Talbot and Hansen picked up the prone man up by his arms and legs and hauled him, his body swaying heavily, toward the barn.

Joe's father looked around. "And the rest of you can stop standing around gawking." He picked up a hammer and walked back to the construction area.

Bancroft motioned for his men to get back to work, then followed after his injured worker.

Uncle Rex trotted to the backdoor of the house to call Dr. Fremont. The milking beckoned and there was nothing Joe could do here to help; he headed down the cow lane between the farmhouse yard and the central cornfield and into the cow pasture. The herd, twelve buff-colored Geurnseys, stood at the gate, waiting for him, their stomachs empty and udders full.

Joe walked back up the lane behind the crowd of bobbing, shuffling cow bodies. How could someone practically his own age wind up an itinerant barn builder? Where'd he come from? Where was his family? Who would take care of him now that he was hurt?

The men who built the barn were strangers to the Marshalls. They came with Max Bancroft as a traveling crew that lived temporarily at the farm. They could be any sort of men – loners, drinkers, unstable, or perhaps criminal. They bunked in the loft of the old barn, washed at the pump, ate simple food Joe's mother cooked and Bancroft served to them from a long table at the worksite. They rarely came near the farmhouse, though Joe didn't know if that was because they were told to stay away or because they took no interest in the Marshall family.

Still, his mother watched them anxiously from behind the white eyelet curtains of her kitchen window, like a hen looking out for the fox circling the chicken coop. It was from her kitchen, with its high, open shelves full of neatly stacked dishes and rows of bowls and pitchers, that she kept track of everything that went on at the farm. Though she never seemed to step far from the heat of the cast iron stove and was always stooped over a pile of crockery in the sink, Margaret Marshall invariably knew what was what – and by now, she surely knew the details of the accident.

Joe prodded the last cow into the barnyard with a soft “C’mon” and a gentle slap on its flank. If only his father could get the kind of compliance from those men that Joe was getting from these cows. The young man who fell to the mud-packed ground was tired and overworked, driven by Bancroft, who was being pushed by his father. His father always said, “You’d better keep up, or you’ll be left behind.” Joe wasn’t sure how much longer he would try to keep up.

Joe’s father had first read about the round barn in an article in *Kimbell’s Dairy Farmer* the year before. Then, in November 1913, he took a trip to the agricultural school at Iowa State University in Ames to see the design. He returned home convinced he needed to build one. He stayed up late at night studying the plans and detailed instructions he ordered from the Lawson Barn Building & Supply Company in Des Moines, scribbling columns of numbers, trying to figure the cost of materials, labor and equipment.

Several weeks after Joe’s father received the plans from the Lawson Company, Max Bancroft showed up at their door introducing himself as a builder of this new type of

barn. Bancroft had round, shiny eyes, like wet pebbles, and a sly smile designed to draw in whoever he spoke to. But he had a firm handshake and Joe's father took to him immediately. Joe's mother viewed Bancroft with concern, dubious about anything the man said. "He feeds your father's ambitions with no concern for whether this round barn is really a wise idea," she said to Joe, nodding her head slowly, the way she did once she decided someone was trouble. The two men were outside surveying the spot where the new barn would go. His parents disagreed about things before -- but this was the first time his mother voiced a criticism of his father directly to him. The round barn just didn't sit right with her and she was going to be hard pressed to keep that fact to herself.

The day after Bancroft left, his father began to carefully explain the advantages of the round barn in detail to the family during dinner.

"This new design will let us keep twenty-five cows more efficiently," he said. He sat at the head of the battered, wooden table. "We'll be able to produce more than eight hundred gallons of milk a week."

Milk Joe would have to cart to the creamery in Iowa Rapids every Saturday. He picked at the plate in front of him and watched his mother dish slices of ham and mashed potatoes onto plates. She served his younger sister, Felicia, eleven, across the table from him, not daring to speak, though she was bursting to say something. As his mother put food in a bowl for Alex, his little brother, and placed it on the tray of the rickety highchair, Joe could tell from the set of her mouth, it wouldn't be long before she spoke her mind. Finally, when she was sure everyone had food, she sat down at the end of the table closest to the stove.

“If and when those farmers in Europe march off to fight, there’ll be a sharp drop in the supply of farm products.” His father said this in order to convince his mother that the round barn was a sound investment. Although his father was in charge of the farm finances, she was always aware of how much money they had, how much was coming in, and how it was spent. She watched their pennies closely and wanted know exactly what this undertaking would cost and how it would benefit them.

“The smart American farmer will put himself in position to fill this demand,” he continued. “And there’ll be a rise in milk prices. We’ll be able to take advantage of it.”

There it is, Joe thought. His father’s real motive – profit.

“That sounds rather like profiting from the misfortunes others,” his mother said, as if she read Joe’s mind. She raised an eyebrow and went on. “Lots of people are increasing their farm’s capacity to produce milk but they aren’t building round barns.” She paused. “Maybe it doesn’t seem wise to them.”

His father looked her in the eye. “I’m just trying to make the most of the good times while they last,”

The current period of agricultural prosperity that most folks agreed started five years earlier had allowed his father to gradually acquire more land – a small adjoining plot here, some additional pasture land there – until the farm reached its present size of two-hundred and twenty-three acres. He also added new equipment each year – a Hart-Parr gas-powered tractor in 1911, a stationery engine to run the corn sheller in 1912, and a small farm truck just last year. These were not extravagant purchases, but they were significant enough to garner the attention of other farmers in the neighborhood -- at least until one of them bought their own new piece of equipment. Sam Marshall’s Hart-Parr

tractor was soon outshone by George Cabot's 1913 Waterloo Boy two-cylinder tractor with its coat of shiny green paint and bright yellow wheels. But that was how it went around here – prosperity was a constant cycle of acquisition and one-upping the neighbors.

If his father wanted to keep buying land, he could always find something he wanted -- some parcel made available when an inept or unfortunate farmer couldn't figure out how to make a go of it, even when times were good. Recently Joe's father mentioned that the sixty acres across the county road from the Marshall's south pasture would surely come up for sale when the Fryslie family, currently doing a poor job farming it, finally gave up and went back to Chicago.

His mother had lost the barn versus house battle one too many times not to question exactly what they were getting for the money they were spending. She did not get the new stove they needed until the year after the tractor purchase, despite the fact the old stove had a broken door and regularly sent streams of smoke into the kitchen. It was no surprise to her when the new stationary engine went to the corn sheller rather into making the difficult, hand-cranked clothes washer a self-powered machine. And she was still waiting for a new suite of furniture and carpet to replace the threadbare hand-me-downs they'd been lived with since she and Joe's father had married.

Joe watched his mother wage her half of the war, mixing patient resignation that allowed her to make do with what she had while a simmering resentment flashed in her eyes. At first, she voiced her wishes calmly, trying to explain to her husband why the house needed what it did – until it dawned on her that these decisions had already been made without her. It was then that the stove began to smoke everyday, a few too many

corncobs jammed into its firebox, and the clothes washer habitually wrenched and tore his father's overalls.

His father had always been right in the past about decisions to purchase new equipment or livestock or additional acres, but this barn would take more effort and cost more money than the family had ever spent on any single purchase before. And his mother needed to be sure about it.

"How are we going to pay for a new barn?" Joe's mother asked, her voice quiet and steady. She didn't look up from wiping food from Alex's chin and prodding him to eat.

"We have enough in savings to pay for the barn and still have a cushion." His father cut his meat with quick swipes of his knife. "I checked with Allen Flynn at the bank."

"Do you think it's wise to use up our cash?" Her tone was still neutral, but Joe knew this wasn't a simple question. Growing up poor in a family of Irish immigrants made her frugal. "My father told me the only safe way to double your money was to fold it in half and then tuck it into your vest pocket," she always said.

"I figure it's going to cost anywhere between twenty-two hundred and twenty-five hundred dollars to build and outfit the barn. We can handle that." Joe's father rested both elbows on the table and clasped his hands together as if in prayer, gesture he rarely made in church.

"I know we certainly aren't borrowing it," she said. .

She was baiting him now. She didn't favor borrowing either. They were all well aware of farm families that got into trouble that way. They got in over their heads and



lost everything, then were forced to move to the county poor farm or to leave town to escape the shame.

“That’s right.” He pointed with his knife, then went back to cutting his food.

“Why do we need to expand? Isn’t the farm and the herd big enough to support us?” Joe’s mother asked. She hadn’t touched her food.

“You know it’s always good for a farm to grow when it can – and we can,” his father said. He went on with his sales pitch, explaining why the barn should be round. “The engineers at the university figured out cows are wider at their hips than their heads.” As he spoke, his calloused, thick-knuckled hands moved in rapid circles above his dinner plate, his fingers jabbing outward, mimicking the shape of the round barn floor. “They’re wedge-shaped, and the best way to keep them is in a circle with their heads facing in.”

Joe suppressed the urge to laugh. He knew only too well that cows were wider at the back end – that was the end that squeezed him against the stall or knocked him hard into the barn door as the animals moved out into the yard. But it was not wise to interrupt his father’s sermon, especially with laughter.

“With everything we need -- the hay, silage, milking equipment -- all in one place with the herd, we could easily double the herd size.” His father continued to talk slowly and earnestly, his voice low, not booming as it usually did. He pointed with his fork across the table at Uncle Rex.

Uncle Rex nodded in agreement, his mouth full of food. He set down his fork and reached for his glass. “Best part of all, damned Iowa winds won’t make a round barn

shake and shimmy the way flat-sided ones do.” He glanced at Joe. They both knew Sam Marshall didn’t feel Iowa winds anymore.

Joe’s father went on. “There’s an overhead track system with a bucket attached-- makes hauling things up and down easier. New hayloft will make moving hay around a helluva lot easier, too.” These words sounded familiar, as though his father was parroting Bancroft.

“And there’ll be inside ventilation downstairs that’ll carry fresh air up through pipes to the roof,” Uncle Rex added. “Nothing like fresh air in a barn full of warm, damp cow bodies, especially in summer.” He started to stand up, but before he could get to the stove, Joe’s mother was leaning over his shoulder, dishing potatoes from the pan onto his plate. She then reached over and dropped some onto Joe’s plate.

Joe was never quite sure where Uncle Rex stood on the barn issue, if he really believed it was the right way to go or if he was just trying to get along with his brother. When Uncle Rex came back to the farm, nobody questioned his desire or his right to be there. Joe wasn’t privy to conversations between his father and uncle, but he assumed Uncle Rex was welcomed back, although with conditions. There was, no doubt, a specified amount of labor Uncle Rex was expected to contribute in exchange for room and board. And there was a clear line between time that belonged to the farm and time that was his own.

There was also the possibility Uncle Rex’s presence might cloud the issue of who would inherit the farm, a concern in the back of every farmer’s mind. Some men split their holdings evenly among their sons and sent their daughters into marriages with cash or livestock. Some farmers, loath to split up farms they worked so hard to build, left

everything to either the eldest son or to the son most dedicated, in his father's eyes, to the land -- with the provision, of course, he take care of his widowed mother. This was the approach taken by Josiah Marshall when he left the land, now the central part of the Marshall farm, to his eldest son, Sam, and cash to his younger sons, David and Rex. Joe's grandmother, Elizabeth, had lived with them until her sudden death when Joe was six.

"Joe, you'll be pleased that there'll be a corn silo in the center with a mechanism to fill silage and bring it down," his father said.

It was Joe's job every day to climb the ladder high up on the outside of the brick silo that now stood next to the barn. He crawled into the barrel at the top and shoveled the corn silage down the chute so it could be loaded into buckets and fed to the cows. When he took over this chore, at the age of twelve, he was scared to climb the ladder. He'd put it off as long as possible, until he had no other choice but to put a shaking foot on that first rung. Uncle Rex had offered to take over the job, but Joe's father refused to let him. "Boy has to pull his weight," he'd said.

Joe heard the note of criticism in the word "pleased," but he simply shrugged. "Doesn't bother me anymore."

He had gotten over his fear of the climb, the height no longer making him dizzy and off-balance, like he could easily tumble into nothingness. Now he was more sure-footed, comfortable moving the platform down as the silage dropped. Often he stopped at the top of the ladder to look across the fields or down onto the roof of the house and barn. From this vantage point, Joe could see his father working in the cornfield, a tiny figure like one of his old toy soldiers. He liked to imagine his father was a toy he could move

around the field, making him work at double speed or pushing him over into the soft, brown mud.

But even though Joe had gotten used to the height and the sweet smell of corn silage, he still hated the job. He hated most of his chores but did them without complaint – farm children didn't complain.

Joe's father kept talking. "Besides, the old barn is about to rot away in spots. Last spring we replaced an entire section of floor boards. I think some of the supports are about to go."

"You think?" his mother questioned. She pushed food around on her plate, but never lifted any of it to her mouth. "Shouldn't you be sure before you go spending all that money?"

"I'm sure," his father responded. "Everyone else in this family knows the new barn is a good idea – even your own cousin, one of the tightfisted Flynn's."

At that moment, Alex fussed in his highchair and Uncle Rex moved as if to pick him up, but Joe's mother stood and pushed him out of the way. She yanked the baby into her arms and left the kitchen. The room was silent except for the sound of her footsteps on the stairs. Without a word, Joe's father and Uncle Rex got up and walked out the front door to finish their chores. Joe hesitated only a moment before following them out. His sisters would have to clean up the kitchen -- and see to their mother-- on their own.

A month later the building contract was signed and, by the spring of 1914, Joe's father, Uncle Rex, and Max Bancroft were spending late nights around the kitchen table working to adapt the barn plans to suit the needs of the farm. They talked late into the night, their mumbling voices drifting up the stairs to his bedroom.

Construction began with digging and pouring a concrete foundation, a circle almost sixty feet in diameter. By the time the bricklayers laid the courses of the thick, dark bricks three feet high, neighbors and farmers from all corners of the county were regularly stopping by the Marshall farm to check on the barn's progress. Joe's father showed them around, pointing out each and every one of the barn's features, talking at great length, and gesturing expansively. Curious onlookers watched and made frequent comments as the forty-foot, hand-laminated, curved beams that would support the second floor and form the circular track were brought in by a team of carpenters and workmen.

From his vantage point, Joe overheard neighbors – some who claimed to be friends, some who were merely acquaintances – call the round barn “the extravagant foolishness.” But his own mother was the most direct, saying, “We are a freak show. People coming here to look at this barn like it's a two-headed horse.” And for what must have been the hundredth time, she shook her head.

George Cabot, who ran the threshing ring and farmed a large spread down toward Welden, said to the man who came with him to get a look, “Sam Marshall thinks himself a gentleman farmer. A smart farmer wouldn't have this barn as a gift.” Joe didn't know whether Cabot knew or cared that his words could be heard by Sam Marshall's son. He grew angry, not because the man insulted his father, but because he had the nerve to do it so loudly, right on the Marshall's property.

Joe grew used to the commentary, but usually it was made by people who didn't realize a member of the Marshall family was within earshot. He was standing behind the drink table at the church picnic earlier that spring, his glass filled with fresh lemonade, when he heard the words “round barn” and “crackpot.” A group of farm women he didn't

recognize sat in a row of wooden folding chairs beyond the table, their dinner plates piled with chicken bones and melon rinds. Their backs were to Joe but no one in this town ever seemed to gossip quietly.

“I feel badly for Margaret, married to a kook who’s spent a shovel full of money on a barn,” said one woman, her voice rising to sneer at the word “barn.”

“I don’t think she saw *this* coming when she married him,” said the woman next to her.

A third woman, older than the other two with a sharp face and a beaky nose, said, “That marriage isn’t much of a going concern anyway.”

Joe wasn’t sure what she meant, but burned silently at this bunch of hens talking about his family, as if they knew how it was inside his house. He wanted to fling his lemonade at them, but he never would. Instead, he took the glass and walked to the far side of the picnic grounds and sat alone under the trees. He began to understand there was a group of people who treated his father to his face as if he were one of their own, but really waited for him to fail.

At least the kids at school and at the soda shop made their cutting remarks directly to Joe’s face, “Hey Joe, your dad lost his marbles?” or “What kind of idiot builds a round barn? Doesn’t he know they’re supposed to be square?” At first he tried to defend the barn – but not his father -- by explaining the efficiency of the design, how cows are wedge-shaped. But after a while, it was just easier to laugh at their words and smile, like it was all a big joke.

Mercifully, by the time the round was finished and outfitted in the summer of 1914, it did not end up costing any lives. The man who fell, Lucas Schmidt, survived. The doctor did what he could for him, but it was apparent two weeks later, when Max Bancroft loaded him into the wagon to take him to the train station, that Schmidt had suffered a brain injury. He could not answer simple questions and just stared three feet in front of him.

The barn had ended up costing far more money than Joe's father had originally estimated. They'd had to pay the workmen hundreds more than expected, additional metal work had been required, and there were increased livestock costs. "Bancroft inflating prices to make more for himself, no doubt," Joe's mother said to him.

They'd depleted their savings more than his father planned, but there was still some money in the bank he told Joe's mother. He wasn't worried. "The first year of increased milk production will cover it," he said. "Milk keeps going up." The herd was now twenty-five strong and Joe was busier than ever milking and cleaning stalls.

Joe found the views from the new barn to be just about the same as those from the old plank barn, which still stood next door, the first signs it would some day collapse in on itself just setting in. From the second floor hay dormer, he could see through the stand of walnut and pine trees, across the north cornfields to the two-lane road of unpaved dirt that ran across the flat terrain, east through Welden and into Iowa Rapids. North of Iowa Rapids, far beyond and out of sight, flowed the Iowa River. From a window on the other side of the barn, he could see across the small wheat field, through the cow pasture, and just make out the train tracks of the Illinois Central Gulf Railroad through the gap in the

trees. He heard a train running, its whistle faint and the puff of smoke from the engine barely visible in the dim morning light.

He leaned a hand on the clay tile wall and felt the ridges of the brown-red bricks, as dark as the Iowa soil they came from. The white mortar between the courses of brick snagged his fingernail as he moved his hand back and forth, the same way he stroked the flank of each cow in the dairy herd before settling down to milk her.

Moving into the center of the hayloft, Joe stared up at the ceiling beams until they appeared to spin out from the silo, like the spokes of a bicycle wheel. Looking up made him dizzy, as if the whole barn revolved around the silo. The silo, a column of heavy concrete blocks held together with metal straps, anchored the barn, towering over everything before disappearing abruptly into the roof. Was this what it felt like to stand in a great cathedral and look up into its vaulted ceiling? He had never been in a cathedral; he'd only seen pictures in books of their high gothic arches and airy domes.

He made his way down the wooden stairs to the barn's main floor; if he lingered any longer he would be late for school. Just this morning, as he dawdled over breakfast, spinning bits of toast crust on the table until they fell off the edge, his father reminded him the barn would not clean itself. Joe muttered he was getting to it.

He hadn't always minded the farm chores and physical labor so much. When he was ten or eleven years old, he willingly sowed row after row of corn and dug up bushels of potatoes. It was only in the last year or so he'd come to see the farm as a place of endless drudgery and constant struggle. Even when times were good, the family worried about losing crops to the weather and livestock to disease. The farm was not a place of



pastoral charm and virtuousness and his father was deluding himself if he thought being a farmer made him the master of his own destiny.

He pulled the pitchfork from its hook on the wall and began to throw heavy forkfuls of manure, mixed with straw and urine, into the large metal bucket that hung from the circular track running around the outside of the stalls. As he bent over each load of manure, his slender arms and wrists working the shovel hard, Joe tried not to think about how, in a few weeks, he would have to pitch this same manure onto the spreader so it could be hauled out into the fields. He was used to the smell, associating it more with the field where it fertilized the crops, than with the bowels of the animals from which it came. What he hated was the slickness of the manure that made his boot heels slip across the concrete floor. Even with the aid of the bucket on the track, this was still the most miserable chore of the day, the barn empty and hollow. At least during milking time he had the warm beating-heart companionship of the herd.

Hurrying now, he ran the shovel through the gutters, leaving bits of manure in the grooves. He splashed out several buckets of water to rinse the stalls so they dried by evening when the herd came back in. He finished by spreading a layer of dry straw bedding across the concrete floor. Tomorrow he would shovel it and the manure that mixed with it, back into the hanging bucket. Maybe tomorrow he'd have time to stop and appreciate the new barn and how lucky he was.

## March, 1915

The mid-spring frost crunched under Joe's boots as he crossed the yard behind the old barn and its silo. Though he walked normally, he felt he was creeping, a thief in the night trying not to be caught. Behind the silo, he pulled open the sagging door to the carriage shed, went through the main room where discarded pieces of farm equipment were stored, to the old tack room at the far end. The tack room was usually empty, a rare vacant spot on a farm where almost every space was used for one job or another.

This was the only place where Joe could work on his science experiments without getting into trouble. When he was thirteen, he found a worn copy of *Horne's Easy Experiments for Schools and Families with Home-Made Apparatus* on the parlor bookcase, wedged between an old grammar school primer and his mother's copy of *Little Women*. Ever since then, he had snuck out here and, in the quiet with no one watching, he'd carefully followed the directions in the book, conducting most of the tests contained within its pages. He found the activities in it were more complex and mysterious to him than shoving kernels of corn into the ground and waiting to see if they sprouted or if they succumbed to heat, to drowning, or to insects that preyed upon them.

This experiment shouldn't cause any trouble – he was simply building a crystal radio set from a kit he'd sent away for from an ad in the back of *Successful Farming*. He'd read these sets could pick up radio transmissions and people across the country were building them to listen to weather and farm reports, church sermons, and adventure stories. He hoped to be able to pick up musical broadcasts that his mother would enjoy.

The first experiment he tried had been cementing two old watch crystals together and filling the gap between them with water to make a magnifying glass he used to

examine the undersides of leaves and ants that crawled over the windowsill. He then concentrated the sun's rays using an old spectacle glass taken from the odds and ends drawer in the roll-top desk in the parlor. The book said he could also use the larger lens from an opera glass, but he didn't know what an opera glass looked like and was pretty sure the family didn't have one. The spectacle glass worked fine, focusing the sun's rays onto a piece of gun cotton, taken without permission from his father's gun cabinet and coated with lampblack. The cotton grew hot, then flamed briefly leaving a telltale smudge mark on the tack room floor.

Pleased with himself for making the cotton flame just the way the instructions said it should, Joe decided to work his way through the whole book. Over the next three years, he spent stolen moments in the carriage shed when he should have been picking or shoveling or washing something. He'd set a glass of water on fire using a match and a small bit of ether borrowed from the farm's veterinary supplies; the brilliant flame shot high for a moment before Joe slapped a sheet of tin over the glass to cut off the oxygen.

Mostly these experiments were simple and their results consistent, always as the book said they should be. Joe craved the measure of control he got from them; he decided what he would do, he took action, and he alone determined if he did it right or not. By being secretive, he managed to have something that was his alone, private and not shared with the whole family or everyone at school. While the farm offered plenty of opportunities for solitude – he could be alone as much as he could stand, harvesting endless rows of corn or milking cow after cow in the barn by himself – it was a mind-numbing isolation and boredom that other farm kids didn't seem to notice. Or if they did, no one said anything about it to him.

Only once did Joe forget about secrecy and let his “science” get him into trouble out in the open. In mid-summer the year before, he made a test of gravity with the help of his friend, Eddie Wilson. They began by leaning a twelve-foot wooden ladder against the side of the low-slung chicken coop so the top of the ladder stuck up over the apex of the roof, just the way the diagram in the book showed. They climbed up onto the roof, Eddie dragging a five-pound weight and Joe, an eight-pound weight, both borrowed from the farm scale. The weight, clutched at his hip, threatened to throw Joe off balance and pull him from the ladder, but he held on. They attached the weights with strings to the top rung of the ladder so each dangled the same distance down. But before they could cut the strings at the exact same time in order to see which weight fell faster, Eddie lost his footing, tripped up by the roof shingles and his own clumsiness, and tumbled off the roof. He pitched straight into the poultry yard, scattering the chickens in a flurry of panicky wings, crushing part of the wire fence around the yard, and breaking his right wrist.

“What’s wrong with you two?” his father had shouted at them. “Horsing around on the roof and wasting time on foolish crap.” He then packed Eddie, pale and clutching his damaged arm close to him, into the back of the farm wagon and took him home. After that, Joe never enlisted an accomplice in his work.

From a box on a high shelf, Joe pulled a thick coil of wire and a round, cardboard oatmeal box he’d persuaded his mother to save for him. From the pocket of his overalls he took a crystal radio kit – a wooden knob, an earplug, a metal wire “cat’s whisker,” a pair of tweezers, and a little tin box holding a galena crystal – and set each piece carefully on the workbench. He unfolded the instructions and began wrapping a long piece of the

wire around the oatmeal box. Forty turns the instructions said. He punched a hole through the oatmeal box with a nail and poked the end of the wire inside.

He wasn't exactly sure how the crystal set worked or if there were any broadcasts in the area to pick up, anyway. He wasn't even sure where the nearest radio transmitter was -- Fort Dodge, maybe. But if there were people out there broadcasting, he wanted to hear what they were saying, their disembodied voices coming to him from far away, as if by magic. If he could get the radio to work, Annie would surely find the idea of these voices from far away as intriguing as he did. He could see her brow furrow, then lift in surprise, the way it did whenever she encountered something new or unexpected.

Annie Flynn was Joe's cousin, though not really. Though they were not blood relations, the Marshalls called Annie and her brother, Peter, cousins because Allen Flynn, a first cousin to Joe's mother, had married their mother, Emily, six years ago when Annie was nine and Peter just two. Their real father, Michael Fitzsimmons, had been killed the year before when the tractor he was riding rolled down an embankment. As far as Joe knew, Annie liked her stepfather well enough, though he had the feeling she missed her father more than she let on.

Not sure what to do next, Joe opened the tin to see what the radio crystal looked like. It wasn't magic -- just a piece of lead ore that could detect radio signals. Using the tweezers, he placed the crystal on the workbench to get a better look at it. Just then the tack room door opened and his father came in carrying one of the small wooden stools used for milking, its leg broken off.

"Have you seen the wood clamps?" he asked, looking around the room. "Can't

find them and I've got to fix this." His face and hands were chapped red by the wind, but he wore no hat or gloves.

"No, haven't seen them," Joe said, irritated at being interrupted and, at the same time, hoping his father wouldn't notice the radio sitting on the workbench, partly hidden from view by some old wooden crates.

His father stopped looking around the room. "What're you doing in here?"

"Can't find the big shovel. Thought maybe I left it in here." It wasn't a good lie, but it was the best he could do.

"What do you need it for?" His father looked at him closely. "Have you finished your chores yet? You'll be late for school." As he set the milking stool on the rickety bench in the corner, he spotted the oatmeal box. "What's this?"

Joe hesitated. "Something I'm building –" He shrugged. "A crystal radio set."

"What do you think you're going to hear over it?"

"Won't know until I build it. Read about it somewhere and wanted to try--"

"Where'd you get the parts?" His father picked the cardboard tube up; the coil of wire hung to the floor.

"Sent away for them." He looked down, then raised his head and looked his father in the eye. "I spent my own money, from selling the pig I raised last year."

"If you're going to build something, build something we can use, that'll run the cream separator without one of us having to turn the crank." He dropped the box back on the workbench. "This is useless."

The oatmeal box bounced and rolled off the bench, knocking the crystal onto the floor. Joe bent and picked the crystal up. He knew from the instructions touching it

would probably ruin it. "I just wanted to see if I could get it to work," he muttered. He picked up the rest of the pieces of the kit.

"Don't let me catch you in here fooling around when you're supposed to be doing something else."

"Can't I have fifteen minutes to do what I want?" It was to risky to say such a thing, but Joe went on. "I don't have to work all of the time."

His father turned to face him. "As long as you live under my roof and eat at my table, you'll do what I ask." The conversation ended there, punctuated by the sound of the tack room door slamming behind him.

As he walked toward the barn, Joe thought of the thousands of dollars his father spent to build it. The herd was already turned out, so inside there were only empty stalls in need of cleaning. He grabbed the pitchfork, ready to attack the manure and straw and pitch it into the metal hanging bucket. All this money spent, but he couldn't spend two dollars of his own to make a radio. He raised the pitchfork and swung it hard against the bucket. There was a loud, satisfying clang. The force of the blow ran up the pitchfork handle and stung his hands, but he swung again, three more times in rapid succession until his rage ran out. There was a dent in the bucket and the yoke that connected it to the overhead track was bent so it would no longer move easily. But Joe didn't care. He did a hurried, slapdash job shoveling manure and rinsing the floor, then trotted to the house to change his clothes for school.

Joe left the house without seeing anyone. He usually walked to school with his twelve-year-old sister, Felicia, but she was already gone. He'd have to hurry, but it wouldn't be difficult as his simmering anger seemed to march him down the lane and

onto the road. As he left the farm behind and got nearer to school, a familiar, almost welcome anxiety rose in him – the awareness that Annie would be there. He pushed his hair back from his eyes, tucked in his shirt, and kept walking.

The one-room school that served rural farms west of Welden was a mile and a half south of the Marshall's farm, just off an unpaved, deeply rutted, dirt road. It stood on a plot of land the Cabot family gave the township expressly for a school building. George Cabot acted like this gave him the right to dictate how the school was run. He told Miss Harrington, the teacher, that the three Emerson kids, whose mother was part Iowa indian, were not permitted to attend. The teacher never had to enforce this rule because none of these children ever attempted to come to school, their family no doubt getting the message they were not welcome.

By trotting the last quarter mile, Joe made it to the schoolyard just as Miss Harrington rang the bell for the last time. Miss Harrington had been their teacher for seven years and, for the most part, Joe liked her. She was fussy about her appearance – skirts pressed, hair always neat – and about the way the classroom was kept – desks in orderly rows, firewood and books stacked carefully. She was kind and fair, the embodiment of an upright Christian woman. But when there was an infraction, she was not afraid to hand out punishment. When she'd caught the Wilson boys poking pencil stubs through the stove grate into the fire, she'd said, "Pencils seem rather an underachievement, boys. I think you need to chop and carry wood for the stove for the next month." She was particularly hard on students who were late for school, having grown weary of excuses. Unlike his father, who seemed only interested in his ability to complete a task, Miss Harrington seemed concerned with the nature of Joe's soul,



expecting him, and the other children, to use their brains and to work to “perfect” themselves.

As he crossed the yard, Joe saw Annie and Peter Flynn standing by the hitching post under the maple tree, apart from the rest of the children. Annie held her brother’s hand tightly and they made no move toward the schoolhouse door, instead waiting for everyone else to go in. They hadn’t been in school for the last week and Joe wondered if they had been sick. He smiled and waved at Annie, but she looked away.

This morning the children crowded the schoolhouse door – the curly, blonde Cabot children, Francine and Jesse, were first; Letty and Hanna Greunig, in matching hair ribbons, were behind them being pushed by Kenny Parkhurst, who should have finished school last year. The Wilson boys, Henry and Eddie, who weren’t twins but were just as hard to tell apart, stood a head taller than everyone else. Club-footed Milo Jenkins and his sister, Carol, waited at the back of the group with the three Fryslie children -- two boys and a girl – whom Joe hardly knew as they attended school sporadically, only there when their parents didn’t need them to work the farm. They formed a mass of cotton overalls, calico dresses, and dusty shoes.

As the children shuffled into the schoolroom, Joe took his seat at the double desk he shared with Eddie Wilson. He watched the younger kids take their places in the front of the room. Finally, Annie came in, guiding Peter to a seat closest to the teacher’s desk. She whispered something in his ear, then took a seat on the other side of the room from Joe. The room was filled with chatter, but Annie spoke to no one.

Eddie poked him hard in the ribs. “Did you see the soles of the Fryslie kid’s boot are tied on with string? They may not make it ‘til the weather warms up. Not good.” Joe didn’t respond. “What are you looking at?”

Joe jerked his attention back to Eddie. “Nothing.” Eddie was his best friend, but he wasn’t going to discuss Annie with him.

All morning, Miss Harrington lectured them, but Joe could not concentrate, puzzled and disappointed as he was by Annie’s distance. Had he done something wrong? He would talk to her at recess or on the walk home. As he tried to focus on the work in front of him, a dull ache began to build behind his eyes. He lowered his head and snuck a look at Annie. She was bent over her book, looking up when the teacher spoke. He studied the regular rhythm of her hair as it swung with the motion of her head, observing her as if she were one of his experiments.

Annie was a year behind Joe in school. At fifteen, she was tall for her age and slender, with long, reddish-brown hair. Despite her Irish ancestry and the red in her hair, she had no freckles; in summers past, they’d spent time together outdoors and her skin had turned golden-brown while Joe’s arms and face only spotted pink. Peter, who was now eight and in his third year of school, had a shock of black hair that stood straight out from his head on all sides. His skinny ankles stuck out from his too-short overalls.

Growing up, Joe hadn’t spent as much time with Annie and Peter as he had with his cousins on the other side, his Marshall cousins. He had been to the Flynn house in town at Christmas two years earlier. It was fancier than the Marshall’s farmhouse, with a round, brightly colored stained-glass window built into the front door, and a wide staircase with a carved wooden railing. Despite the fact they were “town folk,” Mr. and

Mrs. Flynn had not treated the Marshall children like “poor farmers,” at least as far as Joe could remember. He’d had fun with Annie and Peter that Christmas and had received nice presents – a leather-bound edition of *Robinson Crusoe* and a complicated, wind-up coin bank with several coins already rattling around in it.

By the time she was twelve, Annie could climb a tree, any tree, faster than he could. And though it seemed like longer ago, just last summer she beat him to the top of the maple tree at the edge of the Marshall’s pasture. She perched herself in the highest branches and called climbing directions down to him.

“Put your left foot on that big branch, then grab the smaller one just over your head and pull up.” As if sensing he was unsure, she added, “Don’t worry. It’ll hold a skinny kid like you.”

Joe did as she said and soon he was wedged in a crotch of branches next to her. They were at least twenty feet up. The tree was fully leafed out, the foliage hiding them from the view of their cousins playing a ragtag game of cowboys and Indians in the yard below.

“How’d you learn to climb so fast?” Joe asked.

“Been climbing the trees in our backyard ever since I could reach the lowest branch.” She reached out and picked a still-green seed pod from a small branch. “My mom always asks how I get my dresses so dirty and put so many holes in my stockings.” She broke the seed pod in half and pulled it apart, not minding the sticky white milk that covered her fingers.

“You should put on overalls to climb trees,” Joe said.

Annie laughed. “I don’t have overalls. We’re not farmers, remember? We live in town.”

She said it simply, as fact, merely a matter of which clothes should be worn for which activity. But Joe wondered if Annie thought town folk were better than farmers. He didn’t want to talk about that.

“Do you know how to tell how far away a thundercloud is?” he asked her.

Annie looked at him, but didn’t seem surprised by the sudden change of subject. “Is there a storm coming?”

Joe wanted to tell her about his experiments, wanted her to know he thought about more than when the cows need milking. He wanted her to know that he was curious about the world beyond Iowa Rapids. But maybe these things only interested him; maybe she didn’t care about gravity or radio waves or how engines worked. All he could think of to say was to ask her a stupid question about thunderclouds. “Thunderstorms are never as far away as people think. If you can hear it, than it’s probably less than ten miles away.” He picked a seed pod and split it open. When he was a kid he used to put the split pod over the end of nose so it stuck straight out, making his sister laugh. Now he just fiddled with it, pulling it apart slowly. “All you have to do is count how many seconds between the flash of lightning and when you hear the thunder. Divide that by five and you’ll know how many miles away the storm is.” He hoped that sounded smart. He wanted to reach out a hand and touch her – brush the hair from her shoulder or take her hand or stroke her forearm. He settled for resting his foot next to her foot, on a branch just under them.

“I guess farmers need to know that.” She looked closely at him, her eyes narrowing and holding his gaze until he looked away. “But maybe you don’t want to be a farmer.”

Joe smiled. She knew, she knew without him having to say it. “No, I don’t want to be a farmer – I’d like to go to college. Study chemistry or engineering.” The words were rushed, coming out of his mouth as soon as they came into his head. He needed her to understand how much he wanted something else besides acreage, livestock, and grinding physical labor. “I don’t want to be my father.”

“I don’t really know what your dad is like,” Annie said, “but you don’t seem to me to be much of a farmer.”

Joe took her words as a compliment though he wasn’t really sure she meant them as one. He saw her everyday in school and she was always friendly to him. Often she sought him out with a question about math or science, either at recess or on the walk home. Sometimes he dared to hope she wanted something from him, as much as he wanted something from her.

Ever since their days climbing trees together, he thought of Annie as his closest friend. He carried on conversations with her in his head, when she wasn’t around. He told her about his latest experiment or the latest skirmish with his father. In these imagined talks, she was always interested in what he had to say and he was able to say exactly what he meant. In his mind’s eye, Annie was always smiling or laughing, happy to be with him.

After school, Joe caught up with Annie and Peter as they walked down the county road toward home. Peter ran ahead, glad to be free for the rest of the day. The road was

dry and dusty, warmed by the spring sun; on either side, farmers prepared their fields, the soil turned over, corn stubble and stones removed. Joe and Annie walked down the center of the road, close together, their arms parallel and touching every so often.

“What happened to you last week?” Joe asked. “Were you sick?”

“No, I’m fine.” She pulled one corner of her mouth down in a frown that told him she didn’t want to tell him what was bothering her. “Did you understand what Miss Harrington was saying about lines and planes and space? I don’t think I’ll ever understand geometry.”

He didn’t want to admit he hadn’t been listening. “I think she had some of that wrong.” And at the moment, he couldn’t pay much attention to the words coming out of his mouth, as aware as he was of her shoulder bumping his and his chest moving with each breath.

He continued to talk about school because it was better than not talking at all, telling her how to calculate the volume of a cylinder and a sphere. He actually knew how to do these things, so he hoped it made him sound smart. She seemed to listen carefully, smiling a bit. He would not press her to tell him what she would not. When they came to the intersection where she and Peter had to split off, he stopped. They lingered for a moment, still talking about school.

Then she made her excuses. “Peter has run off,” she said and trotted after her brother. He watched her go until her retreating figure was just a dot in the distance.

Joe was still thinking about Annie the next morning. It was odd they should talk so long about something as silly as geometry. He wondered how he might get her to tell him what was bothering her. On Saturday, he usually did the milking with his father. It

was a chore that could not be avoided or hurried, no matter how much he didn't want to be in the barn with his old man, especially after yesterday.

Joe had milked since the age of eight, and though he'd grown tired of the routine and wished most days instead for freedom and variety, he did appreciate the feel of the warm, heavy cow bodies and the rhythm of the milking. Often he would lean his head against the animal's flank and let his mind drift while his hands moved automatically. The pulling on the cow's teats created a rhythm that threatened to lull him to sleep.

Sometimes, when Joe did the milking with Uncle Rex, they would talk, often about nothing important, but sometimes Uncle Rex would tell him about his last visit to the tavern over in Welden where he drank corn whiskey and, if his stories were to be believed, occasionally got into fights. If they were left alone long enough, Uncle Rex might talk about his time out west, describing the deserts of Nevada or the California mountains.

But milking time with his father only seemed to give the old man the opportunity to lecture Joe about his shortcomings and failures. This morning he said nothing as Joe pulled up his stool next to Belle, a young Holstein who rarely kicked or fussed. Grasping the cow's teat between his thumb and forefinger, he gave it a gentle downward tug and gradually closed his fist. A stream of white, warm milk hit the bucket. He continued to pull, first the teat in his right hand, then the one in his left, alternating rhythmically until Belle's udder was empty. Watching for flailing tails and chapped teats, Joe worked his way down the row of cows, emptying each full bucket into the large milk can. Across the barn, his father milked another row in silence.

They had been milking for about forty-five minutes when the door opened with a rush of cool air that pushed its way through the warm, stuffiness of the barn. Karl Greunig, a neighboring farmer and fellow member of the threshing cooperative, latched the door behind him and came to stand behind Joe's father.

"Hey, Sam." Karl stood with his hands buried deep in the pockets of his worn jacket. "I just came from town. There's an uproar going on you ought to know about."

Joe's father looked up at Karl but continued to milk. "Go ahead and tell me then."

"Seems Allen Flynn's disappeared and there's about seventy-four thousand dollars in deposit money missing from the bank." Karl's words were simple and to the point. The Greunigs and the Marshalls both had their money in First State Bank and both families had worked with Allen Flynn.

Joe's father stopped milking. "Disappeared?" The cow turned her head as if to see what the matter was.

"No one at the bank or home has seen him since Thursday afternoon. His wife got worried when he didn't come back the other night. Floyd Mercer called Sheriff Stephens yesterday when he didn't come into the bank."

"And the money, when did they find that missing?"

"Late last night Mercer checked the books against what was on hand in the safe and he can't account for where the money might be."

For a moment his father and Karl Greunig looked at each other, perhaps each unwilling to believe their savings, all the proceeds from years of labor on their farms, might be gone.

"Joe, you finish the milking and get Uncle Rex to help you with feeding."



At the sound of his name, Joe started. He'd been so caught up in what Mr. Greunig said he'd stopped milking. He tried to imagine Allen Flynn, a round-faced, paunchy man who looked like he spent all day behind a desk, running off with their money. Before Joe could reply or ask any questions, his father grabbed his jacket from the peg by the door and the two men were gone, the barn door banging closed behind them.

As his hands continued milking, Joe's mind reeled. It seemed impossible that Flynn took money that belonged to people in his own family, people he knew, people he'd eaten Sunday supper with. Had their stepfather really run away and left Annie and Peter behind? That must be why she acted so distant yesterday – as far as Annie knew, her stepfather had abandoned them. He wondered if she knew anything about the money. If Flynn had left them and their mother behind to face the anger that would surely be heaped upon them by people in this town, then he truly didn't care about them. But Allen Flynn was only a stepfather to Peter and Annie. And he wasn't a farmer.

Joe set his stool next to the last cow left to be milked, sat down heavily, and leaned his forehead against the animal's flank. She shifted slightly but didn't move away from him. Was it possible their money was really gone? He knew they had been paying for things – supplies, equipment – out of savings and would be doing so until the fall harvest came in. He wasn't sure exactly how the farm's money worked, but he knew they had to pay for the things they needed now or there would be no fall harvest. The worst case possibility, it seemed to him, was they would be forced to sell some land to raise needed cash. That would sorely wound his father's pride, a thought that gave Joe a jolt of

satisfaction. But selling off some land was a far cry from what happened to truly bad farmers, the ones who ended up living at the county poor farm.

The county poor farm was a series of whitewashed wood-frame buildings that stood on a patch of land on the north edge of Iowa Rapids. The people living there were called “inmates,” just like at the jail, and had to work the farm in exchange for their room and board. He’d heard his father call them “paupers” and “lazy good-for-nothings,” even hinting some folks ended up there because they drank too much and wouldn’t work. Although the poor farm was a far-off possibility, Joe indulged himself, imagining what it would be like if his family had to go there. Though it was surely not a pleasant place to be, at least there he wouldn’t have to work this damn farm any longer.

By the time Joe finished the milking, Uncle Rex had already begun shoveling silage down the chute so the cows could be fed. Joe grabbed bucket after bucket of the sweet and sour corn and dumped it into the feeders in each stall, bending rapidly each time until the muscles in his arms and back burned with the effort. He was sweating hard under his clothes, but didn’t stop. When Uncle Rex came down from the silo, he cursed under his breath and didn’t look Joe in the eye as he pushed the shovel into his hand and walked off in the direction of the pasture. There would be no joking around today.

It was well after dinner and Joe’s father hadn’t yet returned from town. The kitchen was clean, his sister and baby brother were in bed, and Joe and his mother were waiting in the parlor. Joe was trying to read a book at the big roll-top desk. His mother straightened and sorted her sheet music at the piano in the corner, her hands fluttering as if she were actually playing the instrument.

“We’re both keeping busy by pretending to do something we enjoy,” she said.

“What are you reading?”

“Just a history book for school.”

“Sounds dull. But if it’s for school, it must be worth reading.”

“Yes, I know, Mom. Read anything and everything I can get my hands on.”

Sometimes his mother told him what to do as much as his father did.

When Sam Marshall banged up the steps and through the door, his brother, who had been waiting on the porch, rolling and smoking cigarettes, followed him in. He carefully hung up his coat and settled onto a straight-backed chair before speaking.

“It’s true. Flynn disappeared with almost seventy-four thousand dollars belonging to farmers from the whole county.” He banged his open palm on the arm of the chair to the rhythm of his words. “There was a big crowd down at the bank, like there was gonna be a public execution. The sheriff had deputies on hand. They sent a couple of men out from the county courthouse, lawyers or investigators, or something – I’m not sure.”

“Can they find him?” Joe’s mother asked. She sat down on the stool and gripped the edge of the piano.

“They know he got on a train for Chicago on Thursday afternoon. The bank’s decided to put a Pinkerton man on the case to see if they can find him.”

“A Pinkerton man?” Uncle Rex looked unsure.

Joe had read in the *Iowa Rapids Ledger* about the Pinkertons, private detectives who tracked down jewel thieves and con artists across the country. Their tales seemed too exciting to be real, like something out of an adventure story. He found it hard to believe the Pinkertons would really help some unfortunate Iowa farmers get their money back.

“He’d better hope they don’t bring him back here. If I get my hands on him, I’ll strangle him myself,” Joe’s father said. He made a wrenching, twisting motion with his hands. Joe had seen angry people make threats before and he saw his father angry plenty of times. What was different this time was the blackness in his eyes, as if his deep blue irises had been swallowed up by the pupils.

“Perhaps we should put our faith in God. He’ll see we get it back,” his mother said, though Joe was sure it was an optimism she didn’t really feel.

“I’m putting my faith in the authorities,” his father said. “For what that’s worth.”

The next morning, Joe got out to the barn before breakfast, shoveled and rinsed the stall gutters twice, finishing in time to help Uncle Rex carry the heavy buckets of gruel-like slop to the hogs. He walked to school quickly, only to find that Annie and Peter were, once again, missing. He walked home from school quickly, got right to milking, and, like everyone else in the family, waited for some word about Allen Flynn – or his family. The week passed slowly and no one in the family spoke much. Joe’s mother went about her routine; suppers were at their usual time, clothes were washed, the house was clean. But on Thursday morning, as he came through the kitchen on his way out the door for school, Joe found her sitting at the table. She was just sitting, with nothing in front of her – no vegetables to peel, no pie crust to roll out, no socks to darn. His mother was the one who said to him that farm women were always busy because it kept them from thinking about things too much. Now thinking was all she seemed to be busy doing, staring through the doorway and out the parlor window. Joe left without disturbing her.

The other kids at school all seemed to know about Allen Flynn, though none of them said anything about Annie and Peter. Miss Harrington certainly knew, too, and Joe

considered asking her if she'd heard anything about Annie, but decided against it. She probably wouldn't comment on other people's business -- that would be too much like gossip. He'd have to find out about Annie himself.

Late Friday afternoon, more than a week after Flynn disappeared, a black Model T Ford pulled into the lane in front of the Marshall home. Any other time a car pulled into the drive, Joe always trotted toward it, eager to get a look inside or under the hood, if he could. Today he stood and watched as Sheriff Stephens and two men he didn't know got out and walked toward the spot by the barn where he, his father, and Uncle Rex were loading the hay wagon. Joe's father put down his hayfork.

The sheriff, a big man with thick, dark hair and a heavy mustache, spoke first. "Sam, you know Mr. Mercer from the bank. This is Mr. Edmonds. He's with the county." They shook hands. Joe had seen Mercer before, in town; he looked like a banker, with round glasses that magnified his squinty eyes. Edmonds had a blank face, as unclear as his role in all this. They made a ragtag group, a bunch of men who were thrown together by chance.

Mercer began, "We have news. Two nights ago Flynn was found in a hotel in Chicago. With only about a quarter of the money with him." He stopped and looked at the ground.

"Where's the rest of it?" Joe's father asked. He looked from Mercer to the sheriff.

The sheriff spoke up quickly. "We don't know yet. We don't think he could've spent that much in a week." He raised his hand, as if to slow Joe's father down. "He may have hidden it somewhere -- or left it with someone. We don't know."

“What’re you doing to find it?” Uncle Rex asked. He sounded like he did when he came back from a visit to the bar in Welden, his voice gravelly and pushing for a fight.

“We’ve got investigators looking,” Edmonds broke in. “But it could take some time – and we may never find anything.”

“Won’t Flynn tell you where it is?” Anger rose in his father’s voice and he spoke to these men like they didn’t know how to do their jobs.

Uncle Rex interrupted, stabbing the tines of his hayfork into the ground. “Won’t he *have* to tell you where it is if he doesn’t want to spend more time in jail?”

Mr. Mercer shifted his eyes to look at the sheriff. Sheriff Stephens said, “There was a fight between Flynn and the Pinkerton agent. Flynn was seriously injured. He died yesterday afternoon.”

Joe was shocked. Annie’s stepfather was dead – killed. Did she know? He wanted his father to ask the sheriff for details about the hotel they found him in, the kind of injuries he had. His imagination went to work, painting vivid pictures – Flynn on the floor with his head bashed in, Flynn tumbling out a window and crashing to the sidewalk below. But he knew better than to ask for details– now was not the time.

“He’s dead?” Uncle Rex said, turning the fork round and round in the dirt. “Guess that serves him right.”

“He’s dead and no one knows where our money is?” Joe’s father leaned in, his bull-like head close to Mercer’s. Mercer backed up. “Some bank you got there.”

“About the money we did recover – that will be divided between everyone based on how much they lost,” Mercer said. “You’ll get roughly a quarter of your original amount on deposit back. It may take a month or so to sort it all out.”

“A quarter?” Joe could see him doing calculations in his head – how much that was, how long it would last them, how far it would get them if the harvest was late or milk prices dropped. “How the hell could this happen?” He shook his head.

“Sam, we’ll do what we can to find it,” the sheriff said. “It’s going to be worse for you, Flynn being Margaret’s cousin and all.”

The three men turned back toward the car and his father followed them, as if he might get into the car and go with them – and stay with them until they found the rest of his money or took him to the body of Allen Flynn. Joe and Uncle Rex returned to the hay wagon. By the time they finished loading the hay, it was almost dark and time to head in for supper. His father had already gone into the house to tell his mother the news.

As he hung his hayfork on the barn wall, Joe noticed that several of the new metal stall stanchions had corroded in the spring dampness and dark water spots already discolored some of the wooden beams overhead. Instead of making less work, the round barn and what it cost them now meant more work -- more cows to milk and clean up after, more wagonloads to haul into town. He blamed his father for spending too much money on this barn they didn’t need, built as a monument to his own ambitions rather than to improve the family’s condition. And what he would hold even more deeply against his father than the barn itself was the accusation he knew the old man would make. In next few days his father would remind his mother, at least once, that it was a member of *her* family that had done this to them. With his words, he would give voice to the silent rift that the family had carefully steered away from for years.

But what angered Joe in a way he hadn’t expected was that Allen Flynn hadn’t given a damn about his stepchildren and the way they would surely be punished for his

sins. Already what he'd done had driven Annie away from school, the only place Joe could count on seeing her. He wasn't sure how else she would be made to pay, but the twisting in his stomach told him he couldn't let whatever it was happen to her.



## Autumn, 1915

The summer of 1915 had been long and difficult for the Marshall family. The two hired men were sent away; the money that would have paid them was saved for expenses that came with the fall harvest. All summer Joe moved hay and loaded it into the barn, cut oats and tied them into bundles, and plowed row after row of corn. What should have been a pleasant season of the year, with time for swimming in the creek, picnics in the grove, and afternoons spent under the oak tree by the pond with a book, was instead a string of long days filled with work.

Joe's only solace was that all the work gave him the time and solitude to think about Annie. He had not seen her since Flynn took off, as she and her brother did not return the rest of the school year. By mid-summer, he couldn't bear not seeing her any longer and, on a trip into town with his uncle, made his way to the Lake Street neighborhood in search of the big, Victorian house where he'd spent that Christmas with Annie and Peter. He found it, recognizing the stained-glass window in the front door. But there was a strange car in the drive and a woman who was not Annie's mother sat on the front porch swing with two small children he did not know. He walked by the house, unsure where to look for Annie next. He wondered what had happened to her family. It was as if they had disappeared, too. And for the next several weeks he heard no news of the Flynn family; no one wanted to speak of them.

Late summer arrived and with it came the ritual of threshing. This morning the pounding and whirring of the steam-powered thresher filled Joe's ears, its gears beating stalks of wheat to the rhythm of his heart. He could feel the blood throbbing as he bent and scrambled to gather up the piles of wheat straw kicking out the back of the giant

machine. The August sun was high and sweat ran down his neck. Dust and bits of wheat chaff pasted themselves to his bare forearms, neck, and face.

In front of Joe, the thresher crept through the field like a great beast eating its way across the land. The dairy herd in the adjoining pasture moved away from the noise, across the flat of grass and clover to the lower spot at the south end where the creek ran through. Joe had been up early to milk the cows and turn them out to pasture before the threshing began. Now he longed for the cool and quiet of the barn early in the morning – the low, diffuse light just coming through the semi-circle of windows and the shady, damp smell of hay in the loft. Though the barn was full of living creatures, there had been little movement, only the soft swish of air through the ventilation shaft and the slight swaying of the cows.

Over the grinding and coughing of the thresher, Joe's father and Uncle Rex shouted and gestured to each other as they walked ahead of the machine, feeding shocks of dried wheat into the front end. George Cabot, who owned the machine, rode on top, steering and pitching wood into the firebox that fed the steam engine. Karl Greunig and his son, Elias, worked the wagons that sat under the thresher's tall spout, catching the stream of grain of wheat that spewed from it.

Bending alongside Joe were his cousins, Walter and Alice; they gathered up the straw, bound it in bunches, and stood each bunch on end where it would wait to be loaded into wagons. Walter and Alice were Joe's "Marshall cousins," the children of his father's other brother, David. David Marshall was neither as ambitious as Sam nor as wandering as Rex, so his family lived on a modest farm on the other side of Webster City, where he also ran a successful grain mill. Every summer, Uncle David came to help with the

threshing, sometimes bringing Walter and Alice's older brother, Tim. But this year the whole family had come as they knew there would be no additional men hired on to help with the harvest.

It was almost noon when Felicia and their littlest cousin, Ricky, came up, carrying jugs of water. Grateful for the break and a chance to stand up straight for a few minutes, Joe took the clay jug, wrapped in wet burlap to keep the water cool, and yanked out the corn-cob stopper. He swung the jug up over his arm, leaned back and let the water gurgle out over his dry lips and cotton mouth. He drank three more times before handing the jug back to his sister. At the other end of the field, Tim, who just turned eighteen, drove the wagon that carried the water for the steam engine, a job Tim boasted about all morning. Joe knew that in another year or so the job would be his.

His father stood on the side rail of the thresher shouting at Cabot and pointing out into the field. Cabot yanked at the gear shift and shouted back at him. Joe couldn't hear them over the din of the machine, but he didn't need to hear. His father's face was twisted and his fingers jabbed the air. He'd better watch his temper – it was not a good idea to yell at George Cabot. Even his father couldn't bully Cabot the way he had Bancroft and other men. Cabot had more land, more ready cash, and owned more equipment than any other farmer in the county. And he carried no debt. He didn't work his own land so much as he supervised the work being done there.

A few minutes later the thresher was shut down. The sudden silence created a void, an almost soundless world Joe thought as he waited for the ringing in his ears to stop. Everyone went into the house for dinner, everyone except Joe's father, Uncle Rex, and Cabot, who stood in a tight circle, arguing.

Joe walked up casually, as if he was invited to attend their conference. His father was going to lose this argument and he wanted to see it happen.

“We need to keep working if we’re going to finish today,” his father was saying.

“I’m not working everyone without feeding them,” Cabot said. “Sam, you know that’s not how it goes.”

Cabot was being quite reasonable, not throwing his weight around as he often did. It was a kind of joke to say that George Cabot threw his weight around as he was a small man with bowed legs. He had a wide face and prominent nose accentuated by center-parted hair that was smoothed down with some sort of pomade. It was generally agreed that he looked like a bulldog – small, tough, and ready for a fight.

“I’m the one feeding them,” Joe’s father said. “And I’m the one who should determine when we stop.”

Cabot raised his eyebrows at this and stepped closer. “I don’t have to remind you who owns the thresher, do I?”

Uncle Rex laid a hand on his brother’s arm. “Let’s let everyone eat. Then we’ll get back at it and see how far we get.”

Uncle Rex was always the peacemaker. Joe knew he should side with his father against this pompous jackass, Cabot. But it was satisfying to watch someone put him in his place and Joe smirked to himself as he walked toward the house, ready for his supper.

In previous years, Joe looked forward to threshing time. The Marshalls, like most farm families in the area, were part of a threshing ring, a group of friends and neighbors who shared the cost of the threshing machine and the labor required. The job of threshing

was a yearly social event. For several weeks during mid to late summer, Joe's father and Uncle Rex would help out at neighboring farms, contributing their labor to others so they would receive help when the thresher came to their farm. They would leave in the morning after finishing their chores and return late, having worked until well past six and driven the team home several miles. Joe's mother held dinner and the family gathered to hear news and gossip from other farms.

"Parmalee's put together a superior feed mix for his livestock," Joe's father reported. "Fryslie can't figure out how to rotate his fields properly, and, on top of that, he's got some kind of fungus on his fruit trees," he said, shaking his head. Everyone at the table nodded and waited for more.

It was Uncle Rex who could be counted on to bring the news that really interested the family. "The McDowells bought a new car, a fancy Model T touring car," he said and described its sleek body, the fine leather interior, and how Gil McDowell kept polishing the chrome with one of his wife's dishcloths. He also reported, "Mrs. Mann is confined to her bed with some sort of nervous condition, though no one would say what it was. And the oldest Thompson boy left to work in Des Moines, despite his mother's crying and his father's threats to disown him."

Joe's mother always wanted to know what Letitia McDowell or Florence Thompson served for dinner. Because neighbors and extended family gathered, coming long distances and staying for several days to bring the wheat in, the "threshing dinner" took on the air of a holiday feast and an unspoken competition arose between the farm wives as each sought to serve more and better dishes than their neighbors. Though preparing food for twenty people meant more work for his mother, each year at threshing

time she made sure the best young chickens were slaughtered for frying and that ice was brought in for the ice cream churn.

In the years when Joe was too young to help in the field because his hands were still too small to handle the bundles of wheat, he brought water to the workers and helped his mother and his aunt get ready for the men when they came in from the field. He set up plank tables and hauled chairs outside onto the lawn. His mother entrusted him to carry large platters of roast beef and fried chicken, the big bowl of mashed potatoes, and apple and cherry pies out to the table. It had been Joe's job to set the enamel basins of warm water on the benches on the front porch to and lay out soap and clean towels so the men could wash before they ate.

But since the age of twelve, when he was first allowed into the field to pick up and bind stalks, Joe had known threshing was tiresome and boring work, as tiresome and boring as any chore on the farm. And the noise left him with a throbbing deafness that didn't wear off for several days. The only good thing threshing offered him was the company of his cousins – that and the fact that he could usually stay out of his father's way for most of the day.

This year was different – tense, not only because there was so much work to do in a short time, but also because several of the families in the threshing ring were, like the Marshalls, taken in by Allen Flynn. They were short of money, shorthanded on labor, and desperate for the fall crops to come in quickly and at a profit. There were arguments over which farm the threshing machine would go to first; Bud Thompson, who had lost the most money to Flynn and had recently lost another son to the city, wanted to get his

wheat in first, though the crop wasn't quite ready. Gil McDowell, with the help of the two hired men he could still well afford, had planted his wheat early and wanted to bring it in as soon as it was ready. Families like the McDowells, who had put their money into another bank -- or into no bank at all -- did not feel the same kind of urgency, the push to gather every grain and sell it as quickly as possible. George Cabot, having wisely invested in the thresher instead of in Allen Flynn, took care of his own crops first, then became a kind of referee between the others, a King Solomon making decisions about his neighbors' crops and possibly the fates of their families.

It seemed strange to Joe that members of the threshing ring were not "all in the same boat," as his father liked to say. Farmers and their families usually lived and died together, subject to the same weather, the same crop diseases, the same fluctuations in crop prices -- until someone among them made a bad choice. Now men like his father felt vulnerable in a way they never had before. It was as if that old spirit of cooperation had been an illusion, a veneer that had given way to an attitude of "every man for himself."

When September arrived, Joe was desperate to go back to school, in hopes that enough time had passed and Annie would come back too. He didn't ask his father about it and his mother simply said he was to stay at home for the time being, at least until the threshing was done. August had seemed to drag until the threshing crew finally arrived two days ago. Threshing the Marshalls' one-hundred and twenty acres of winter wheat should take three days and Joe hoped they would finish that evening.

At dusk, they still had an acre and a half left to go. Once again, Joe watched a pantomime argument between his father and Cabot, and, once again, the machine was

shut down. They were done now. Joe knew the threshing machine was due at another farm tomorrow morning.

“We can’t do this in the dark, Sam,” Cabot was saying as Joe approached.

“Leave the thresher here and we’ll finish this last bit tomorrow at sunup,” his father said, his voice loud and commanding.

Cabot’s bulldog personality surfaced and he moved in close, looking up into Sam’s face, spit flying from his mouth as he spoke. “We’re due at McDowell’s tomorrow and I’m not going to screw up his harvest because you can’t scrape together enough help.”

Joe’s father leaned over Cabot, his hand moving as if he might strike the man. “I think you bought the thresher just so you could travel around the county telling your neighbors what to do, so you could lord it over everyone what you’ve got.”

Joe could see Cabot holding back from taking a swing at his father, perhaps because he thought himself too good to resort to violence. “Don’t blame me, Marshall, because you spent all your money on that barn and were foolish enough to trust your money to a crook.” He turned on his heel and walked back to the thresher.

While the cost to the Marshalls of not threshing all the wheat would not be known for a while, Joe could tell by his father’s face this was a failure of his will, perhaps the first one the old man ever experienced.

Three days after the threshing was completed Joe told his mother he was going back to school when the fall term started in less than a week. While school was required by law, in the rural areas around Iowa Rapids farmers sometimes kept their children home when they were needed, especially in the early fall. Some years Joe saw kids



turning up at school for the first time halfway through November. School attendance was not always well-enforced and allowances were made. No one wanted to be the kid who had to stay home because their parents couldn't afford hired help. But his father wasn't going to care about the law or what others thought of his kids when there was work to be done.

"I don't know. We'll have to see what your father says." His mother turned away from the dining room cupboard, where she had been returning bowls to their proper places, to face him. "I know you're ready to get back to your schoolwork – but there's still a great deal to be done." She smiled and he could see she was trying to walk a narrow line – making peace with his father while still looking out for his interests.

Joe sat at the dining table pulling at the lace edge of the tablecloth. It was early evening and he was tired from a day spent digging potatoes from the large garden patch besides the house. His arms and legs felt heavy and he didn't want to get up from the chair. "I have to go back to school," he said. He had to see Annie, if she was there-- but he wasn't going to say that out loud, not even to his mother. "I've got to do something besides dig in the dirt, alone all day with myself. I've almost run out of things to think about."

"I'll talk to him about it." She reached out a hand, still damp and pink from washing dishes, and wiped a smudge of dirt from his chin. "Go get ready for bed."

Joe's father was, as usual, taking advantage of the late summer evening light to work in the barn. Joe was only halfway up the stairs when he heard the screen door bang and his father cross the kitchen, headed for the coffee pot still warming on the stove. Joe sat down on the steps, leaned his head against the wall and listened.

“Joe finished the potatoes. They’re all in the cellar.” His mother’s voice was neutral, though it sounded as if she was trying to win points for him with his father.

“Now we can get to the corn.” A kitchen chair scraped the floor as he pulled it out and sat down. “Without extra hands this year, we’ll need him to pick. I’d take Felicia too but she’s not nearly tall enough to reach the ears.”

Joe heard her set the coffee pot back on the burner. “School starts next Monday and he should go back.” She added, “He’ll get the week off for corn picking at the end of September.”

“I need him now. If we don’t hurry the corn will turn and we’ll lose it.” His voice was firm and Joe knew his head was tilted back a little, his chin jutting forward the way it always did whenever he announced a decision. “If you don’t need Felicia around the house, you can send her back.”

So that was that – corn picking for the next month. He deeply resented that Felicia, who didn’t even like school much, could go. Joe could feel the sticky soreness on his hands already. He was about to get up off the step and head upstairs when he heard his mother’s voice, louder this time.

“Sam, I know we need to bring the corn in, like we need to do everything else around here. But Joe *cannot* miss school – it’s too important.” There was a note of pleading in her voice, like when she begged Alex to take his medicine.

“If we don’t make the most of this harvest, we won’t have the income we need this winter. That’s all there is to it.”

“Joe shouldn’t be made to suffer because of our mistakes.” Her voice was no longer pleading.

“*Our* mistakes?” Joe felt the sharpness of his father’s words. “How is Allen Flynn stealing from us *our* mistake?”

“It’s not ours – it’s his mistake and that’s between him and God now. But how we deal with it -- the things we do, the things we ask our children to do – could be our mistakes.”

“How can asking the boy to do a little hard work be a mistake?” His fist hit the kitchen table with a bang and he was close to shouting now. “We don’t have a lot of choices here.”

“Joe does plenty of hard work. He needs to be in school. He wants to be in school. You’ll just have to find another way to get the work done. Or we’ll have to sell off some of the dairy herd – or some of the land, something. I don’t know.”

“Our only mistake was putting our money in the hands of Flynn. He was your cousin, for God’s sake. How could he steal from you?” He was no longer shouting, but his words still made Joe cringe.

“We’ve been over this already—and I’ve apologized on behalf of my family plenty of times. I didn’t know he would do that – how could I? No one did.”

Joe had heard her apologize before for Allen Flynn, for what he’d done. His mother’s whole family was ashamed. They were decent Christian people his grandmother had said at the time and now she preferred to act as if Allen Flynn had never existed at all.

His father didn’t stop. “Living in that big house in the center of town, a new Model T last spring, piano lessons for those kids that aren’t even his. Always wanting more than he should have.” He snorted a kind of laugh, but Joe knew he wasn’t making a

joke. “Your mother can always point out other people who are acting like ‘lace-curtain Irish,’ but can’t even see it in her own family.”

“Don’t you dare tell me once again that you think the Flynn family is ‘highfalutin’ just because some of them want to do something besides dig around in the dirt and slop hogs their whole lives.” Her voice was getting louder and Joe heard dishes rattling and banging like they might break.

“Maybe besides being highfalutin’, the Flynn’s should also list ‘poor judges of character’ among their family traits,” his father said.

“Maybe we are poor judges of character. I’m beginning to think so right now.” Her voice was firm, accusatory now. “Let’s say that trusting my cousin with our money was my mistake – let’s not forget that you spent a great deal of our money to build that barn when we could have kept on going just fine with the old one.”

“I explained that to you a long time ago.” The chair scraped again as he got up from the table. “The round barn will pay us back. We have to invest and improve the farm if we’re going to get anywhere. And you damn well know that.”

His voice was loud enough now that Joe wondered if Felicia, in bed in her room directly above, could hear him. If Uncle Rex were on the porch or anywhere in the yard, he certainly would have heard all of this -- but Uncle Rex rarely jumped into the middle of a quarrel.

“You can call that barn an improvement if you want. Some would call it a folly.” The screen door slammed close as she shouted her final word. His father was gone, out to the barn no doubt.

Joe heard the sound of water splashing and utensils clattering in the sink, then the sound of his mother's sobs – a gasping noise that he barely recognized as she rarely ever cried. The sound went right to his gut, a stab of pain and disappointment as he realized she was in this position because of him, because he could not do what his father wanted. For her sake, he resolved to pick corn or do whatever else his father asked, even if it meant quitting school. He would keep doing experiments on his own, he would read whenever he had time. And he would find Annie on his own.

His mother would be disappointed if he quit school, crushed he would give up the chance to learn from a real teacher. “Miss Harrington graduated from a teachers’ college in St. Louis,” his mother told him from the time he started going to school. “We’re lucky to have her at our rural school.”

As long as Joe could remember his mother had read to him from the family’s small library, stories from the Bible, *The Devil and Daniel Webster*, a worn copy of *Little Women*, her voice soft, with just a trace of Irish accent. Once, when she had finished reading, she said to him, “I never spent much time in school. My family moved around so much, coming all the way across the country from Massachusetts to Iowa. By the time we settled here, I was fourteen. My parents didn’t see the point in sending me to school because I could already read, write, and do sums.”

“What did you see on the trip?” he’d asked her.

“I remember crossing a couple of rivers, lots of green mountains with people living in little villages tucked up the hills. There was a big city, somewhere in Ohio, with brick factories and trains hauling cargo. I wanted to stop, but of course we couldn’t – we had to move on and get settled out here.” She’d smiled at him and added, “Perhaps

someday you can go back and take a look at these places for me.” It was the first time she’d ever suggested that he might do something away from the farm.

Joe didn’t ask again about school, but on Sunday evening his mother took his church clothes back out of the closet where he’d hung them that morning and pressed them. As he got into bed, she brought the clothes into his room and told him he would need to get up promptly the next morning, get his chores done quickly, and be ready to go to school. She also told him that he should walk home from school without dawdling, get changed, and get out into the cornfield to help with the afternoon picking.

The morning was cool with a trace of the summer humidity lingering in the air when Joe and Felicia set off down the county road. They’d only walked about half a mile when Joe began to feel warm; his jacket collar seemed to strangle him. Felicia looked happy enough, wearing her favorite blue cotton dress, stockings, and high-button shoes, though Joe noticed she stopped every so often to tug on the bodice of the dress.

“You’re gettin’ too big for your britches” Joe said.

Felicia narrowed her eyes at him. “Mama didn’t want to make me another summer dress. The cold weather is almost here. She only wants to get material for a winter dress.” She pulled at the sleeve, trying to loosen it under her arm.

“Stop fidgeting like that. You look like a dog with fleas.”

Felicia stopped in the middle of the road, a hand on one hip and her lunch pail swinging from the other. She glared at him but didn’t say anything.

Joe knew he’d have to pretend to apologize if they were going to get to school on time. “Alright, I take it back.” He didn’t care if she knew he didn’t mean it.

She kept on glaring but started walking again. To keep her moving Joe changed the subject. “Don’t you like school?”

“I’d rather be outside, playing with Hannah. And Miss Harrington nags too much.” She scowled at him. “Why are you in such a hurry to get to school?”

She must have heard some of the argument the night before and probably knew he was the cause of it. Despite the promise he made to himself, he decided to tell her what he really thought. “I’d rather do homework than stand in a hot, buggy field all day, being scratched by corn stalks.” He looked out over the pasture that ran along the road. A dark line of trees marked where the creek cut through it. His sister was the kind of girl who would get married, move to her husband’s farm, and have babies. She didn’t seem interested in anything outside of Iowa Rapids. But maybe he shouldn’t blame her for what she wanted.

“I think you should help Dad and Uncle Rex. You should do what Dad says.” She stopped again in the middle of the road.

Joe didn’t want to be scolded by his little sister, though for a long time now she’d acted like she was older than him. They still had half a mile to go and if she kept stopping they would surely be late. “Hate to tell you this, Felicia, but we *have* to go to school – it’s the law. Anyway, some of us like to learn new things.” He gave her a slight push and was surprised when she started walking.

Somehow, she got along with their father, daddy’s little girl. He wished it was more of the two of them, as siblings, sticking together against their parents, but Felicia always played the traitor.

“When I get home today, *I’m* going to help Dad pick the corn,” Felicia said.

“He won’t let you. You’re too small to reach the ears,” Joe said. He took delight in telling her this.

“I’ll get a crate to stand on.” She had an answer for everything.

A blue jay sat on the barbed-wire fence that separated the road from the pasture. Joe picked up a small stone and threw it close enough to startle the bird and make it fly off. “You help Mom in the kitchen. That’s your job – not picking corn.” Joe kept on walking.

“I’m still going to do it,” Felicia said. “Why do you care so much what I do? You should worry about yourself, that you don’t make Dad mad.”

She walked past Joe and stayed ten paces in front of him the rest of the way to school. Joe wished for another stone to throw. Felicia was skinny, but he was pretty sure he could hit the spot between her pointy shoulder blades.

They reached the schoolyard in front of the one-room schoolhouse just before nine. Miss Harrington had her hand on the rope that would ring the school bell. The school’s whitewashed clapboards were freshly painted and the peaked shingle roof had been patched.

In the schoolyard, Joe searched through the crowd for Annie. Instead he found all the other kids they went to school with year after year -- Frannie and Jess Cabot, still blonde, pretty and well-dressed; Eddie and Henry Wilson arguing and punching each other as always. Letty and Hanna Greunig were there, though their dresses and hair ribbons no longer matched. Milo Jenkins had had some kind of operation on his club foot, though he still limped and his sister, Carol, had to walk slowly so she wouldn’t leave him behind. Even the three Fryslie kids were there; their parents must still be



holding on, bringing in enough money to keep them going. Only Kenny Parkhurst was missing, having given up trying to finish school and gone to work on the family farm full-time. Most everyone wore their Sunday clothes for the first day; tomorrow it would be overalls, pinafores, and boots again. They carried their metal lunch pails and some had new pencil boxes with new rulers, pencils and erasers tucked inside. But no sign of Annie.

Joe stared at the door, willing her to come in. Just as he was pulling out a book, she and Peter ducked in and shuffled into their seats. Relief flooded through him in a rush, making his hands shake.

The morning was spent filling the water cooler, opening fresh packages of chalk, unrolling clean maps, and passing out new books. Just before the children were excused for the lunch break, Miss Harrington pointed to the new motto that had been painted on the wall over the blackboard, next to the Golden Rule that had been printed up there for as long as Joe could remember. The new motto read, “To do and to bear is the duty of life.” He wondered if people really believed that – and if Miss Harrington had painted them up there herself.

At lunch, Annie and Peter Flynn sat under the oak tree at the far end of the schoolyard, one lunch pail between them. Joe went over and sat down on the grass next to Annie. She was thinner than the last time he’d seen her – before any of this had happened – and her worn cotton dress was too short, falling well above her ankles. Peter looked up at Joe, then reached into the lunch pail and pulled out the only thing left – a small apple.

Annie spoke first but didn’t look at him. “You’re probably not supposed to talk to me, you know.”

He hadn't been sure what he was going to say, even as he walked over to her. Now he was even less sure. He couldn't say he was sorry about her step-dad, like people always do when someone dies. He had to be better than that. "How are you?" he asked. That was almost as dumb as saying "sorry," but he had to say something. He plucked at the grass, pulling up several blades. She had kicked off her shoes and he could see her bare toes wiggling in the grass.

"Oh, we're fine." She raised her head and looked out over the schoolyard. "No one will talk to us anymore, my mother has to take charity from her family, and by Christmas who knows where we'll be living." Her hair blew across her face but she didn't turn her head or raise a hand to tuck it behind her ear.

"I'm sorry." It sounded lame, but he *was* sorry. "I came to your house once, but you were gone."

She looked surprised, but smiled slightly. "There was no way we could stay in that house on Lake Street. Now we're in a dumpy little cottage on Estes."

She wouldn't want pity, so all he said was, "I'm sure it's not that bad."

She looked away from him toward the crowd of kids playing games on the other side of the yard. "It's only a matter of time until one of them says something about how it's all our fault, how our family is a bunch of criminals. You wait and see."

Joe wanted to say "No they won't," but knew she was probably right. He wanted to do something for her, give her something, but the only thing he had was two dinner rolls left in his lunch pail and he knew she wouldn't take them – that would look like charity. He reached into the pail anyway, pulled the rolls out and handed them to Peter. "Here Peter, I don't like these very much. You take them."

The little boy took them without hesitation. “Thank you.”

Miss Harrington appeared at the schoolhouse door, about to ring the bell. As they got up and brushed the grass from their clothes, Joe turned to Annie and smiled “Tomorrow, after school, I’ll race you to the top of this maple tree. And I’ll beat you this time.” He wasn’t serious – they were too old to climb trees. But he wanted her to remember how things used to be, before he fought with his father all the time, before he thought his family would fail at any moment, before her family was branded as thieves.

She laughed weakly, as if she knew too that those days were gone. “Oh, I don’t think so. I’ll always be the champion tree climber around here.”

After school, Joe walked with Annie and Peter as far as their turn off, lingering again to talk to her. “See you tomorrow,” he said looking directly into her eyes, willing her to say “Yes, you will” and give him the assurance he needed that she would be there.

“Bye,” was all she said and gave him a quick wave. Then she grabbed Peter by the arm and turned down the road.

When they had gone, Joe made up the time he’d spent by running the rest of the way home. He changed quickly into his overalls, a cotton shirt with a flannel shirt over top, buttoned tightly over his wrists. As he trotted from the barn to the cornfield, he pulled on a pair of double-thumbed, cotton-flannel gloves and tucked an extra pair into his pocket. The rough husks of the corn would wear through one set of gloves and the serrated edges of the stalks and leaves would tear up both the cuffs of his shirt and then his wrists beneath.

It was now three-thirty and the afternoon light would hold out for a few more hours. It was still warm enough but the wind had turned cool, hinting autumn would soon

be there in earnest. His father and Uncle Rex had been out there since first light. Joe wondered if his father would say anything to him about missing the day's picking or whether he'd save all that for his mother.

When Joe got to the field, his father was setting up the wagon to be refilled, adjusting the high bangboards on one side so the corn, when tossed, would bounce off and fall into the wagon.

"Here's a husking peg," he said and thrust the tool into Joe's hand. "You can start on these two rows. I'm going to see if Rex needs to be emptied and to get some water for the teams."

As Joe strapped the metal husking peg onto his right hand and checked the sharpness of the half-inch blade, his body seemed to remember the repetitive motion of corn picking and he felt tired already. He grasped the first ear of corn with his left hand and raked the hook in right hand across the tough, green husk. In what seemed like a single motion, he stripped the outer husks off one side of the ear, snapped it off the stalk, and tossed it in a wide arc into the wagon. Though he wasn't looking, the banging noise the corn made told him he hit his mark. It was all coming back to him so quickly, as though he'd never stopped picking corn at the end of last season.

He worked methodically, leaning left, then leaning right to reach the row on either side. Even the occasional "giddyap" he spoke to the team of horses behind him, so they would move the wagon forward a few steps, came out of his mouth automatically. The rhythm of his movements became hypnotic, lulling him.

It was no surprise Annie and her family had to leave that house. There was, no doubt, a hefty mortgage on it that her mother would never be able to pay. It amazed him

Allen Flynn cared so very little about his family that he left them to be turned out, as he surely had to know they would be. Lost in thought, Joe didn't notice the pace of his picking had increased and the sound each ear made as it hit the bangboard grew louder.

The sun was setting when Joe's father returned from the other side of the field. Joe's wrists and back ached and there was a familiar soreness in his left thumb. He figured he'd picked about twenty five bushels and hoped that would be enough of a contribution. He climbed into the wagon and held on as it lurched toward the barn with its load bulging.

Joe was in the hayloft, pitching fresh hay for bedding down when he heard Uncle Rex and his father bring the herd in for the evening milking. The iron stanchions rattled as each cow settled into her accustomed stall; then the barn grew quiet except for the sound of the milk stream hitting the bottom of an empty pail. Every few minutes the buckets were emptied and stools scraped the floor as they were moved. Then Joe heard his mother's voice. He stopped forking the hay to listen.

"I've fed the children. I was wondering when you three would be in for supper -- so it will be hot," she said.

Joe could see her standing at the foot of the steps that lead up to the loft. She was facing away from him and she held a new box of Raleigh's udder salve in her hands. She looked out of place, cleaner than anything in the barn. She stepped gingerly over a shovel that lay on the floor, careful to keep her skirt from the dirt.

"We'll be in when we're done with the herd. You know that," his father said. His voice was muffled and the sound of milk hitting the pail never stopped. "It took us longer

to get through the one hundred bushels we needed. It would've gone quicker if we'd had Joe all day – but you know that, too.”

Joe had to give his father credit – he got right to the heart of the matter. All the things he hadn't said to Joe all afternoon were now going to be aimed at his mother. He put down the hayfork and moved closer to the stairs.

“I brought some fresh salve,” his mother said, as though she hadn't heard or didn't care about the tone of his father's voice. “Joe might need it for his hands.” She moved out of Joe's sightline, as though she was going to circle the lower level of the barn looking for him.

“He's fine. You can stop worrying about him. The boy's not going back to school until it's done.” The milking stool scraped the barn floor again. “And don't you ever go against my word again.”

His mother rarely went against his father's word – only once that Joe could remember, when she'd sent for the doctor after he'd said he wasn't needed. The baby, Alex, was sick and getting sicker and she'd been right that time to defy her husband.

“This is too important.” Her voice was hard. “Joe has a mind for other things besides farming. He wants to go to college.” She seemed to know what he wanted though they hadn't talked about it much.

“College. I'm tired of hearing about it.” He lifted the milk pail in his hand. “He can learn what he needs to know right here. And if he doesn't want to farm, he can go to college on his own time.”

Joe moved to the top step and looked down. His father was standing behind Franny, a broad-backed, Geurnsey cow, holding the milking pail in one hand and the

stool in the other. His mother stood right in front of his father, one hand on her hip, the other still holding the container of udder salve. Behind them, Uncle Rex continued to milk.

“Do you want him to be a farmer all his life, to have to work this hard for everything?”

“What’s wrong with being a farmer? It may be hard work but it’s an honest living.” He leaned toward her slightly. “It was good enough for my parents and grandparents.” He hesitated. “But I guess it isn’t good enough for you.”

Joe wasn’t sure he wanted to hear this or wanted them to know he was listening, but he stepped quietly down several more steps.

“Farming was good enough for me when I thought it was a way to a better future, and to afford things for our children.” She gestured with both hands and it seemed she might throw the udder salve. “Not a way for you to try every foolish idea that comes along.” Her hand swept a wide arc around the barn. As she did, she caught sight of Joe and shook her head, meaning he should stay quiet.

“I’ve told you – the barn will pay us back, if we’re patient. Everyone in this family -- whoever eats at my table – will do whatever needs to be done to keep us going. If they have to miss school or church or their own funeral – so be it.” He was yelling, the milk pail in his hands swinging and sloshing. Behind him, Uncle Rex stood up from the cow he was milking and came toward them. With this last word, he threw down the wooden milking stool. It hit the concrete floor hard, splintering off one leg at an angle. The leg bounced and hit Franny just above her udder. Startled, the cow tried to yank her head out of the stanchion and started to kick. A back hoof caught the pail of milk in his

father's hand and knocked it to the floor. The milk splattered his boots and ran in white rivers into the channels and grooves of the barn floor.

Uncle Rex rushed forward to calm Franny. His father swore. His mother turned and walked toward the barn door. As she passed Joe at the foot of the stairs, she thrust the jar of udder salve into his hands. Her mouth was drawn tight and he could see she was on the verge of tears.

Not sure whether to stay and finish the hay or follow after his mother, Joe stood rooted on the bottom step, holding the jar of salve. The outside of the jar was greasy and it began to slip from his fingers. He caught the jar before it fell and placed it on the step. He left the barn, sliding the heavy wooden door as hard on its track as he could. Instead of crossing the yard to the house, he turned and went across the cow pasture and through the hay pasture. Cutting across the ditch that ran behind the pastures, he turned up the dirt track between the two cornfields.

The long, late-summer day had faded into darkness now. Joe could see by the light of an almost-full moon, though he knew the paths around the pastures and cornfields by heart. He'd often heard nighttime cornfields described as frightening, haunted places; the tall, spindly stalks of corn were like skeletons, twisting and reaching for the poor soul who had the misfortune to wander into a cornfield at night. He kept to the dirt track, half running, half walking straight ahead toward the open spot where the track ran into the county road. The blood pounded in his ears, a tempo that kept him on edge and watching for anything or anyone that might come out of the darkened fields.

As he turned onto the county road, east toward Welden and Iowa Rapids beyond, Joe slowed his pace to a steady, rapid walk. The night air was cooling, a slight breeze



drying the sweat on his neck and back. It was only half a mile or so to Welden, a town so tiny it didn't appear on the map, a town where the post office and the general store were located in the front room of the MacKenzie's farmhouse, and the tavern in its basement. It was then two miles more into Iowa Rapids, past farms separated by dirt tracks and barbed-wire fences, past one white farmhouse paired with its red barn mate after another, past new corn silos and the collapsed wrecks of old silos. Joe wasn't sure if he could really see their dark, silent outlines or if he only felt them, looming along the road like phantoms.

Joe had seen his father throw things before – a wrench pitched across the barn floor when it failed to loose a rusted bolt, a rock yanked from the blades of the harrow and hurled over the hedge into the pasture. His father once threw the spade end of broken shovel at a hired man after the man accidentally ran over the tool with the heavily loaded manure spreader.

But tonight was different. The old man had never thrown anything around his mother like that, in a way that seemed directed at her. The word “menacing” came into Joe's mind. But the real measure of his father's rage was the fact he'd thrown the stool so close to Franny. A cow is a farm asset and farmers didn't jeopardize their assets just because they are angry.

It would always come back to the same argument between them. She would say he'd built this disastrous barn and he would say it was her people that ruined them. They were stuck – and he was stuck in the middle. If they were arguing over him, what was he going to do about it? He'd already pledged to do whatever his father asked – and he'd done it. How long would he have to keep it up? How long could his mother bear up?

As Joe came into the west side of town, across the bridge, he could hear the river flowing by, quiet here, well below the rapids that tumbled and churned upriver. He turned south, toward the train tracks, and made his way over the railroad crossing and past Kingdom Hill Cemetery.

He found a dumpy little cottage with a weedy front lawn that had to be the Flynn's house. The slate walk leading to the front door was sunken and overgrown, the slabs loose and rocking under his feet. The white clapboards of the house appeared gray and mottled in the moonlight, the paint peeling in most places. The front door screen was bowed out and ripped where many hands had pushed hard against it in their haste to get out of the house.

Now that he was standing in front of her house, Joe suddenly realized he hadn't thought much about what he would say if Annie answered the door – or what he would say to her mother if Annie didn't answer the door. He barely even knew her mother. And he had no logical reason for being here; he couldn't use schoolwork as an excuse. Her mother would think he was strange, coming to see her daughter unexpectedly – and at such a late hour, as it was well after ten now.

Joe stood with his hand on the screen door for a moment, then pulled it open and listened for noise from inside the house. It was quiet. He raised his fist to knock, then dropped it and closed the screen door gently so it wouldn't bang. This was stupid. He should turn around and go home before anyone saw him. But before he could turn to leave, Annie's face appeared in the square glass window of the front door. She must have heard his footsteps on the porch or the squeaking hinges on the screen door. The ripples in the glass made her appear older than she was. Joe wondered if she was surprised to see

him – or angry that he'd come here. If she was, she didn't show it as she pulled the door open.

“Hello.” Her voice was soft, a little scratchy. “Why are you here?” She didn't open the door all the way, instead wedging her body between the door and the jamb. She made no move to open the door or invite Joe inside.

Joe didn't know exactly what he wanted, why he'd come all this way. “I'm not sure,” he said. “Maybe to see a friendly face.” He nervously fingered the little metal compass that lived permanently in his pocket. “I'm scared about what will happen to my family – and to yours. I wanted to talk to you about it.”

She nodded. “For my family, it's easy. I'm pretty sure my stepfather has ruined us. We can't go on living in this town.” She pushed her hair out of her eyes and looked directly into his face. “I know it, but my mother acts like we are just going to go on as before.”

“I don't think any of us can do that,” Joe said.

“She can't see it. She has been numb ever since my dad died. I've tried to tell her that here, if you don't play by the rules, you can't stay. Break the rules and they will punish you.”

“She doesn't understand that?”

“No. Maybe we're the only ones who don't want to play by the rules,” Annie said.

There was a lull in the conversation and for a moment Joe could hear the distant hoot of a great horned owl, the low-pitched *ho-ho-hoo hoo hoo* sounding like an insistent question. The breeze moved through the tops of the trees, rustling them softly. “I wanted to tell you that I won't be in school for a while,” he said.

“I’m not sure how much longer I’ll be going either,” Annie said.

“I don’t know when or how I’ll see you, talk to you.” He couldn’t look directly at her, instead staring at a spot on the door frame where the paint was peeling. He drew in a breath and plunged ahead. “And that’s the thing. That’s become—“ He paused. “It’s important to me.”

“I know,” was all she said and laid a hand on his arm.

A light came on upstairs and Annie pulled away. She slipped back inside the house and closed the door softly behind her. Joe crossed the lawn, the start of the long walk home. Behind him, high in one of the trees, the owl continued to mark his territory with the cadenced *ho-ho-hoo hoo hoo*.

## May, 1916

Spring corn planting took place in mid-May; by then the weather was fair, the sun warm enough to encourage the seed corn to sprout quickly, before it could mold in the damp earth. The Iowa wind was brisk, but it no longer cut with cold, which would make corn planting a bearable task. Joe's father and Uncle Rex would start the planting in two days, early Monday morning, if Joe could get the machine parts they needed today – two three-inch bolts and a six-inch gear wheel to repair the corn planter and the manure spreader -- in town today. If the lever on the corn planter kept refusing to release the right number of kernels the plants would be spaced too far apart for maximum yield or crowded too close together, which meant some would die – and precious time would be wasted in replanting. If the gears on the manure spreader continued to seize up, the manure that Joe, his father, and Uncle Rex had already pitched onto the machine would have to be unloaded forkful by heavy forkful across each field, extra work they could not afford to do.

For the last two days, parts of both machines were strewn across the barn floor as his father and uncle worked to repair them. Tension circled inside the barn just as the wind circled it outside. His father, face flushed and sweating, struggled to straighten the blades of the manure spreader. Every few minutes he swore, once or twice taking the Lord's name in vain. Uncle Rex would smile a little at each of these outbursts, but Joe noticed that he also picked up his own pace, pounding and bending the metal levers of the corn planter more quickly, oiling joints and gears in rapid succession.

Eager to be out of the way and on the road into town, Joe led Sadie, the small roan mare, quietly out of her stall, around the half-circle of cow stalls and into the yard. She

stood patiently as he slipped the bit into her mouth and threw the reins over her head and hitched the small wagon behind her.

Before Annie, a trip into town had been simply a welcome break from the farm. But now there would be no stopping for ice cream at Purcell's Drugstore, no "window shopping," as his mother called it, at McPherson's Dry Goods, as there had been in the past. He wasn't interested in the library and if he saw friends from school -- Tom Fryslic picking up feed at the hardware store or the Wilson boys eating lunch at the drugstore counter -- he wouldn't stop to visit.

Now the only thing a trip into town meant was a chance to see Annie. Several times since that night last fall he'd walked into town to her house, though he'd been careful his father didn't find out. It was always at night; Annie would meet him on the porch each time, until the weather had turned too cold and she'd invited him into the house, deciding that her mother would simply have to accept him. They'd talked about everything -- she speculated where her stepfather might be, he talked about his trouble with his father, and they both wondered what it would be like to live somewhere else.

Joe climbed into the wagon seat, adjusted the reins and gave Sadie a gentle "giddyap" to get her going. They took the dirt road north to the northwest corner of the Marshall property, past the smallest of the three cornfields on the farm. Joe had spent most of last October in that field, picking corn. The autumn frost coated the corn stalks in the morning, but by the afternoon he was warm enough to shed his sodden gloves and jacket. He'd picked through November, when the skies were cast gray and he was chilled through for most of the day. He'd picked through the week of corn-picking vacation his friends who were still in school received so they could help out with the harvest. Felicia

had joined him in the field that week. She worked steadily and complained very little. It seemed to him that she tried to keep up with his pace, but it was harder for her to lob the ears of corn into the wagon. Often she missed and would have to backtrack and pick up the stray ears from the ground. It must have been disappointing for her, as much as she wanted to please their father.

It was the goal of every farm family to have the corn picked by Thanksgiving. In previous years, with the help of a hired man or two, the Marshalls had met that deadline, sometimes coming in with the last loads just before they were to sit down to their holiday meal. This last year they were lucky to have the crop all in by the first week of December. They'd got it done just by the skin of their teeth. "Now every farmer in the county knows exactly how close we are cutting it," his father had said.

Joe spent so much time in this field, had looked up from his picking so often to gaze down this road, wanting to take it wherever it would go, that the view from the corn field was as familiar to him as the view from his bedroom window. Now, out on the road looking in, the bare, unplanted field seemed different -- smaller, more compact, less like it would go on forever.

With another "giddyap" and a tug on the right rein, Joe turned Sadie onto the county road toward Welden. A couple of beat-up old wagons sat in front of MacKenzie's -- farm folk stopping to pick up mail or goods at the store. It was hours before the tavern would open, serving beer and moonshine whiskey so bad Uncle Rex called it "embalming fluid." There was little else to see in Welden except the dozens of cows peering disinterestedly over the barbed-wire at him as the wagon rolled by.

It was a dusty, bumpy ride on into Iowa Rapids, but it would take less than an hour, considerably less time than it had taken Joe that night when he'd half run, half walked to Annie's doorstep. He'd come back along this same stretch of road, under bright moonlight that made the cornfields look blue-black, getting home after midnight. He'd quietly closed the front door behind him, gone up to his room, and gotten into bed, without anyone seeming to notice he'd been gone. Two days later, his mother asked him where he'd gone. "I took a walk," he'd replied. "By the train tracks, I imagine," she'd responded. He nodded.

Over the last several months, it seemed almost like things between his mother and father had returned to the way they were before that night in the barn. Conversations between them, mostly at the dinner table, were usually about farm business, but his mother asked fewer questions than before. And she had begun playing the piano again, in the evenings after dinner, something Joe hadn't heard her do since Alex was born. Instead of busying herself with mending or going over the farm account books, she spent at least an hour each night at the piano. She pulled out the old sheet music and played sentimental songs like "The Merry Widow Waltz Song" and "Evening Idylls," while he and Felicia did their homework at the parlor table. Often she would sing softly, no trace of her accent to be heard when she sang. Sometimes Felicia would put down her book to page through the sheet music, admiring their fancy script and the pictures of Victorian women in exotic costumes pictured on them. Frequently their mother was still playing when Joe and Felicia went to bed; Joe would hear his father come up to bed while the strains of "On a Sunday Afternoon" drifted up the stairs behind him.



On the east side of Welden, two large fields belonging to the Cabots had already been planted with corn, in neat rows of freshly turned, dark soil. The planting wires, used to guide the planter and to trigger the lever to drop seed corn every forty inches or so, still stretched across the far field at one end, waiting to be coiled up and put away for next year. Once again, George Cabot was ahead of his father.

Half an hour after passing the Cabot farm, the Iowa River appeared off to his left, and just beyond it the River Road ran along the northern bank into Iowa Rapids. The river coming into view meant that he was almost to the west side of town, where the river would curve away to the north and he wouldn't see it again until he crossed the Washington Avenue Bridge into downtown. The west end of town was a grid of streets ten blocks long and five blocks wide lined with small, neat clapboard houses. Children played in the front yards of several houses; one little girl waved to Joe and he waved back. He resisted the urge to turn Sadie to the right here, south toward the train tracks and the Flynn's house. But he had business in town, so he urged the horse across the bridge over the river. Below the bridge, he could see the water was still running high and fast from the spring rains.

On Saturday morning, the market square would be busy, its sidewalks crowded with farmers bringing in their produce and with townspeople shopping, doing business at the bank, or stopping to gossip. Iowa Rapids was the kind of town that put on a baseball tournament each summer, bringing players in from all the surrounding towns. Every Christmas, the Ladies League put up a glittering tree in the center of the park for the community to enjoy. It was also the kind of town where farmers, damning both the automobile and the kind of progress it represented, fought bitterly with the town fathers

to preserve hitching posts along the main streets. And it was the kind of town where immigrants were accepted if they worked hard and learned to speak English quickly, but also the kind of town where the Ku Klux Klan was rumored to make night raids to drive blacks, Jews, and other undesirables from their homes – though no one seemed to know this for sure.

Joe turned Sadie left onto Main Street; they passed Fisk Park, where the summer concerts would be held in the band shell, and came into the commercial district. Four blocks east of the Main Street shopping area sat the larger, grander homes of Iowa Rapids, built by merchants and men who made their fortunes in the railroads. They were brick, limestone, and slate monuments to success, reminders to all who passed by that the inhabitants were indeed respectable citizens. Some of these homes were actual mansions, but some, like the one the Flynns had lived in, were merely “fancy,” as Joe’s mother would say. Still, it had been fancy enough for Allen Flynn to pretend to be something he wasn’t.

He turned the wagon into a spot on the street in front of Elkins’ Hardware Store and reigned the horse to a stop. He jumped down and tied the horse’s lead to the post. A crowd was gathered in front of Purcell’s Drugstore. As Joe got closer he could see it was a group of kids about his own age, a few older and a few younger maybe, a few he recognized from school. They were standing in a ragged semi-circle with their backs to the street, facing the brick wall of the building between the drugstore and the bank next door. They were laughing and Joe heard someone cat-calling in a high, sing-song pitch. Though he couldn’t make out the words, Joe knew the name that was being called – “Tinker Man, Tinker Man.” Inside the semi-circle, his back pressed against the bricks,

stood the Tinker Man, his trademark bowler hat pushed at an angle on the back of his head.

For as long as Joe could remember the Tinker Man had walked the downtown streets mumbling to himself and peering into shop windows. Everyone in Iowa Rapids recognized the slight figure in the worn houndstooth suit. They believed him harmless, though young children on their own, without a parent or older sibling, would cross the street to avoid getting too close to him. He always had live insects -- grasshoppers, moths, and spiders -- in small, glass jars tucked into his pockets. Over and over he repeated the words "how about it" to everyone he passed -- or to no one at all.

Everyone in town knew the Tinker Man's story. His name was John Andrew Forsythe and he was the youngest of eight to a family that farmed a small patch on the north side of town. The Forsythes raised just enough oats, corn, and poultry to keep themselves from starving. Joe's mother told him John Andrew was what they called "slow" from the time he was a toddler. By the time he was six, he could only speak a kind of gibberish, could not sit still through a meal, and continually rocked back and forth in his chair. It seemed, she said, that the only time the boy was calm, free of fidgets and tics was when he sat in the corner of his father's small blacksmith and metal-working shop watching him mend pots and work tin into baskets and decorative items. Joe's father said the Tinker Man's parents should've put him into the special home for defective children run by the county over in Eldora. They refused and kept him at home where his mother and three older sisters had taught him to do chores, to talk, and to read a little.

But the Tinker Man was forty-five now; his parents were long dead and he lived in town with a spinster sister. He spent most afternoons, when the weather was fair, in the

park on a bench by the band shell or walking the streets downtown. Joe found the Tinker Man alone on the bench one Saturday in October the year before, when he cut through the park on an errand for his mother. Encouraged by the absence of taunting children and by the placid look on the Tinker Man's face, Joe approached. The Tinker Man held a glass jar on his lap. Inside a large butterfly slowly beat its dark, velvety wings in patient rhythm.

“How long will it live in that jar?” Joe asked, pointing to the butterfly.

“Not long – unless – I let it go,” he said. His speech was halting, like a child who couldn't quite figure out what word came next.

Up close, Joe had seen how thin the man was, his wiry arms sticking out of his frayed, cotton shirt. He wasn't sure how often the Tinker Man ate, but he did know that Mrs. Barnes, who ran the hotel restaurant downtown gave him a hot meal whenever she could, kitchen leftovers served on a stack of battered, wooden crates by the back door of the kitchen.

“Have you eaten today?”

“I've had -- enough,” he replied.

Perhaps one day Joe would be the Tinker Man. But instead of wandering around with pockets full of creepy crawlies, he'd be an old man alone with his experiments, prattling on nonsensically to anyone who would listen about electrical currents, radio waves, or how gravity works – someone who had spent his whole life wanting something different than what they said he could have.

“I'm sorry they don't understand about your bugs,” Joe said, nodding his head in the direction of the downtown street.

“My bugs – eat – other bugs.” His voice was high pitched, as if he was excited, though his face was oddly placid.

Now, the Tinker Man was surrounded by the crowd and Joe heard the words “crazy” and “dimwit” shouted at him. No one made a move to touch him, but the semi-circle of bodies had penned him in, forcing him to listen to their words. Everyone in this town had their moment of being judged, but it seemed to Joe that for the Tinker Man that moment must be never-ending. Unable to watch the inevitable torment, he turned and kept walking.

The door to Elkin’s Hardware Store was propped open and Joe could smell the dusty scent of feed and the tang of turpentine even before he walked in. In front of the store, two men Joe knew from the threshing ring were bent over one of the cast iron stoves, examining its construction. Ellis Thompson, a small crop farmer from north of Welden, had lost money to Flynn, less money than the Marshalls, but still money he could ill-afford to lose. The other man, Gil MacDowell, was also a dairy farmer and considered himself too smart to have been taken in by the likes of Allen Flynn. MacDowell, an overly tall man, was bent double, peering into the stove’s firebox, saying something to Thompson about the thickness of the walls.

Joe walked quickly past them, into the store and down the long row of shelves holding cans of paint, varnishes, and paintbrushes. Rakes, hoes, and shovels were stacked deep along the wall opposite. He stopped in the automotive section long enough to look at the spark plugs, fan belts and spare windshield wipers that the Marshalls would not need any time soon.

As he rolled a spark plug around the palm of his hand, Joe heard voices behind him, Mr. MacDowell and Mr. Thompson, one aisle over.

“Well, that woman and her kids may not have done anything, but I still don’t want to have to look at them – reminding me of what I lost,” Thompson said.

“I think Sam has the right idea. He talked Riley into turning them out of that house. They’ll have to leave town,” MacDowell said. “No one else will rent to them.”

The “Sam” they were talking about had to be his father and the woman and her kids could only be Annie’s family. Joe’s stomach turned at the thought of Annie as the topic of conversation for these men he held in such contempt. It had been awful enough when his father was the one gossiped about, but this was unbearable.

Thompson laughed. “I can’t imagine what happened when Sam found that Margaret had been to see them.”

“Not just went to see them,” MacDowell said, “but took them food, as if they were her own charity case.”

“Food out of his own pantry. Must’ve burned him up.”

The two men turned down another aisle of the hardware store. Joe followed, keeping one row away from them, out of their line of sight. He pretended to be keenly interested in hand tools, testing the weight of a hammer, pricking his finger along the blade of a saw to check its sharpness.

“Bad enough it was her cousin who started this—then to go on seeing them,” MacDowell said.

“No way he could allow it, associating with them,” Thompson agreed.

“Cabot sure as hell would give him a bad time – worse than he already has.”

“Marshall can’t fix his reputation with his wife sneaking off to give aid to people who stole from half the town,” Thompson said.

“Best thing they leave. Solves the problem for everyone. And we can all forget about this whole thing.”

By the time the two men had finished speaking, Joe’s hands were shaking. Annie gone –the thought of not seeing her, never seeing her again sickened him. They could say what they wanted, do what they wanted, but he would not allow this. He clenched his hand around the wood plane he held, then dropped it with a bang. He walked up and down the aisles of the store, not seeing anything. His mind turned circles. What had his father done? Since Allen Flynn wasn’t around to take any of Sam Marshall’s anger and bitterness, it overflowed onto everyone else, like rushing water sweeping people along. His father had been punishing his mother for months now. And now their family problem was public knowledge. Now wonder his father’s hostility had flowed outside of the family, too.

Joe walked to the long counter that ran the length of the store, along the back wall. It was divided into compartments, each one holding some type of hardware – nails, screws, nuts, bolts, hooks, washers, cotter pins, ball bearings. Ever since he’d grown tall enough to see over the counter, Joe had stopped in front of the counter to reach into the bins and let handfuls of sharp screws slip between his fingers or ball bearings the size of marbles roll around his palm. Now he simply selected the three-inch bolts he needed, took a six-inch gear wheel from the shelf above.

The shop assistant, Art Bradley, stood halfway up the ladder behind the counter, pulling down a bolt of fabric for a woman at the counter. Mr. Elkins was behind the cash register, adding up totals and marking what was owed in the account book.

Joe set the hardware on the counter. "Please put these on our account." The words seemed to burn his lips. He hated that he didn't have money to pay with, hated that both Bradley and Elkins knew it would be some time before the account was paid up.

"The total is eight dollars and thirty-six cents," Mr. Elkins said. He opened the account book with a flourish and slowly ran his finger down the column of numbers. "I'll let you put it on the account this time – but tell your dad he'll need to make a payment before anything else can be charged."

The heat rose in Joe's face but he didn't look away from Elkins. Leaving the bolts and the gear on the counter, he turned and walked away from the counter. He heard the two men muttering something behind him.

Joe walked out of the hardware store and, without thinking, turned up the block toward McPherson's Dry Goods Store. He didn't need anything, but was simply in the habit of stopping in the store. Unlike Elkins Hardware, the door to McPherson's was never propped open. Mrs. McPherson would not stand flies, moths, or any other type of creature in her store. The screen door was made of ornately cut wood with gingerbread details at the top; it was painted a deep, tasteful green and had an elaborate latch and a closing mechanism that kept it from slamming.

Joe opened it quietly and went inside, as if he were entering the library or church. After the bright sunshine outside, the store seemed dark and cool. It smelled of baking spices and sweet syrups and floral soaps and powders from the cosmetics counter. The



clerk, a middle-aged woman with dark hair pulled back into a tight knot and a starched white apron over her high-collared dress, stood behind the counter, arranging rolls of velvet ribbon. Her sharp eyes followed the figure of girl who leaned over a glass display case, peering at the ivory combs and pearl-handled hairbrushes.

Even at a distance, Joe recognized the curve of the girl's cheek and her straight, red-brown hair. It was Annie.

He spoke her name and she turned.

"They won't wait on me here," she said. "They just stare at me, sure I'm going to steal something." Her feet were firmly planted and she looked the woman behind the counter as she said this loud enough for her to hear. Her face was not flushed red, as Joe knew his would be if he'd said such a thing.

"Is there something you wanted?" The woman pointed a long index finger at the display case.

"No, there isn't." Annie's eyes narrowed and she pointed her finger back at the woman.

"Perhaps you should leave then."

Annie laughed sharply. "Now I'm being thrown out?" She slammed her open palm down on the glass-topped counter so hard the face powders and ivory combs on the black velvet underneath the glass jumped. Joe was close enough to reach for her arm to stop her from doing it again.

The woman flinched at the banging sound and backed away. "Get out now." She pointed to the door and started around the counter.

"I'm not going anywhere," Annie said. "I haven't done anything."

The woman made as if to grab her by the arm, but Annie slapped her hand away.

Joe took her hand. "Let's go."

"I'll go on my own -- but she is not throwing me out," she said, but didn't pull her hand away from him. She let him pull her to the door where she turned back toward the woman. "Don't worry, the thieving Flynn's won't be bothering you anymore."

Out on the sidewalk, Annie turned to Joe. "They all think we're going to steal from them."

"They're all small-minded and suspicious," he said.

"I'm sorry – I'm just so angry." She danced a little jig, kicking her toes at the sidewalk.

Joe was anxious to ask her what she meant by "Flynn's won't be bothering you anymore" but he let her go on.

"Everyone in this damn town acts so superior." He'd never heard her swear before, but he didn't mind. "Like they're so blameless, so clean that they can pass judgment on me."

"Judging seems to be what people around here are best at."

"They think they're better than us, as though they never made a mistake, never could make a mistake," Annie went on. "Perfect farmers, perfect farmer's wives, perfect people."

"That's because they never took a risk, never imagined anything different," Joe said.

Annie stopped on the sidewalk and looked up and down the street. "All I do is imagine a place different from this. Somewhere where we aren't known."

“Where you aren’t the child of a thief and I’m not the son of a crackpot.”

She turned to look at him. “Somewhere bigger, I suppose, where everyone doesn’t know your business.” Her eyes seemed to beg for agreement, confirmation that such a place existed.

“Ames?” He’d never been there, but it was the nearest larger city.

“Ames is just a bigger small town,” Annie said. She snorted a laugh, then grew serious. “My father’s sister lives in Des Moines. My mother was too ashamed at the time, after my stepfather was killed, to contact her. Now she’s ready.”

“C’mon,” he said. “I’ll take you home.” He led her up the sidewalk toward the wagon.

It was a short trip to Annie’s house, so he’d have to talk fast. “I’ll take you and your family to Des Moines,” he said. Not daring to look at her, he concentrated on pulling the reins to guide Sadie down the narrow streets.

“And then?”

“We could marry.”

“Alright,” she said. She rested her hand on his knee. As they turned down the alley that led to Annie’s house, she said, “I think it’s time we both moved on from here.”

He reined Sadie to a stop and jumped out of the wagon to help Annie down. As they walked up the slate walkway, he grew anxious to make firm plans, to make this real.

“When will your mother be ready to go?”

“We haven’t had word from my aunt yet,” she said, “But I think we’ll have to go in the next few days – whether we have a place to go or not. We’ll have to hope for the best.”

They stood on the porch, facing each other. “I’ll come back in three days,” Joe said.

Annie smiled, as if to reassure him. “I’ll have her and Peter ready.” Then she leaned in and kissed him on the cheek, a move so sudden he didn’t have time to turn and meet her lips with his own. A second later, she was inside the house and the door was closing behind her.

On the way home, Joe rehearsed what he would say to his father. But really it was his mother he cared most about, that he knew he would hurt the most. She would be deeply disappointed if he didn’t finish school and he knew that of her three children, he was the one she would miss the most. But it was time he made his own way – she would see that.

The late afternoon sun was beginning to cast shadows when Joe turned Sadie down the lane and reined her to a stop in the yard. The herd was still in the pasture, not yet brought in for the evening milking. The barn door stood open but no sounds came from inside. Ready to tell his father what was on his mind, Joe jumped from the wagon and strode through the barn door. Pieces of the manure spreader and the corn planter were still spread around the floor but in a different pattern than this morning. Overhead, Uncle Rex pitched hay down from the loft to the floor below. Loose bits of hay and dust fluttered in the air. Joe’s father stood with a shoulder leaning hard against one of the barn support beams. His fingers worked the stiff leather of a horse bit. It was a simple enough task to insert a new brass ring into the loop but Joe saw he was sweating with the effort. His father looked up, suddenly aware of him.

“Where’ve you been? We’re waiting on you.” He pulled away from the support beam to stand erect. “Lollygagging with your friends in town when we have work to do.”

Joe opened his mouth to speak, but wasn’t fast enough. His father realized he had returned empty-handed.

“Where the hell are the belts and the gear you went for?” He stepped toward Joe, one arm raised. Then he stopped and turned away to cough.

“I didn’t bring them,” Joe said.

“Why the hell not? Didn’t Elkins let you put them on our account?”

“He was going to let me, but I changed my mind and put them back.” Joe knew being coy would only enrage the old man more, but he felt like prolonging this moment.

“You changed your mind,” his father said, his voice rising until it was stifled by another cough.

Speaking slowly, in a measured voice that sounded odd to his own ears, Joe began the speech he’d prepared. “While I was in the hardware store I overheard something that made me so mad I couldn’t think straight.” He gripped the stall stanchion and leaned forward as if his works were a weight pulling on him. “Something about you, something you did.” He knew it wasn’t a good idea to bait his father, but there was no other way to do this. He wasn’t going to rush it.

“What are you talking about?” his father shouted, his voice hoarse. Sweat beaded on his forehead and ran along his hairline. Overhead the sound of the pitchfork stopped and Uncle Rex appeared on the steps.

“I’m talking about MacDowell and Thompson saying you convinced Riley to kick the Flynn’s out of their house. Now they have nowhere to go and will have to leave.” Joe stopped, wondering if he would deny it.

His father stepped toward him but faltered briefly and grabbed the corner of a feed box to steady himself. Uncle Rex watched him closely. “That’s right, I did. I don’t want that family here any longer. We can’t be associated with that family in any way. I did what I had to do to protect this family – and I don’t have to justify myself to you.”

There it was. No apologies, no compassion, no memory of how it felt to be the object of the town’s ridicule. “Very Christian of you, Dad,” Joe said. “Turning out a widow, a teenage girl, and a little boy.”

“Don’t be smart, young man. They will go to live with relatives, so don’t make it a matter of life and death. This is” – a cough broke through his words. “—none of your business, anyway.” When he finished speaking his chest heaved and he made a wheezing sound as he tried to catch his breath.

Joe could see his father wasn’t well but he pressed on. “As a matter of fact, it is my business.” This was going to be strange and somehow delightful at the same time. “They’re leaving in three days and I’m going with them.”

“Going with them?” his father snorted. “As what, their manservant?” He turned away to cough into his handkerchief.

“I’m going to help them get settled wherever they end up. Then I’ll get a job and make my own way.”

“Joe, what are you talking about –“ Uncle Rex said, but didn’t get the chance to finish.

“You aren’t going anywhere. You have obligations to this family – you know how much you owe.” His father stepped closer but was stopped by another fit of coughing. A clot of yellow, sticky phlegm shot to the floor.

“It’s my life and I’m done with being ordered around, done with back-breaking work, and done with panicking every time the weather changes.”

“You ungrateful son of a bitch.”

“You’ll get along without me. You won’t starve. You always find some way to get by.” Joe smiled, a smirk he didn’t really feel, especially at the thought of his mother, Felicia, and little Alex, but it was for his father’s benefit.

“You will not defy me,” his father said.

“I’m not defying you. I’m done with you.”

His father drew himself up straight and raised the leather bit strap as if to strike Joe.

Joe stood his ground, silently daring him to do it. He was prepared to take the blow.

Uncle Rex stepped forward, “Sam–“

Joe’s father pulled his arm back, the leather making a snapping sound, the heavy metal bit arcing high over his head. But as he brought his arm forward, he doubled over, cut in half by a powerful fit of coughing. He bent at the waist as the spasms wracked his body, making it impossible for him to catch his breath. The horse bit clattered to the floor. Drops of phlegm and bright-red blood spattered Joe’s shirtfront. When the coughing subsided, his father slumped to the floor unconscious.

Uncle Rex caught him on the way down. “Get your mother.”

In the moment it took his father to hit the floor, Joe felt something inside of him turn over, as if all his plans were imploding, collapsing in on themselves. He turned obediently and headed for the house. As he crossed the lawn he noticed the herd still waiting patiently in the pasture.



## December, 1916

When his father still couldn't get out of bed by the second week of December, Joe knew he would have to shoot the hogs himself. Uncle Rex would wield the butcher knife, but Joe was a better shot, as good a shot as his father, so the task would fall to him. The hog slaughtering couldn't wait any longer, but his father was still too weak to do anything about it.

Up since four in the morning, Joe had already dragged the big cast iron kettle from the back of the old barn around to the spot behind the hog pens, next to the large oak tree with the lightning scar on the trunk. In the frigid dark, he moved mechanically, not thinking much about what he was doing as he perched the kettle up on a ring of field stones. His fingers were stiff and he dropped several matches and cursed aloud before lighting the fire. He stamped his feet, as much out of resentment of the cold as to keep the blood in his feet moving. The world seemed to lie dormant, but still his work went on, the needs of the farm and the family taking all his attention, his energy, his mind.

Twelve hogs had already been taken to market, driven into Iowa Rapids in the large wagon where they were sold for almost two-hundred dollars. Joe locked the money in a metal box in the roll-top desk; it would be safer there than in the bank. He, his mother, and Uncle Rex would dole it out, as expenses warranted.

Hunching his shoulders against a brittle wind, he filled the kettle with water from the cistern by the old barn and returned to the house for breakfast. The kerosene lamps were already lit in the kitchen and the woodstove warmed the room. Joe's mother shuffled pans around on the stovetop, heating coffee in the battered enamel pot and

melting butter in the fry pan. She wore her wheat-colored hair in a long braid down her back instead of in the usual tidy knot on top of her head.

“How is he today?” Joe asked. After six months, he asked out of politeness, because his mother expected it. He hoped if he did ask, she would talk more to him.

“No fever today, but the pain in his chest is still bad.” She set a bowl of oatmeal and a plate of eggs in front of him and turned back to the stove, but not before Joe saw the lines around her eyes had deepened and her skin was pale.

He shoveled the oatmeal into his mouth and watched her closely as she continued cracking eggs into a large bowl. She’d retreated into silence and routine – but so had everyone in the family. Joe didn’t think much about what they weren’t saying to each other. He was too full of his own feelings and had too much work to do. Besides, what would he do about it? What could he say to make her feel better?

“Did you get any sleep?” It was the best he could come up with. His father’s illness had cast her out of her own bed. She shared Felicia’s bed, the two of them either sleeping in shifts or squeezing into the cramped single mattress together.

She poked the eggs spitting in the fry pan. “Some. Felicia was in and out all night.”

“Too bad she can’t sleep in the chair by the bed.” He meant that as a statement of fact – it would be more convenient for Felicia, now their father’s devoted nurse. If it came out sounding mean-spirited, so be it.

His mother didn’t say anything, so he retreated into his plate of eggs. When he looked at her worn face, he imagined his mother could already see their precarious position coming fully to the brink of disaster. It was as if, from the time his father

collapsed, she could look into the future and see clearly the spring planting left undone, no harvest coming in, selling off the herd, then selling off the land, bit by bit. Did she, like him, picture these events, one following the other, like links on a chain? If she did, did she know where that chain ended? Perhaps she saw them living at the county poor farm, in a ward with no dignity or privacy, her children being fed by someone else.

For the first few weeks after Joe's father collapsed, the doctor had been unsure if he suffered from pneumonia or tuberculosis, or some other, unknown lung condition. If it was tuberculosis, he'd have to be quarantined, sent to a sanatorium in Smithton, something Sam Marshall would fight, even in his weakened state.

Dr. Fremont came the next day, just as Joe finished the morning milking. He was putting the herd out to pasture when he spotted the doctor's car, a handsome Maxwell five-passenger touring car, parked in front of the house. He trotted across the yard and into the house. He took the farmhouse steps two at a time and reached the doorway to his parents' bedroom just as the doctor opened the buttons of his father's nightshirt. The patient lay in the middle of the bed, propped up by pillows. He was restless and thrashing about; his cheeks flushed, like the red of a ripening apple. Every few minutes the force of a cough rocked his body forward to a sitting position and mucus speckled with deep-red blood spattered the blanket. Joe was shocked to see fever blisters around his father's mouth and that his lip frequently moved, mouthing soundless words through his delirium.

Dr. Fremont continued his examination as Joe's mother and sister watched anxiously from the corner of the room. The doctor was a small man with white hair swept

back from his round face and wire-rimmed glasses that slid down to the end of his nose. He moved quickly when he examined a patient – stethoscope on the chest to fingers on the pulse point to peering down the throat in rapid succession. He listened closely to the patient’s complaints, considered them carefully, then made a firm diagnosis. He had been the doctor in Iowa Rapids for the last forty years. Dr. Fremont’s methods combined the latest medical treatments and medications with traditional folk remedies, including herbs and roots pulled from the farm garden. He based his prescriptions not only on what he believed was most effective against the illness, but also on what best suited the temperament of the patient – and the contents of their wallet.

The doctor listened to Joe’s father’s chest, felt his hands and feet, took his pulse, and palpated his abdomen. When he finished, he closed his leather bag and paused a moment. “It could be pneumonia – or it could be tuberculosis. Both lungs are affected,” he said. Joe’s mother sat down heavily on the wooden chair. The doctor went on, “It’s very dangerous – the amount of fluid being secreted in the lungs can be so great, so tough, that he can’t throw it out, no matter how much he coughs.” He rose from the edge of the bed. “He could drown in his own secretions.”

Joe’s mother closed her eyes at these last words, then slowly opened them and stared blankly past the doctor. Felicia stood with her hand on her mother’s shoulder, her face hard, memorizing every word the doctor said. When it seemed their mother would not speak, Felicia did. “What can we do for him?”

“Give him a warm bath every evening to reduce his temperature and soothe the agitation brought on by the cough. Put warm flannel cloths on his hands and feet and a

hot, wet towel on his chest where he has pain.” The doctor moved toward the bedroom door, brushing past Joe.

“That’s all. There’s nothing else?” Felicia asked.

The doctor stopped and turned. “Until we know more, no.” He paused. “You could also try oiling sheet cotton with olive oil and putting it on his chest. That might give him some relief.”

Joe’s mother’s forehead wrinkled in frustration. “Where do you suppose I’m going to get olive oil?”

The doctor turned and started down the stairs. Joe followed after him, anxious to ask him something. At the front door the doctor stopped. “You should watch his temperature doesn’t go up any more or he may develop typhoid. And if his sputum becomes yellowish, it may be bile, a sign of liver derangement.” He peered over the top of his glasses at Joe. “If his fever hasn’t broken by tomorrow evening, call me.”

Joe wondered what he meant by “liver derangement” – he thought “derangement” was a mental condition. Perhaps the doctor was off the mark this time, but he pressed ahead with his question. “Dr. Fremont, where’d this come from? How’d he get so sick so fast?” He could picture his father’s lungs filling with thick, cloudy fluid.

The doctor paused, his foot on the running board of his car. “This lung infection, like many diseases, is caused by toxins absorbed in the bowels. Though why in one person the disease lodges in the lungs, in another in the brain or spinal cord, and in another it’s paralysis, we don’t know.” He tossed his black leather bag onto the seat of the car. “I’m convinced it has to do with heredity and nutrition.”

This answer sounded like something out of *The Farmer's Gazette*, something more to do with cows and pigs than people. "How long it will last?" Joe realized too late he should have asked, "How long before my father gets better?" – that he'd revealed greater concern for himself than for his father. The doctor didn't seem to notice.

"Assuming it doesn't turn into typhoid, could last a month, could go on for six. Hard to tell at this point." Dr. Fremont heaved himself into the driver's seat and, with a wave Joe thought too cheerful, drove off.

Joe walked back to the round barn to finish the milking. Though he knew the illness wasn't his fault, maybe if he hadn't pushed so hard, his father wouldn't have collapsed. Now he was paying for his desire to hurt his father. Once again, he was chained to work he hated and was no good at. He was going to have to help save his family, something he should want to do more than he really did. He couldn't tell anyone about the guilt and resentment he felt. If Annie were here he could talk to her about it, but she seemed so far away right now. He hadn't gone to see her the three days after they had made their plans, but he'd sent word to her in a note saying his father was sick and that he would come as soon as he could. The message was carried by Dr. Fremont, but Joe couldn't be sure Annie had gotten it. A week later he'd been able to get away, sent into town to pick up some medicine the doctor had said might help. He'd taken a by the little cottage, but it was dark and no one answered his knock. He'd left another note, but didn't hold out much hope that Annie would get that one either.

Joe was well into his breakfast when Uncle Rex came banging into the kitchen carrying the .22 rifle his father kept in the tack room of the old carriage shed. "How's

your aiming eye this morning?" He was too loud for the early hour, especially on a butchering day. The cold rolled off him and his hands were red and chapped.

Uncle Rex was not the silent type, but that didn't mean he was going to open up and talk about how he felt about his brother's illness. Still, Joe saw he was pained by it. He rarely visited the sickroom, preferring to get reports from Joe's mother or Felicia. He kept up his humor, often trying to make the family laugh. Coming in exhausted and dirty from cleaning the barn stalls, he often pulled off his boots and managed a quick mock tap dance across the kitchen floor in his stocking feet. Joe wondered where his uncle learned to dance, but the little act made his mother smile for a moment, and his sister and little Alex would laugh, too.

This glimpse into his uncle's past, that other life far away from here, reminded Joe that Uncle Rex was the one who could leave, strike out on his own – save himself. But he wouldn't abandon them; it seemed now as if they were his own family, his wife and his children. Joe wondered if this was loyalty – or if it was simply that he had nowhere else to go. His uncle used to be footloose and fancy free his mother would say. Now he seemed fine, content almost, chained to this farm. It was as if he thrived in exhaustion and tension.

"My eye is fine," Joe said. It was his nerve he wasn't sure about. In the past, his father did the shooting and Uncle Rex the cutting. Joe was only around to help herd the hogs, move the carcasses, put the hams in the smokehouse, and to clean up. Today he would have to raise the rifle, aim at the broad, flat spot between the hog's eyes and pull the trigger six times. He'd learned a long time ago which farm animals he could get attached to and which he could not – hogs were almost never given names. He also knew

that shooting, if done right, was a quick and fairly painless way to kill. If he did his job properly, they would never have to feel the knife.

“Where’s Florence Nightingale?” Uncle Rex asked. He propped the gun in the corner and sat down.

“Felicia’s upstairs trying to get him to take a mustard plaster,” Joe’s mother said. She set a plate in front of Uncle Rex and handed Joe a cup of coffee.

“Do you think she’s pleading with him or trying to bully him?” he asked. Uncle Rex stirred a teaspoon of sugar into his oatmeal with his right hand while shaking salt onto the plate of eggs with his left. He was particular in the way he prepared his food at the table, and, unlike most farm men, he ate slowly, not shoveling food into his mouth. “If I were her patient, I’d do whatever she said – at least until I was well. Then I’d take a switch to her.”

Joe smiled grimly at the thought of his stubborn sister trying to apply mustard plaster to his equally mule-like father. While the rest of the family kept their fears and resentments to themselves, working in silence, Felicia took on the role of her father’s nurse, prodding him with questions about where his pain was located and coaxing him to eat. Every day, perched on the hard wooden chair by the bed, she read to him from *The Farmer’s Gazette*. Often, when Joe peeked into the bedroom, he saw her head bent over the paper, her face half hidden behind the drape of her pale hair. Her voice was bright and lively as she read aloud articles about increasing egg production or the latest planting technique, as though she refused to believe their father was too weak or delirious to hear or to care. She seemed to know instinctively, to feel what must be done in a way Joe



could not. She hadn't had to learn her duties the way he did. Joe never spoke to her about it, not even when they'd argued, afraid his own resentments would surface.

Felicia wouldn't care if their father wanted to take the mustard plaster treatment -- no one ever wanted to take it. Joe remembered the sharp smell that made his eyes water and how the mustard's heat seeped through the cloth and burned his skin. He doubted it would do much good. It was fine for a chest cold, but this stubborn lung infection had a hold of his father for months now and wouldn't let go, wouldn't let him get out of his sick bed, and certainly wouldn't allow him to do any work.

Joe had worked as hard as he knew how to make sure his family didn't end up at the poor farm, but he hadn't been able to do that and also keep Annie and her mother and brother from the place. A few weeks after his father's collapse and his abandonment of his plans with Annie, Joe heard from someone at church the Flynn's had ended up there. A few days later, on his way back from an emergency trip to borrow tools from his Uncle David, he made a detour by the Franklin County Poor Farm. As he approached the compound, dominated by the four-story brick dormitory at its center and surrounded by a sagging, split rail fence, Joe reined Sadie to a slow walk. He scanned the figures working in the large garden patch. He recognized Mrs. Flynn first, bending over a row of bean plants; then he spotted Annie's auburn head at the end of a row of tomatoes, only a few feet from the fence. He approached and spoke her name.

She turned quickly, frowning when she saw him. "We didn't get very far, did we?"

“Annie, I’m so sorry,” Joe said. Anxious for her to understand, to fix things if he still could, he rushed on. “Did you get my note saying how sick my father is?”

Annie nodded, but said nothing. She stood there clutching a handful of weeds, clods of dirt dangling from the roots.

“He was feverish and coughing blood. We had to carry him into the house.” Joe spread his hands wide, pleading. “And wait for the doctor. I was desperate to get word to you but in all the chaos--” He searched for some sign of understanding on her face, but he saw only the familiar pattern of freckles across her nose and the hard line of her mouth.

She threw down the weeds and stepped closer to the fence. “We waited a week – until Riley showed up with his son and a rifle and told us to get out. My aunt wouldn’t have us, so we had nowhere to go. Except here.”

“I came a few days later, but you were already gone. I left a note in case you came back.” He spread his hands, palms upturned, as if he were begging.

“Two notes. That’s what I’m worth to you.” A dark expression came over Annie’s face and her eyes narrowed. “So how sick is your father? What’s he got?”

“Could be pneumonia. Maybe TB.”

She grasped the splintered top rail of the fence with both hands and rocked back and forth against it. You’ve made your choice, haven’t you? You have sided with him.” She stopped moving and looked directly at him.

“Annie, don’t say that.” Joe winced, as if he’d been kicked or punched or slapped in the face. “I don’t side with him. I have no choice – my family needs me.” He added quickly, “In a few months, we can try again.”

“Maybe your mother needs you, but your father doesn’t deserve your loyalty – not after what he’s done.”

So she knew, knew without him telling her that his father was responsible for having them evicted. Was she about to ask him if he knew this was coming and didn’t tell her? Should he lie and say “no,” pretend he knew nothing about it? She’d see right through that – he wasn’t a good liar. “I was going to tell you, once we were gone from here,” he said. “Tell you and tell that I hated what he did, that I hate him, that he’s a bastard, and that I’m not like him.” She’d caught him out, seen him for the coward he was. Could he fix it, convince her that he really was as good as his word? That he could be as good as his word?

After a long pause, Annie said, “Perhaps then your father deserves to be sick.”

“Maybe he does,” Joe said. It wasn’t a logical thing to agree to, but he didn’t care. Maybe agreeing with her would fix things between them. “Maybe he’ll get well enough in a few months. Then we can leave.”

“You’ve made your choice – your family over me,” she said. “I’m sorry for your mother and Felicia, and Alex, but they would have been alright. They have your uncle and the whole town to help them.” She turned away and nodded toward her mother. “We have no one.”

“Annie, please -- ” It hurt to know that she thought so little of him and he was embarrassed to feel the prick of tears sting his eyes. He shook his head and said, “I’ll make it right, make it up to you. Just give me some time.”

She looked at him, her brown eyes penetrating him, and said, “You can’t. I needed someone who would do anything for me – that wasn’t you.” She turned away from him and walked into the middle of the garden patch where he could not follow her.

As Joe climbed into the wagon, he knew he had made an irreversible mistake – perhaps the mistake of his life – when he had not come for her when he said he would. Funny, he thought bitterly, how you couldn’t know at the time what would come out of a decision, how things seem like they could be fixed when, in fact, they couldn’t. It turns out he wasn’t the person he thought he was, but was really just a coward, unwilling to break the rules.

As he scraped up the last of his eggs, Joe considered the six hogs he and Uncle Rex would have to kill and butcher today. Each one weighed more than two hundred pounds and together they would give the family enough meat – ham, bacon, and sausage – to last the year. He was thankful the hogs had done well this last year, even though they hadn’t received much attention. His father always maintained that hogs were good that way. “Any idiot farmer can raise hogs without even trying,” he’d said. But could any idiot farmer slaughter and butcher them properly Joe wondered.

“I’ve asked Louise to come over and help with dressing the meat and making sausage,” his mother said. Louise Greunig was their neighbor and his mother’s closest friend. “She’s bringing Hannah and Mrs. Allinson is bringing Ivy and Mae.” The Allinson’s were not part of their threshing ring but went to the Congregational Church with the Marshalls. Ivy was one year older than Joe and the prettiest girl in school, tall and almost regal with long, wavy hair. Mae was two years behind him, a petite, funny girl

who actually liked to do the recitations Miss Harrington made them do in front of the class. He didn't know the Allinsons well, but he did know they hadn't treated his family any differently since his father built the round barn or since their money was taken. And he was grateful to them for helping his mother – and for not apparently expecting anything in return.

Uncle Rex pushed back from the table, picked up his plate and Joe's and carried them to the sink. Whenever Uncle Rex cleared the table it was time to get back to work. Joe gulped the last of his coffee, shrugged on his coat, and followed his uncle out the door.

In the yard behind the hog pen, the water in the kettle was just shy of boiling. If it boiled it would have the wrong effect, setting the coarse swine hair into the skin instead of making it easier to scrape off. Steam rose into the chilly air. Uncle Rex climbed a ladder that leaned against the oak tree to make sure the pulley screwed into the thick branch was secure and the rope strong enough. He tied the end of the rope around the trunk with a heavy knot and left the free end dangling next to the kettle. It looked like a hangman's noose, though the condemned man would already be dead by the time the rope was tied around him. He helped his uncle set up the two wooden sawhorses and lay two thick planks eight feet long across them. As they worked, Uncle Rex started to talk.

"I'm a terrible shot with a twenty-two – or any gun, for that matter." He grinned. "You know that old saying 'He couldn't hit the broad side of a barn'? That's me." He shook his head. "Made your grandfather mad – his son couldn't even kill rats in the corn crib." He laughed and gently dropped his end of the plank onto the sawhorse.

Joe set down his end of the plank. “What’d you do about the rats, then?” He already knew the answer.

“Oh, your dad got ‘em – he’s a good shot.” Uncle Rex aligned the planks, then stood up straight. “He could pick off rats, mice. Used to bring home rabbits and birds during hunting season. I tried to keep up with him, but I’m just no good at it.”

Joe had always been accurate with a gun; he’d killed his fair share of the rats that scrambled in and out of the corn crib. But he wasn’t much of a hunter and he didn’t relish shooting animals, even pesky vermin, the way many of his friends did.

“Anyway, that’s how I got the butchering job,” his uncle went on. “Got more talent with a knife, I suppose – though I don’t like it very much either.” He gave Joe a tight smile and raised his eyebrows.

Perhaps he was talking so much to distract Joe from what he was about to do, but all the chatter was making Joe more anxious to get on with it. “Let’s get this over with,” he said.

The sun had risen, though it offered little warmth yet and Joe flexed his toes inside his boots. He cradled the rifle in his arms and watched as Uncle Rex led the first hog into the small side pen, its floor covered with extra hay and sawdust to catch the blood. The narrow space of the pen would keep the hog from moving too much and the wide spaces between the slats allowed Joe to see his target. Uncle Rex stood behind and waited, mercifully quiet.

Joe raised the rifle, peered through the sight and waited for the hog to move into position. The animal, a large boar with several dirty scratch marks on its pink-white skin, nosed around in the hay, not lifting its head enough for Joe to center it in the gun sight.

He waited, one eye closed, both hands steadying the gun. Not finding anything interesting in the hay, the hog raised its head and Joe took his chance. The rifle cracked and the animal's legs went out from under it.

“Good shot,” Uncle Rex said. “You’re your father’s son.”

He meant that as a compliment on Joe’s accuracy with the gun, but Joe wondered if, as his father’s son, he had turned into a bastard who didn’t seem to give a damn about other people’s feelings. As Uncle Rex drew the knife across the hog’s jugular vein, Joe refused to look away – not because he wanted to make his father proud, but because he wanted to be clear and sure about what he was doing. Annie had always been sure of whatever she was doing and about why she did it. He wondered what she would think of him if she could see him now. The hog’s blood flowed rapidly, puddling and clotting in the sawdust. He watched the dark, sticky circles grow bigger, so intent on them he didn’t hear Uncle Rex at first.

“Grab a leg,” Uncle Rex repeated. They each grabbed a hind leg and lowered the hog, head first, into the kettle of boiling water. Blood splattered and speckled Joe’s overalls and boots, and droplets of scalding water landed on his face as they slid the carcass up and down in the kettle. Soon the hair slipped from the skin and they hauled the body from the kettle; they removed the rest of the hair with the scraper. Uncle Rex slit the tendons behind the hooves so he could insert a strong hickory stick, then he tied the end of the rope to the stick. While Uncle Rex steadied the carcass, Joe pulled hard on the rope, hauling the animal up until it hung three feet off the ground, swaying slightly above an old metal washtub.

It should have been easier for Joe now, once the animal was rendered a commodity, a farm product, merely a chore that required skill and precision to complete. Still, he left the cutting to his uncle. Uncle Rex sliced around the neck, through the thick band of fat and muscle, rounding the neck bone completely. He grasped the head under each ear and, with a jerking twist, pulled it off. Joe wondered what people in towns and cities would think if they saw this, if they ever considered about where their food came from. He'd long been told slaughtering and butchering were just more of the things that connected farmers to the cycle of life and being good at them was a kind of virtue. But it didn't feel like much of a virtue when he actually had to do it. He was pretty sure it was just another chore his father did efficiently, without much thought or feeling. Joe imagined he was the only farmer around here who thought of the animal as a sacrifice, something that gave its life for them. The animal had no choice and it knew no better. Perhaps that made it luckier.

Joe watched intently as Uncle Rex cut straight down the hog's belly and opened the cavity wide. The most important thing was not to puncture the intestines and spill the noxious contents all over the precious meat. Uncle Rex's knife flicked expertly along the membrane holding the intestines to the skin. He then carefully pulled out the entrails, heart, liver and lungs. The glistening organs slipped easily out of the body, almost through Uncle Rex's hands, into the washtub. Joe poured bucket after bucket of fresh water into the hog's body cavity, cleaning it as best he could. When it was clean, they lowered it from the tree branch and heaved it onto the makeshift sawhorse and plank table. The hairless, bloodless hog was now a pale and waxy corpse, but it waited in the cold air to be butchered, not buried.



They repeated the ritual four more times – shooting, bleeding, scraping, gutting. By the time he raised the rifle for the sixth time, Joe’s hands shook, tired from gripping the gun so tightly. As he squeezed off this final shot, the hog turned and the bullet caught it squarely in the shoulder. The wounded animal squealed and screeched, charging the fence rails of the pen.

“Damn it.” He’d screwed it up and he couldn’t take another shot with the hog ramming madly around in the pen.

Uncle Rex sprinted toward the pen. “C’mon, we’re gonna have to do this the hard way. Leave the gun. Hold this.” He handed Joe the butcher knife.

Letting out a shrill cry of rage, the hog threw itself against the fence and bared its sharp teeth. Blood poured from the hole in its shoulder, though the animal didn’t weaken much. Uncle Rex waited until one of the hog’s front legs buckled under it, then swung his leg over the fence and dropped into the pen. Coming in from behind the hog, he bent over and lunged, knocking the beast over onto its side. He straddled the hog, which was now too weak to throw him off or wriggle away, though its head rolled violently back and forth, teeth snapping, squealing. It could still inflict a nasty bite to the leg or slam either of them hard enough against the rails of the pen to break a bone. A swift kick in the ribs or in the meaty part of a thigh with those hard hooves would hurt like hell. Joe had seen these injuries before – ragged gashes, purple-black bruises on swollen flesh.

“I can’t cut him like this,” Uncle Rex shouted. “You’re going to have to get in here with me.”

Joe could see this hog did not want to be sacrificed and it made him angry. Why the hell couldn't it just take the bullet like the rest of them? He gripped the handle of the butcher knife tightly in one hand and climbed up onto the rail of the hog pen.

“Hold on.” Joe swung himself over the fence and dropped into the pen. He knelt next to the hog and leaned his weight against the side of its head. Underneath Uncle Rex, the animal continued to writhe, its coarse hairs digging into his hands. Its blood smeared Joe's arms and neck. Every twisting, jerking movement of the hog's head made Joe angrier.

No longer caring about the beast's snapping teeth, Joe gripped it under the chin and pulled the head back to expose its throat. In one swift, yanking motion Joe pulled the knife blade hard across the hog's neck, cutting deeper than he needed to. He saw the slit open like a sudden crack in the winter ice over the pond. The blood rushed, thicker and stickier than anything he'd ever seen. The squealing cries died immediately. Underneath him, the animal kicked and moved one more time, a spasm like a great exhalation of breath. Then the kicking stopped and body went slack.

Joe rolled himself off the carcass, through the pools of still-warm blood, and heaved himself out of the pen. He leaned heavily against the fence. Both he and Uncle Rex were covered in blood; it stiffened their overalls and clotted in the laces of their boots.

“You alright? You made quick work of him.” His uncle looked at him closely. “Seemed like you took that one personally.”

“Son of a bitch made me mad.”

“Glad it was the last one. Wouldn’t want to have to do that again,” Uncle Rex said.

Joe wanted to scream “I never want to have to do any of this again.” He leaned over and vomited instead, emptying his gut onto the frozen ground. When his queasiness passed, they dragged the carcass to the kettle and finished cleaning it. Trained by the last five hogs, Joe went through the procedures of lowering the carcass into the boiling water, scraping off the hair, and pouring water over it without thinking about what he was doing. Still charged by the fight with the pig, he took the butcher knife and cut the carcass open with almost as much dexterity and efficiency as his uncle had. He thought about the hog’s blood spraying him and about the blood that speckled his father’s blanket. What he’d just been forced to do, his father would have done it without a second thought. He didn’t think he could do this much longer. Over the last six months surely he’d done enough.

By mid-day dinner, six hog carcasses were laid out across the plank table, waiting to be dressed. Sitting at the kitchen table, his overalls and boots shucked and left on the porch, Joe stared at the plate of stewed chicken in front of him. He felt the tiredness lodging in his arms and legs. He wasn’t sure if he’d be able to get up when the meal was over. He could imagine what Annie would think of him now -- tired, crusted in blood, every bit the effective hog slaughterer. Undoubtedly she would compare it unfavorably with the life he’d passed up with her. She would be right, he supposed.

“Nice shooting out there, Joe. Not your fault that last one tried to get away from you,” Uncle Rex said. “You’re almost as good as your dad.” He turned to Joe’s mother. “How’s he doing?”

“He isn’t really sleeping. Can’t ‘cause of the cough. And he isn’t really awake either.” She set a basket of bread on the table and sat down, though she didn’t eat.

“I guess that plaster Felicia made didn’t help?” Joe said.

“Not much, but she’s still up there. Won’t leave the room.”

Louise Greunig thumped into the kitchen just as Joe and Uncle Rex finished eating. She carried a heavy, cast-iron meat grinder in both hands. She was a broad-breasted woman who seemed to fill the whole room. Her heavy, blonde braids were pulled up onto the top of her head and her cheeks were red from the cold. Her daughter Hannah followed her, holding a small wooden box of herbs and spices they would need to make sausage. Behind the Greunigs trailed Mrs. Allinson, and her daughters, Ivy, and Mae

“Hope those hogs are ready to go, Margaret,” Mrs. Greunig said. “By the end of the day we’ll have you set with plenty of sausage and souse for the season.”

“I appreciate your help, Marta,” his mother said. “We always seem to be trying to catch up around here.”

Mrs. Greunig set the sausage grinder at one end of the farm table. “Rex, bolt this down tight to that end. I think Hannah can do the grinding. Ivy can do the mixing and I’ll stuff.” She bustled around the kitchen as if it were her own. “Margaret, you can prepare the meat for the grinder and Lorene and Mae can handle making the souse.”

While Uncle Rex bolted the grinder to the table, Mrs. Allinson filled a heavy pot with water from the pump over the sink. Hannah unpacked the spices from the box while Joe’s mother passed heavy crockery bowls to Ivy, who set them on the table.

Aware that the kitchen was now full of women and that he was in the way, Joe edged toward the door. On his way by, he nodded a silent greeting to Ivy and Mae. Uncle Rex followed. They were halfway across the yard when Mrs. Greunig appeared on the porch.

“You men will take care of the lard out there, please,” she shouted. It was not a request, but a command.

Joe dumped the water from the big iron kettle and relit the fire. He was in charge of the lard while Uncle Rex butchered the hogs. The lard was an important task and in past years it had been Felicia’s job. She had the patience for the constant stirring and was skilled at feeding small sticks into the fire to keep it at just the right temperature. But this year she was excused.

Uncle Rex used a chopping axe to cut each carcass down the middle on each side of the backbone, staying as close to the bone as he could. With a butcher knife he removed the loins and the hams and the shoulders, their joints cracking with resistance. The lean trimmings he set into a large crock on the table to go into the kitchen for the sausage. He dumped several chunks of fat from the hog’s gut into the pot to start the lard.

As the fat heated and began to render, Joe added more chunks and more sticks to the fire, increasing the heat and bringing the fat to a slow boil. He stirred the pot almost constantly with a large, wooden paddle, stopping occasionally to help Uncle Rex move a carcass. The rich smell clung to him, threatening to make him sick for the second time that day. He took a deep breath of the cold air to sooth his stomach.

In the meticulous movements of feeding the fire and stirring the pot, he felt his anger subside. He was surprised at how easily he’d pulled the knife across the hog’s

throat. At the time, he'd believed it was impatience to get the job done. Now he could see it was a release of tension, the culmination of so many things – frustration at the animal merged with his own anger. The animal was just one more thing that refused to bend to his will. In the fight, Joe allowed himself a moment of irrationality, a loss of control. Now he could kill when it was required, something Annie would also recognize for what it was – a kind of cowardice. But Joe also welcomed the loss of control, wondered when it might come again. Perhaps it was the only kind of freedom he would be allowed again, now that he was a slave to this place, to this routine.

Joe bent to add more sticks to the fire, aware it would increase the temperature and bring the fat closer to its boiling point. As the water from the fat evaporated, the temperature would rise, and he would have to rake out the fire to lower the temperature. It was like a science experiment and, like an experiment, he could control the variables. This was the closest he would ever come again to doing a science experiment again.

As he poked more kindling under the pot, he thought again about how Annie was really gone. He'd been by the poor farm several times and did not see her. But even if she never left Franklin County, she was gone from him -- and with her went any future he had away from here. He'd missed his chance. The fire suddenly glowed hot and singed his fingertips. He pulled his hand back with a loud curse.

While he waited for the lard to finish boiling, Joe carted a tub full of trimmings into the kitchen where the women had a full production line going. Mrs. Greunig pulled several organs and some of the lean meat from the tub and filled the sausage grinder. "You've done an excellent job today, Joe," she said. "You got all the slaughtering and

butchering done in one day.” She leaned over and turned the grinder crank. “And you handled a difficult animal. You’re really a farmer now.”

Joe mumbled a thank you for what he assumed was a compliment. He would be polite as long as they didn’t say his father would be proud of him.

He returned to the pot of boiling lard and stirred it again. If his father lived, he would never be the same again. And, if by some miracle he was able to work again, Joe wondered how he would ever work side by side with the man. At least as long as the old man was confined to his bed, Joe could ignore what he’d done and keep on working until he was too tired to think about it. If his father died, Joe wondered if his own anger and bitterness would fade. Could those things be buried in the ground with the casket?

“After all this hard work, we deserve a bit of a good time. I think we should over to MacKenzie’s,” Uncle Rex said over Joe’s shoulder.

This was the first time Joe had ever been invited to the tavern. He was clearly under age, though he wasn’t sure that mattered much these days. “I don’t think Mom will approve,” he said.

“Don’t worry. I’ll fix it with her Lets finish up here,” Uncle Rex said.

Uncle Rex began setting up for the curing and smoking they would have to do. Once the lard was finished, Joe went into the barn to get the barrel they would need to cure the bacon. He pushed the barrel over onto its side and began rolling it, kicking it every so often to keep it moving down the slight incline of the yard. As he rolled it past the back corner of the house, Joe kicked the barrel hard enough to send it skittering across the frozen ground until it hit the rock wall of the well with a cracking sound. One of the barrel’s curved wooden slats was split. It was the only barrel they had and Joe

would have to fix it himself. This chore would not be finished and this day would not be over until the bacon had been set up in that barrel to cure.



## CHAPTER TWO: MAE

September, 1924

After lingering somewhere between life and death for weeks, Ivy Allinson Whitsett died quietly in the childhood bedroom she once shared with her sister, Mae, in the Allinson family's rambling farmhouse. But her baby girl lived. That was in late March and by now, six months later, Mae had finally learned to read the baby's moods. The infant alternated between a placid quiet – a quiet that at first made Mae think there might be something wrong with her -- and a fretting fussiness that never quite reached screaming. Mae was surprised to find that she knew instinctively how to calm the baby simply by laying hands on her back or walking with her draped across one shoulder like a small sack of flour.

The baby was named Lily Charlotte, an odd pair of names chosen by Ivy before the birth. No one, including Lloyd Whitsett, Ivy's husband and the baby's father, seemed to know where the names came from -- there was no Lily or Charlotte in either the Allinson or Whitsett families. Mae supposed Ivy took the names from books she'd read, though she couldn't recall characters with those names in any of the storybooks or novels on their bedroom shelf. Still small and pink, and just beginning to uncurl, Lily had already become Mae's responsibility, a burden Mae willingly accepted.

At twenty-two, Mae was three years younger than Ivy and often felt she lived in her sister's shadow. But somehow she'd slipped fully into Ivy's place now, becoming a surrogate mother to the baby. She'd done so without resenting Lily – unlike her own mother who blamed the child for Ivy's death.

As the September days grew shorter, Mae was busier than she'd ever been before, always moving, much the way her mother and father moved from chore to chore. Sometimes the constant needs of the baby kept Mae from thinking too much – and sometimes the work merely occupied her hands, leaving her mind free to contemplate all that had happened. This morning, as she gave Lily her bath and gently soaped the baby's limbs, Mae thought how pretty the child was. She was lovely, as her mother had been, with an oval face, delicate features, and thick eyelashes. But unlike her mother, Lily was sturdy, with long, stout arms and legs that moved constantly. It was as if the energy Ivy lost during the course of her pregnancy was absorbed by the child and now it was ready to be expended by her kicking legs and waving arms.

After the bath, Mae laid the baby on Ivy's empty twin bed to diaper her. The bed remained in their shared bedroom long after Ivy married Lloyd a year and a half earlier and moved into a small house in Welden, several miles away. At first, the empty bed reminded Mae of the sister she'd lost; now it was a workplace where Lily's clothes and blankets were piled, waiting to be folded and put away. With her sister gone, Mae found herself talking to Lily as if she were Ivy, telling the baby about her life and asking her questions, as though she might get the same kind of sisterly answer she used to receive.

“Lily, you'll like Paul. He's very handsome, most handsome boy I ever met. He's not tall, but he has a nice, lean build and dark, wavy hair. He gets that, and his olive skin, from his mother. She's half Italian.” Mae was flattered when Paul Harper bid high on the lunch she'd prepared for the school's annual box lunch two years earlier. They had eaten it together on the schoolhouse lawn under a tree. He'd intrigued her with his talk of Chicago, describing its tall buildings, bustling streets, and mass of people as if the city

were a magical place. He'd laughed when she said she'd only been as far as Ames, but had listened with interest to the story of her family's trip there to visit her cousins. They had sat close together under the tree and there was a physical pull between them that seemed to draw them together almost as much as the talking had. From then on, they had eaten lunch together and talked about many things, including the many places they had yet to see.

She folded the cloth diaper around Lily's wriggling leg and pinned it into place. "I'm sure some people wondered what he was doing with me. Me, with my unruly hair and glasses I have to wear if I want to read anything." She turned the baby over to smooth and tuck the diaper in the back. "I don't think Paul and I look like we belong together."

Like Mae, Paul was raised on a farm, but his father also owned the grain mill in Iowa Rapids. Not content to wait to inherit the mill, Paul's father purchased a piece of farmland. Soon after, the grain mill came to him when Paul's grandfather was killed in an accident. Mr. Harper chose to run both operations and it was from him that Paul learned about ambition. However, his ambitions led him to college, to a business degree, and, ultimately, out of Iowa Rapids.

"Should I marry Paul?" she whispered to Lily. The baby lay still, gazing up at her as she pinned the diaper in place. "The plan is that I'll teach grade school this year and we'll get engaged at Christmas. Then, after he graduates next spring, we'll get married and move to Chicago." After much discussion, they decided that the kind of life they wanted, life more complex and interesting than the one to be had in Iowa Rapids, could be found in the city. But these plans had been made before the horror of Ivy's death and

before Lily had come to her. Paul knew, of course, that she was caring for Lily; she'd told him all about it in letters and when they talked on the telephone. But Mae wasn't sure he knew the depth of her attachment to the child, an attachment she was only beginning to understand herself.

Mae picked Lily up off the bed and carried her downstairs to the kitchen where Mae's mother was making applesauce. Two bushel baskets of Golden Delicious and MacIntosh apples sat on the floor by the sink and canning jars rattled in a kettle of boiling water on the stove. Mama sat at the large farm table coring and quartering apples, their sweet-tart smell filling the room. She tossed the sections into a pan with a precise flick of her wrist.

Mae laid Lily on the opposite end of the table so she could adjust her bunting, wanting to make sure the baby was warm enough while they took their ritual morning walk. But before she could slide the knitted cap over Lily's fine hair, still damp from the bath, Mama saw the small, curved, red mark, like a crescent moon, above the baby's left ear.

"What is that mark on the side of her head?" she asked, setting down the paring knife.

Mae winced. She'd hoped Lily's sparse hair covered it. "It's from the forceps."

"It's been there since she was born?" Mama asked

Mama should have noticed the mark before now, but for her to do that she would have to hold Lily, feed her, or give her a bath – which she didn't do. "Yes, it hasn't faded yet," Mae said.

“It probably won’t.” She picked up the knife and resumed paring. “The ungratified longing of a mother can leave a mark on a child.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Mama, but you were there. You saw the doctor insert the forceps.” Mae shuddered at the image – Ivy, legs splayed, straining to force the baby out.

“Fat lot of good he did,” Mama said. She flicked more pieces of apple into the pan, but her deep-set, shadowed eyes were fixed on Mae. “Some things are beyond the doctor’s control.”

Mae struggled to keep her voice even. “It’s just a red spot. It’ll go away. Please don’t turn it into something more sinister.” She wanted to add “as if her birth weren’t sinister enough,” but she didn’t.

Like everyone else in the family, Mae always avoided acknowledging her mother’s “peculiarities.” Some things, like the spilled salt Mama tossed over her left shoulder or the way she ushered guests out the same door they came in, were ignored. They all knew she quietly held her breath and lifted her feet when they drove past the cemetery, but no one said anything about it. These were just Mama’s quirks.

But ever since Ivy announced she was going to have a baby, Mama’s peculiarities had become more pronounced. Although Ivy’s pregnancy progressed normally – morning sickness in the first trimester followed by a second trimester in which Ivy looked lovelier than ever – her mother kept a close eye on her, doing whatever she thought necessary to protect her daughter. She taped small pieces of black cloth to the upstairs windows, believing if a bird flew into the glass and died, a person in the house would also die. She banished all farm cats to the barn and forbade Ivy to go near them. Even Mae’s father

hadn't been able to ignore it when Mama insisted that one of the goats, born with a misshapen leg, be sold immediately. "That one has to go – or I'll slaughter it myself," she'd said. A neighbor came that day and took the animal away for a bargain price. In Ivy's seventh month, when the baby had grown large and Ivy's hands and feet were swollen and she couldn't lift herself out of a chair, Mama insisted that Papa or one of the boys drive her everyday to Welden so she could be with her daughter.

Anxious to leave Mama's speculation behind and be outdoors, Mae gathered the baby up and hurried from the kitchen. She laid Lily in the buggy that waited for them on the porch and carefully tucked the blanket around her. "Lily, don't listen to her. The mark will go away." She wheeled to buggy around and down the porch steps. "I don't know what she means by ungratified longings. Ivy had everything she wanted – a husband who adored her, a baby on the way. She was anxious about your birth, but that's normal." Mae wondered if Ivy really had any idea what childbirth would be like -- the pain, the blood, the edge between control and panic. Her sister had seen the farm animals give birth many times – all of them had – but she couldn't have been prepared for what happened when the time finally came.

Mama insisted Ivy come home for the birth and Ivy obediently did so. Lloyd, long aware of his mother-in-law's strong feelings in the matter, didn't object. Perhaps this was because his own mother died a few years earlier and he was relieved to be able to defer to the women in Ivy's family when it came to childbirth and babies. And Mae was aware that what might seem to some outside the family to be excessive motherly concern was really a mix of her mother's own hard experience and her dark superstitions.

Mama had given birth ten times – five boys and five girls – but two of those children had been lost. The boy they named Nathaniel was stillborn in 1904, when Mae was two, Ivy was five, and their older brother, Lewis, seven. Mae was too young to know what was happening then, but she remembered clearly her mother’s grief six years later when baby Clara died of pneumonia at ten months old in 1910; Mama’s face was pale, her mouth drawn tight, and her tears were wiped quickly away with a brush of her hand. Mae remembered how closely all of them, except for Mama, watched her sister, Lucy, a newborn when Clara died, for signs of the illness. The three youngest children, -- Violet, Harold, and Matthew – were all born healthy and grew strong. But those two deaths were enough to change Mama, who never went to visit their graves in the cemetery of the Congregational Church. Every Christmas, Mae’s father went alone to lay an evergreen spray on each gravestone in remembrance.

The family always attributed Mama’s superstitious nature to her German heritage. She was born in 1878, in Des Moines, but her parents came from the Black Forest area of Germany, a land of fairytale evil in Mae’s imagination. Her grandparents still lived in Des Moines, grandfather, Harold, farming the one hundred and thirty-eight acres he accumulated over the last fifty years. Mae and her brothers and sisters had seen just enough of their grandparents to believe German farmers were hard workers, precise and calculating in their dealings for land and livestock. They had little sense of humor and there was undercurrent of superstition running through many of the things they did. Grandma never spun wool on Saturday night, saying if she did so she would never rest in her grave. Grandpa never chopped wood during the “evil crescent,” as he called the waxing moon, believing wood chopped during the waning moon would burn better. One

summer, during their visit, Mae watched as a hen was hastily butchered because she crowed like a rooster, a sign of misfortune Grandma insisted.

When Mae got older, she began to wonder what her pleasant, practical father had seen in her peculiar mother that made him want to marry her, back when they were young and so different from the people they were now. Mae had seen pictures of her mother as a young woman and she certainly had been lovely, her eyes bright and her mouth capable of a wide smile. But Mae couldn't imagine her as vivacious or fun – or anything other than the oddly serious she was now.

After Ivy had been seeing Lloyd for six months, Mama came into the girls' bedroom at midnight on Christmas Eve. She quietly pulled Ivy from her bed, bundled her into a heavy coat and boots, and dragged her from the room. When Ivy returned, she whispered to Mae that they'd gone out to the chicken coop where Mama made her knock on the door so they could find out if she would marry within the year. They waited to hear the rooster cackle – meaning she would marry – or a hen cackle – that she wouldn't. It was the rooster that cackled. Mae told several of her friends at school about it and they had laughed and shrugged it off. She was sure, however, that Ivy never mentioned it to a soul.

Mae pushed the buggy around the yard, through the gate, and down the lane. After a humid summer full of violent thunderstorms that threatened to ruin the corn crop, autumn was now cool and clear. Careful to keep the sun out of the baby's face, Mae guided the buggy down the lane -- two gravelly ruts with a grassy, weedy hump rising in the middle – that ran from the house to the county road. In spring, the ruts flooded, in the



winter they froze; but today the buggy went smoothly down the middle – and Lily lay quietly, her hands curled in tiny fists at her side.

Though she couldn't see the red mark above Lily's ear, Mae was more aware of it than ever before, now her mother had finally seen it. When the doctor pulled the forceps from his bag, Mae thought for a moment that they looked like a farm tool, something her father would use to deliver a foal, a procedure she'd assisted him with several times. But by the time the forceps were introduced, labor was going so badly the horror of what the doctor would have to do with the instrument had quickly become clear to Mae.

Lily's birth began normally enough. Ivy's labor started late in the afternoon with short contractions every twenty minutes or so. Mama, Mae, and her younger sister, Lucy, attended to her until Mrs. Klein, the midwife, arrived. Mrs. Klein, a heavy-set, motherly woman with a round face and calm voice, was well-known throughout the county as a competent midwife who had delivered hundreds of babies, including Lloyd, Ivy's husband and three of his siblings, one of whom came breech.

She examined Ivy and said, "This will go on for twelve hours or so. I'll come back at daybreak." Mae wished she wouldn't leave, but escorted her to the door without saying anything.

At four in the morning, Mama woke Mae and asked her to come back into the room and sit by Ivy, close to her head.

"Talk to her. Say something to soothe her," Mama said.

Mae wasn't sure what she could say. Ivy lay in the center of the small bed, her face pale and shiny with sweat. She twisted the bedcovers in her hands and moaned. The

warm stuffiness of the room pressed on Mae. Each time a contraction hit, Ivy's face contorted; when the contraction passed, she would turn toward the wall.

"She's been at this for more than twelve hours. She's getting weak," Mama whispered to Mae. "I'll bet that baby is breech, or face down and coming out the hard way."

"Oh, Mama, don't say that." Mae wasn't exactly sure how she could tell which way the baby was coming, but she'd given birth enough times to know.

At that moment, Ivy turned toward them, an expression of pain on her face. "I'm going to be a mother – no more picking peas for me." Her eyes were wild and she looked past them.

Mae took Ivy's hand, wanting to comfort her, but Ivy yanked it away. Mama got up quickly and left the room. She was making good on her promise to call Dr. Thomas. Although superstition seemed to rule much of her life, Mama had decided to believe in medicine and, as the birth grew complicated, determined that her daughter would have whatever she needed.

It was more than an hour before Dr. Thomas arrived. He hurried into the room, a look of concern already on his face. He was a young man, much younger than Dr. Fremont, Iowa Rapids long-established medical man. Dr. Thomas had thick, dark hair without a trace of gray and his hands were slender, without the knobby knuckles that Dr. Fremont's arthritis had brought him. Mae thought perhaps Dr. Thomas tried to make up for his lack experience with a nervous intensity, as evidenced by the hard stare he gave Ivy as he quizzed them about her condition. Mae's mother followed close behind him and stood at the end of the bed, keenly watching over his shoulder.

The doctor raised the sheet that tented Ivy's bent legs. "She's in the second stage of her labor." As he moved around under the sheet, Mae realized he was trying to gauge how much Ivy had dilated and the position of the baby's head – much the way she'd seen her father measure a horse about to foal. "The baby's not breech – I can see the head. But it appears to be face down. And there may be a shoulder stuck." He peered under the sheet again, then raised his head. "Head is engaged. Cervix dilated and retracted. Narrow pelvic arch."

He recited these facts as if he were trying to convince himself they were true, as if he were reading them from his obstetrics textbook.

"She's exhausted and getting nowhere. What are you going to do?" Mae's mother asked, her voice hard, as she tried to mask her fears with a commanding tone.

"I'm going to use forceps." Dr. Thomas pulled a small mask made of gauze stretched over a metal form and a brown bottle from his bag. He handed them to Mae. "You'll give her the anesthesia," he said, looking into her eyes, searching for willingness and agreement. Mae nodded. "Just a few drops, evenly around the mask. Hold it loosely over her face," he instructed.

Mae did exactly as he told her and was slightly relieved to see Ivy relax, though her face seemed almost too slack and her eye rolled back in a disturbing way. She stayed by Ivy's head, ready to administer more ether if the doctor called for it. Mama stood behind the doctor, watching as he inserted the forceps. He would have to position them precisely on either side of the baby's head and pull at exactly the right moment. Though it felt like forever, the procedure took only a few minutes. And, as the doctor made the

final, decisive motion, Mae saw reflected in her mother's face something she could only describe as horror.

So Lily was dragged into the world. Ivy lay exhausted, nearly unconscious for several days. After the birth, Ivy was never strong enough to breast-feed the baby. While Mae and her mother attended to Ivy, Lucy tried to bottle feed the baby, but with no success. "She won't grasp the nipple," Lucy told Mae, a look of desperation on her face the fourth day after Lily was born and still hadn't taken any nourishment.

Mae, welcoming the respite from what was becoming the process of watching Ivy die, focused on getting Lily to eat with a kind of ferocity. She remembered baby Clara's death and, though it was years ago, she was determined not to let that happen to this child. She washed her hands and arms up to the elbow and sat down at the kitchen table. She took Lily, still pink and puckered, in her arms, supporting the tiny, wobbling head in the crook of her elbow. She dipped her pinky in the formula and placed it in the baby's mouth. At first the baby scrunched up her face as if to cry, but then relaxed and began to suck on Mae's finger. Mae repeated the action several times until the baby got used to it. Then she tapped the tip of the rubber nipple on Lily's lip, leaving a spot of formula. The baby opened her mouth slightly, took the nipple, and began to suck rhythmically on it.

"How did you do that?" Lucy asked.

"I don't know," Mae said. It may have looked like she had some special talent for babies, but she was just guessing what to do next.

Three days after the birth, childbed fever set in, marked at first by Ivy's complaints of being cold. Mae found the room warm and stifling, the windows closed tight against the late spring breeze. The wall of the chimney opposite the bed emitted heat

from the fire burning constantly in the fireplace downstairs. But Ivy shivered under the wool blankets Mae tucked tightly around her.

As Ivy rolled back and forth in the bed, she mumbled about pain in her head. She slurred her words when she asked for water and Mae felt heat and sweat radiating from her sister's body as she leaned in to give her a sip of water. Ivy's pulse raced under Mae's finger and she thrashed about in her delirium.

Dr. Thomas came and went. Mae's mother, on one of his visits, shook a finger in his face, saying, "You did this. You caused the infection that's killing her." The doctor responded by prescribing another medicine, then hurrying out of the room. Whatever he did, whatever he tried, nothing changed and Ivy still lay in bed, writhing as the fever possessed her mind and body.

Mae refused to believe the fever was killing Ivy. Those were just Mama's bitter words. She sat by her sister's bedside and prayed to God, the God she worshipped in church every Sunday but, up until now, never needed so badly. Now she asked Him to stop her sister's pain, pain she saw every time Ivy curled up and clutched her distended abdomen. But God was not listening and Ivy's breathing grew labored; she began to throw up bile from her empty stomach. Mae held her sister as she retched, aware her own stomach was rebelling against the acrid smell and that she might vomit, too.

By the time the doctor returned again, it seemed there was nothing he could do. Ivy lay on her back, listless, no longer able to control her bladder or bowels, her breathing ragged and raspy. She passed away a few hours later, Mae and her mother with her in the dark bedroom.

In the dark silence of the bedroom, Mae and her mother merged in their stunned, disbelieving grief. That soon gave way to something else -- for Mama it was to a blank numbness, for Mae it was a gut-wrenching sobbing that went on until her throat and lungs hurt.

Mae was yanked out of her grief by Lily. Life went on and a newborn had needs. So her tears and the ache in her chest were soon transformed into a routine of feeding, bathing, dressing, napping, and walking. The day after Ivy's body was taken away, Lily's cradle was moved into Mae's bedroom. Mae noticed -- with only a momentary pang of regret -- that her small desk and bookshelf were moved out to make room.

As Mae pushed the buggy down the farm lane, she could see off to her right her father standing at the edge of the farm's three cornfields, planted now with corn several feet high. He was wearing a battered straw hat and had an old feed sack slung over his shoulder. That sack meant he was working his way through the corn looking for the best ears to set aside and dry for seed corn. Her father had a keen eye for seed corn, always searching for ears with the straightest rows and the most uniform kernels. Even though he already plucked a number of quality ears, he was undoubtedly searching the crop for a more perfect ear. He was a true believer who knew in his faithful heart such corn existed.

Corn was everything to Mae's father -- the source of the family's livelihood and a source of respect from other men in the county. But more than that, her father believed his work as a farmer was in service to the corn, that the crop was a sort of benevolent master. He said, very sincerely and more than once, "The corn responds to my hard work. If I do my best to prepare the soil, plant and cultivate carefully, and employ the latest

methods, it'll reward me. Makes me a better farmer." He was shorter than most men and, although he was slightly pot-bellied and bandy-legged, he somehow seemed to disappear into the corn. He was giving the corn too much credit, too much of a soul, though she had thought more than once, on a dark night when she'd had to cut through the cornfield, that the plants had indeed come to life, bending and swaying like dancers under the moon.

William Allinson came by his obsession with corn honestly. His father had been one of the first farmers in central Iowa in 1848 to encourage the planting of corn over wheat and oats. He campaigned for this, saying corn was more profitable, that it was needed to feed growing livestock herds, and that it was an integral part of crop rotation. His message was well-received and he was so intimate with corn that folks said James Allinson could cut off the tip of a kernel of corn, lay bare the tender germ at its center, and judge from its size, shape, and color if that ear would grow. Word was, he was right every time. It sounded like divination, and though Mae's father preferred a more methodical approach than his father, corn was what he knew and it had kept his family well.

The corn, and her father's wisdom in growing it, allowed him to make the most of the good years and boom that came right after The Great War. He'd built up their cash reserves, hadn't incurred debt, and hadn't over planted, as so many farmers had. The Allinsons had lived both conservatively and well, never in fear of poverty or starvation.

Mae knew he would be out in that corn most of the day. When she was little she had spent days out there with him, ducking between the tall, bristling stalks or tramping through the soft timothy grass planted as part of the crop rotation. For the last year or so, Mae had thought of the farm as a place she could leave, especially for the challenge and

excitement of a place like Chicago, and it would still be there when she needed to come home. But since Ivy's death, she doubted the permanence of even this place.

And she thought more and more about what it would mean to stay, to stay and raise her sister's child. She felt she owed Lily some knowledge of her mother – an obligation to paint her a bright, lively picture of the girl Ivy was in contrast to the darkness of her death. So, as a comfort to herself and to the baby, Mae assumed a playful tone of voice and told the child about her mother, tales from their girlhood that made her feel young and playful again, if only for the moment.

“Lily, your mother was the prettiest girl in her class, the last one to bob her long hair and the most beautiful of the girls once she did.” Unlike Mae's plain, brown hair that broke into unruly curls and frizz when it was bobbed, Ivy's glossy hair waved softly and neatly. Mae yanked and twisted her own hair in an attempt to tame it, but it wouldn't be subdued. Sometimes she'd wanted to reach out and twist her sister's hair just to see what it looked like all messed up – but she never did.

Mae reached down and tucked the blanket tighter around the baby, so she wouldn't get cold. “She had lots of friends, even though she was a serious student – not a cut-up, like me.” Mae smiled at the memory of the time she was caught imitating Mrs. Schultz, her high school home economics teacher, by Mrs. Schultz. Ivy scolded her for her disrespect. “Ivy would never, ever get four demerits for making fun of a teacher.”

Even though the baby didn't understand a word she said, Mae wanted her to know she loved Ivy, that she'd envied her, fought with her, and, some days, swore she hated her – though she couldn't bear to think too much about that now her sister was dead.



The buggy wheels crunched over fallen leaves as Mae, caught up in her words, pushed it slowly, stopping to lean her head into the buggy as she spoke. “Your mother read more books than I ever did, more than any of us did,” Mae said. “I can see her laying across her bed with her nose buried in the pages of Melville or Dickens. She even read all of *David Copperfield*.” The baby’s eyes seemed to focus on her. “Ivy was elected president of the Honors Literary Society at school, even though a boy usually got that spot.” She had been happy for her sister, until the twentieth time she’d heard their mother tell a friend at church or someone she met in a store how Ivy won the position.

Ivy could do so many things well it was hard to keep track of them all. She could sew practical items like aprons, could crochet fancy doilies, and embroider table runners, while Mae’s skirt hems came out crooked and her doilies bunched and crumpled. Ivy could grow all sorts of plants and herbs – rosemary, basil, African violets – while Mae’s pansies and nasturtiums shriveled and died, despite the careful attention she paid them.

Mostly Mae didn’t care that Ivy was better at so many things, but she did wish a little she could draw and paint the way Ivy could – soft watercolors, still life arrangements of kitchen jars and bowls, pencil sketches of Maurice, the big Shire horse that had been Mae’s favorite growing up. Their mother had two of these sketches framed in the front parlor and several tacked up to the wall in the front hallway. Mae’s own drawings were nothing more than smudgy figures with blobby heads or silly doodles she made in the margins of her composition book.

But what Mae could do, that Ivy never could, was get up in front of people and perform. “Ivy could read Shakespeare, but when it came to acting out the scenes, she froze,” Mae said. Lily still hadn’t fallen asleep; she looked up at Mae, turning her head

from side to side to watch her. Mae stopped the buggy at the end of the lane and, in a loud voice, recited several lines from what she thought might be a Shakespeare play, but couldn't remember for sure. When she finished, she spread her arms wide and whirled about, her dark wool skirt and bobbed hair rising and falling as she turned. She made a low curtsy and laughed at the memory of her friends clapping wildly, more wildly than she deserved. "I don't know how this talent could help me raise a baby, but it's something I can do, something your mother couldn't." It seemed odd that such a petty thing should cross her mind now.

Recovering her breath, Mae leaned closer into the buggy and reached down to stroke Lily's hand. Her voice almost a whisper, she said, "Your mother and I fought sometimes, over silly things like dresses and hats and whose turn it was to gather eggs. We could make Mama and Papa mad with our bickering sometimes. But I'm glad she was my sister. I miss her."

She looked out into the pasture where her father was still crouched at the end of a row of corn. "I know Mama and Papa are supposed to love all of us the same, but I think Mama has a special place in her heart for Ivy. She was the first girl, 'mama's little girl,' and she was always so well behaved and so lovely." Mae had come to believe that after baby Clara died, her mother simply turned all her love and care toward Ivy, as though she could protect the girl from harm and thereby shield herself from additional pain.

Mae turned the baby buggy around and pushed it slowly back in the direction of the house. Overhead somewhere, a mourning dove cooed – a soft, comforting sound. Mae knew she had to return to the house though she wasn't sure she wanted to talk to her mother, not after being out in the open air, enjoying the peace.

By the time they returned to the house, Mama was well into making applesauce. Mae put Lily into the bassinette under the window. The kitchen was warm from the steam, so she shed her sweater. In the last few weeks, Mama had stewed quarts of tomatoes, canned summer squash, and made pint after pint of blackberry and red raspberry jam. There was still apple butter and corn relish to make; then there would be pumpkin butter. Though Mama never asked for help, Mae felt it was expected. She didn't mind canning, though peeling apples became boring after a while and some days she'd rather sit in the overstuffed chair in the parlor and read a book. But this was the routine for now -- while the baby napped, before Papa came in for lunch, Mae and Mama would work in the kitchen, putting up the farm produce for the winter. Mae pulled an apron from the drawer and sat at the table opposite her mother.

"Is your father still looking for seed corn?" Mama didn't look up from her work, her hands wet with juice, the paring knife deftly cutting the tart, tender flesh of each apple.

"Yeh, he's lost in the field somewhere," Mae said. She began to fill her own pan with apple slices. They didn't talk much during these mornings together in the kitchen, Mama's silence seeming to deepen a little every day since Ivy died.

As she sat across the table from Mama, Mae thought how her own grief at Ivy's death had been loud, angry and tearful, too showy for some people they knew. That grief had subsided gradually as she worked to take care of Lily, the only thing she could think to do for her sister. Mama rarely picked up Lily and she left feeding and bathing chores to Mae or Lucy. She never played with the baby, but Mae told herself Mama was too busy for that sort of thing. Besides, with her and Lucy and Violet and the boys, Reggie,

Harold, and Matthew, around, Lily got plenty of attention. Still Mae tried to encourage Mama.

“Mama, Lily’s so happy when she first wakes up from her nap. She might like rocking with you on the porch swing.”

“After I finish this applesauce I have to hem a dress for Lucy. And I’m expecting Mrs. Fryslie to come by and pick up the linens I embroidered for the church bazaar. There’s the chicken to clean and get in the oven for supper.” She glanced up at Mae, then reached for another apple, knocking over the salt shaker.

Mae waited for her to toss some of the spilled salt over her left shoulder, then handed her a damp dishtowel to clean the rest up with. Mae never understood the sense in throwing salt over a shoulder when you’d just have to sweep it up off the floor. She could only guess that the thought that the devil might be lingering right behind you made it worth the extra trouble.

“I can hem the dress or clean the chicken for you. It’s no trouble, really.”

“I don’t have time to idle away in the rocking chair. Your father will be bringing in more apples this afternoon and I still haven’t gotten to that corn relish.” She moved to the stove and began lowering a new batch of canning jars into the boiling water. “Mae, you shouldn’t get too attached to Lily. Once she’s old enough, she’ll go to live with her father.”

Mae wondered when Lloyd would be ready to care for an infant. The last time she saw him, three months after Ivy’s death, he was still swallowed up by his own pain. He held Lily on his lap, but he seemed to look at the baby as if he didn’t know what to do with her, as if she wasn’t quite real. How much could he have changed in the last three

months? Besides, how could he object to his daughter being well-cared for by people who love her.

“Lloyd won’t be ready to take Lily any time soon,” Mae said, becoming irritated. Hadn’t she been the one to step in to take care of the child when she was most needed?

“Well, when he does want her, I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

Mae knew she was supposed to say something like “When Lloyd is ready for Lily, I will be happy to see her go with her father – that’s how it should be.” Instead she said, “Mama, I’ve already been hurt so much by Ivy’s death, it doesn’t matter much that I’ve fallen in love with a child that isn’t mine to keep.” Her growing anger started to get the best of her. “Who else is going to take care of her? Lucy and Violet? They’re too young and still in school all day. Lloyd? Last time we saw him, he was useless to himself – there’s no way he can look after her.” She threw stray pieces of apple peel and core into the pan in front of her. “And you won’t even touch her, Mama.”

Mama lifted her head from her work and gestured with her paring knife. “Paul graduates next year. I don’t want to see you lose him because you think you’re bound to your sister’s child.”

“Are you saying I’m going to have to choose between Lily and Paul?” It was the first time Mae had said those words aloud, the first time she’d put them together as a coherent thought, though the idea had been running around the back of her mind for some time. “I can’t believe he would make me do that,” she said. But Mae had the feeling he wasn’t the type to change his plans because of Lily, a child who wasn’t his. She didn’t know this for sure, but she was beginning to feel that soon they would need to revise their plans. .

“What would you have him do?” Mama asked. “You can’t take her to Chicago. What would he do if you both stayed here – waste his college degree working in the mill for his father?” She raised her eyebrows. “He doesn’t strike me as someone who is going to waste anything of his own – his time, his degree, his ambition.”

This was the most Mama had ever said about Paul. As much as she had been involved in Ivy’s relationship with Lloyd, she had left Mae to her own devices, seemingly indifferent to Paul. She was cordial enough to him, but Mae could tell she wasn’t really interested when she failed to ask any pointed questions about him and expressed no concerns when Mae went out with him.

Mae chafed under this sudden scrutiny and, hoping to end the conversation on her own terms, said, “I guess I’ll have to find out from him myself what he wants.” She turned away and began to chop the apples in front of her.

By the time Papa came in for lunch the bushel baskets were empty and three long rows of applesauce jars filled the kitchen counter. He inventoried the day’s work. “Smells good in here.” He moved to the sink to wash his hands for lunch. “Looks like we’ll have plenty of applesauce this winter.” Drying his hands on a dish towel, he leaned over the bassinette. “How are you today, little one?” He reached down and patted her gently on the stomach with a large hand.

Later that evening, dressed in her nightgown, her hair set in pin curls, Mae sat on her bed, pen in hand, letter paper propped on a book in her lap. She’d owed Paul a letter for more than a week, a letter she’d been too tired to write up until now.

Mama said Paul wasn’t a person to waste anything – and the way she’d emphasized the word waste sounded like she admired him for it. But Mama was wrong.

Paul loved her; afterall, he'd come home when Ivy died to comfort her. And he'd offered to help her father make the funeral arrangements.

Paul knew Lily was important to her – but if he didn't know just how attached Mae had become to the child, that was Mae's own fault. It was up to her to make him understand that she was now willing to rearrange her life and plans to make sure Lily remained a part of it. And if Mama was right and Paul coming back to Iowa Rapids to be with her and Lily would be a waste of his time, she needed to know that. But Mama, without knowing it, had supplied a possible solution to the problem, a change to their plans that, the more Mae thought about it, could work out well for all of them.

*Dear Paul,*

*I'm sorry to take so long to answer your letter, but I've bee busy here. Mama and I have been canning every day for more than a week now. Papa and the hired man are bringing in the fall crops. Reggie's having trouble with one of his goats -- something is wrong with its foot.*

*How are your classes? Did you get that math class figured out? I know you'll do just fine. .*

*Lily is fine, getting bigger. She sleeps through the night now and seems to enjoy being outside. I know you won't be home until Thanksgiving, so I wanted to let you know something I've been thinking about – something I want you to consider. What do you think about taking Lily with us to Chicago? Her father can't care for her and we could offer her a good life there – better education, better opportunities.*

A knock at the open bedroom door interrupted Mae. Lucy, squinting sleepily at her, stood in the doorway.

“Lily's fussing and keeping me awake.”

Engrossed in her letter, Mae hadn't heard the baby's whimpering coming from the cradle. It was already after eleven-thirty and she wanted to finish the letter for tomorrow's mail, but if she didn't see to Lily shortly she might never get her back to sleep. "Lucy, just rock her cradle a few times and I'll take over in a minute."

"I'm going back to bed," Lucy whined and disappeared down the hall.

Mae dropped the pen down onto the letter, leaving an ink smudge in the middle of it. Lily's whimpering was growing louder. Mae rose from the desk and walked quickly to the cradle and grabbed up the fussing child. She walked up and down the hall, jiggling Lily against her shoulder until she fell asleep.

The next morning, Mae walked to the end of the lane, Lily propped on one hip, to mail the letter to Paul. She hadn't detailed in the letter all the points she wanted to make, but she felt sure Paul would be willing to talk about it. Once the letter was in the mailbox and she'd walked away from it, Mae felt strangely empty, and wandered back up the lane, moving almost aimlessly. She found her father in the barn, working on one of the tractors. He crouched on the ground, reaching up into the motor, both hands covered in grease. She watched him work for a while, following his hands as he checked all the valves, hoses, and belts, his movements quick and sure. She would soon be as competent with Lily as he was with his machinery and his corn and his livestock.

The sound of wagon wheels crunching gravel as they rolled up the lane interrupted Mae's thoughts. A small mare came into view and behind the horse she saw Joe Marshall sitting straight and high in the wagon seat.

"He's come to see about buying Maurice," Mae's father said.



Maurice was their plow horse, but he had been underused the last few years, ever since her father bought the gas-powered tractor. The horse was still young and healthy enough to be worth something, but Mae wondered if her father was selling Maurice because he didn't see the sense in feeding an animal he didn't need or if he was doing it as some kind of favor to Joe Marshall.

Papa knew Sam Marshall, Joe's father, though they weren't in the threshing ring together. They attended the same church, though and the Allinsons had helped the Marshall family after Joe's father had fell ill. Mae's father had taken Joe under his wing, sharing his knowledge and experience with the younger man, but Joe didn't come to the Allinson farm often; most of the business between the two men was conducted at the Marshall's place or in town. Mae knew Joe had managed the dairy herd from the time of his father's illness, when he was only fifteen. After that time, Mae rarely saw him at school and she wasn't sure if he'd finished or gotten his diploma. As she recalled, he'd been sweet on a girl named Annie Flynn, but there had been that trouble with her family and they'd left town.

Mae recognized the way Joe sat so erect in the wagon seat – it was the way he'd sat on the schoolhouse benches, as though he had an iron rod running up the back of his shirt. He was two years ahead of her and a little more bookish than most of the other boys, not one to run around the schoolyard pulling the girls' pigtails. At one time she'd thought perhaps he'd become a teacher or a scientist – either way, someone who worked indoors.

As he drew nearer, Mae was struck by how much Joe Marshall looked like a farmer. It wasn't simply his lean, calloused hands or the way his forearms and neck were

tanned while his forehead and upper arms remained pale. It seemed as if working the land had molded his body, shaped him and determined the way he moved, the way he jumped down easily from the wagon and casually stroked the mare's neck as he walked by. His neck and shoulders had thickened with the hard work and she could see the beginnings of the paunch farm men seemed to develop by middle-age, as though the physical labor was no match for the heavy, home-cooked food. Mae knew it was Joe's mother who cooked for him and that he had no wife or children at home. Yet he seemed to have settled into his life just fine and Mae was surprised to find she was disappointed in him for that.

Joe walked up and held out a hand to Mae's father, who shook it. Mae shifted Lily on her hip and started to extend her own hand, but Joe only nodded to her in greeting

"How's the herd?" Papa asked.

"Fine," Joe replied. "Everyone's healthy right now."

Papa turned and started toward the barn. "So, you still think you need Maurice?" he asked over his shoulder. Mae knew it was his casual way of asking if Joe had the money for the animal. Joe seemed to know it, too.

"We sold off that bit of land across the county road, the little parcel we couldn't figure out what to do with. Dad didn't want to, but Uncle Rex got him to sign the papers."

Mae didn't know what price her father was asking for Maurice, if it was a fair market price or something less. He didn't treat the Marshall's as a charity case, none of the Allinson's did. What they did for the Marshall's was simply what one farmer did for another – or, as some might put it, what one Christian did for another. But she wasn't

sure if Joe ever really thanked her father for his help -- but perhaps he'd been working so hard himself, he'd not taken the time to appreciate what he'd received.

Mae followed the men into the barn, Lily straddling her hip, her pudgy fingers tangled in the shoulder strap of Mae's apron. The warm, musky smell of animal bodies mixed with the sharp scent of dried straw always comforted Mae, but she lingered behind for only a moment to let Lily look at Beatrice, the bay mare. If Joe Marshall was going to take Maurice away today, she wanted to be there to make sure the horse was treated well.

When she reached Maurice's stall, her father was leaning against the open door while Joe crouched next to Maurice, inspecting the horse's rear fetlock. Maurice was a large and powerful draft animal with heavy muscles, wide feet, and a glossy, black coat. Despite his size, he was amiable and easy to keep. Papa always said that about him. Now Mae wondered why they were no longer keeping him.

Maurice came to the farm as a two-year-old colt, when Mae was fourteen. He was the first animal who made her think maybe animals had souls, that they were individuals, each one with its own personality. Mae was the first of the children to ride Maurice, doing so whenever she could, whenever he wasn't pulling a wagon or dragging a harrowing fork. She climbed onto his back so many times she knew all his quirks, knew how he would behave at every moment. She knew his gait, the way his knees bent hard so he could pull heavy machinery, but she also felt the swift contractions and extensions of his muscles as he moved swiftly with her on his back, as though she were no burden at all. She understood the banging insistence of his white-blazed muzzle nudging her hand, wanting her attention and not judging her the way her teacher, parents, and the adults at church did. Maurice didn't care if her schoolwork was done correctly, if her hair was

neat, or if her prayers were genuine enough. Looking into the dark eyes of that horse, Mae felt she was looking soul of another being, content with just that feeling, even if she couldn't know what he was thinking. But despite all the things she knew about Maurice, she also knew he was always a farm commodity – and now, for some reason, he had to go.

Papa ran his hand over Maurice's withers, across his back, and down his flank. "Strong bones. He's got plenty of muscle, and he's never been sick a day in his life," he said.

Joe stood and rested a hand on the horse's hind quarter. Maurice didn't move. "If you're still willing to take the price we talked about earlier, then I'll take him."

"That price is fine," Papa said. "I've got to find his lead," he said and disappeared into the tack room. Mae heard him rummaging around, looking for the bit and leather strap Joe would need to tie Maurice to the back of the wagon and lead him home. Joe waited. He seemed to ignore Mae, intent on grooming Maurice by pulling small burrs from his coat and stray hairs from his mane while the horse stood patiently, occasionally flicking his tail at a fly.

"Why do you need this horse?" Mae asked.

Joe bent over, squeezed the muscle of Maurice's hind leg, and lifted his hoof to inspect it, though he'd examined the animal's hooves earlier. "Our old draft horse had to be put down." There was a note of defensiveness in his voice, as if he thought she was questioning his ability to manage his own farm, but Mae kept on at him.

"You know you're getting a good price, don't you?" she asked.

“I know that,” he said. “But maybe I’m also saving your father the trouble of having to take him to auction. Waiting to see if he sell, bringing him back if he doesn’t.”

Joe dropped Maurice’s hoof and straightened up. He circled the horse, passing Mae without looking at her, and began prying Maurice’s lips open, as if to look again at the animal’s teeth. Maurice resisted, pulling his head back.

Mae grabbed Joe’s hands away from the horse’s muzzle and thrust Lily into his arms. “No, like this.” She rubbed around his nose and under his chin, then gently opened Maurice’s lips to reveal his large, ivory teeth. “Is this what you’re looking for?”

Joe backed away from the horse, Lily twisting awkwardly in his arms. Mae took the wriggling child from him. He turned away from her so that she could only see the side of his face.

“How is your father?” Though she doubted Sam Marshall’s condition had changed much since the last report she’d heard about him, but Mae couldn’t resist asking. Everyone knew that for the last few years he’d been about the same – unable to work, his lungs too crippled to allow him to walk very far without stopping for rest.

Joe plucked a piece of hay from a splinter in the wooden rail of the stall. He twisted it between his long fingers, working it until it frayed into pieces. Just about the time Mae thought he wasn’t going to answer her, he said, “He’s about the same.”

She thought of the old man, stooped over, his ailing chest sunken in. He would be weak and coughing up blood. “Is he able to do anything?” She remembered Ivy’s last days, as she lay pale and almost motionless in the bed, unable to do anything for herself.

“He sits on the porch when it’s warm enough, by the fireplace when it’s cold.”

Mae waited for him to say more. She was being considerate by asking after his father, but he didn't seem interested in the conversation. Lily shifted in her arms and started to make a chuckling noise. Joe seemed intent on the piece of hay. "I suppose his lungs are breaking down as he gets older," she said. If she could sit by Ivy's bed for days watching her sister's body fail, then he could tell her something about what he saw happening to his father.

A scowl flashed across his face and he dropped the piece of hay. Crossing his arms, he looked past Mae and out the barn door. "It's not his lungs that worry me. It's his mind. It's going."

"Why? What's he doing?" She thought she knew something about a mind on the verge of breaking.

"He shouts about stuff that happened years ago. Flies into rages about people who are long gone. Cursing people he thinks wronged him." Maurice began to turn, his massive body shifting around the stall until Joe and Mae were forced to stand close to its door. Joe gripped the rail with one hand, the thumb of the other hand scratching a crooked line along the wood. "Half the time I don't know what he's talking about."

"Even though Ivy's been dead for six months, my mother talks to her as if she's still here," Mae said.

"People do that all the time, talk to people who aren't there."

"Maybe." She jiggled Lily in her arms, trying to make the child smile.

"She misses Ivy, that's natural." Joe said. "Lily's a beautiful baby," he added, as if trying to turn the conversation back to something more comfortable.

Mae turned away from him. “That’s what everyone says about babies, whether it’s true or not.” She supposed he said that to be nice, but she didn’t care that he was being nice. What was so strange to her was the sound of his voice saying Ivy’s name. No one outside the family spoke of Ivy anymore.

Papa came back carrying Maurice’s lead and handed it to Joe. Mae watched as he pulled the bridle over the Maurice’s head and buckled it, but she hitched Lily higher up on her hip and walked out of the stall before he could guide the horse out of the stall. She didn’t want to see Maurice tethered to the back of the Marshall’s wagon, being led away.

Several days later, Mae met Reggie coming up the lane on his way home from school, the day’s mail in his hand. In the small stack was a letter from Paul telling her that he was busy with his studies and might not have time to write her again for a few weeks, but that he would be home at Thanksgiving. If not then, Christmas for sure.

## Late June, 1925

From where Mae stood in the vegetable garden, she could see her father crouched by the first row of corn at the near end of the west cornfield. Though she couldn't see his hands, she knew what he was doing – gauging the moisture in the soil with his fingers, poking for air pockets around the roots of the plants, and scrabbling through the loose dirt to make sure there was enough rotting vegetation to nourish the young corn.

The corn was now five inches tall and required Papa's closest attention. June was the month in which he most fervently practiced his faith, cultivating row after row of the small plants each week, the disc cultivator breaking the soil's dark crust and churning it until it seemed to froth. Papa was as regular about cultivating as he was about church. Cultivation was the central tenet of his faith and he preached it so often the children could recite as a litany that cultivation kept moisture in the soil, killed weeds that choked the young corn, and fed the corn so it would grow. This morning Papa was testing his faith by slicing into a furrow of corn with a shovel to reveal a cross-section of the soil, a cross-section that should be moist, rich, and well-aerated. From this distance Mae could not tell if his hard work and devotion had been rewarded.

April had been unseasonably hot, the temperature climbing into the low nineties at the end of the month. The heat made farmers already worn down by the last seven years of tough times more anxious about their crops. It made their wives short-tempered, and their children drowsy and slow at their chores. Then, in the first week of May, the temperature dropped to a record low of twenty-four degrees and everyone panicked that the tender, young corn plants would freeze. The animals were brought indoors and Mae



did her best to cover the garden plants with old sheets and sacks. But nothing except prayer could be offered for the corn.

But the corn survived the hard weather and now that the temperatures had returned to normal for late June -- cool nights and dry, pleasant afternoons full of sun -- Mae worked in the garden most days, Lily by her side. Lily, fifteen months old, wobbled through rows of cabbage plants and pole beans on stout legs. She'd been walking for several months, but was still unsteady, like a drunken sailor Papa said. Though it was probably too early to tell, Mae looked for Lily to be as graceful as Ivy had been. Though she was long-limbed, like both of her parents, Lily seemed clumsy, often plopping down on her backside and rolling under the tomato vines, as she did now, dirt sifting into her pale hair. Mae didn't bother to pick her up or dust her off -- she would just get dirty again staggering through the rows of carrots, churning up more dirt. The crescent-shaped mark on the side of her head had faded to a slight discoloration now hidden under her hair. No one ever saw it, though several times Mae caught Mama brushing back Lily's hair, as if to look for the mark.

Mama planned and planted the almost quarter-acre garden years ago, when Lewis, Ivy, and Mae were young children. She began by laying one long row that ran parallel to the side of the barn, then arranging the vegetables in rows by size -- lettuce, spinach, radishes, beets, and carrots at one end, tomatoes, potatoes, and pole beans at the other. Set off at one end was a bed of strawberries and raspberries; they were Mae's favorite plants to tend ever since she and Ivy were little girls stuffing every other red, juicy berry they picked into their mouths instead of putting them into the basket. Soon the berries would be ready to pick again so Mama could make them into jam. Mama never seemed

to rest from the constant routine of canning and preserving, as if she feared letting a single fruit or vegetable rot and go to waste.

The orderly arrangement of the garden reflected the reasonable part of her mother's mind, the part that believed spring vegetables were good for cleansing the blood after the heavy winter diet, not the part that grew fennel to keep evil spirits at bay. Mae leaned over the pea plants to yank a weed; she tended the peas with extra care because she liked the way the vines curled and twined around the wooden stakes that held them up.

The garden work was also a reason to be outdoors, a time for Mae to be alone with her thoughts. For the past six months, since she'd last seen Paul in December, Mae thought almost constantly about the way things were between them.

Paul came home from university for the winter break. He drove out to see her two days before Christmas. Mae stood on the front porch waiting for him, the frigid air making her lungs ache, her cold breath visible, like puffs of smoke. He pulled up the lane in his father's car, a new Hudson Essex that seemed to hint at success with every inch of its black, shiny body. Since it was too cold to take a walk, they went for a drive.

The space inside the car seemed vast, perhaps because the air around Mae was cold and the leather seat under her chilled her through the wool of her coat. Paul didn't seem to notice the temperature, his gloved hands wrapped around the steering wheel, guiding the car as if he drove it every day. When he'd arrived at the house, he'd greeted her on the porch with a hug, stiff and formal she hoped because of the cold and the heavy coats they wore. But he'd not taken her hand. He'd not stopped the car to kiss her like he

used to do when they took drives together the previous spring and summer. Before she'd always been ready to kiss him, but now she wasn't so sure. Perhaps if he smiled.

Mae started with small talk. "How's your family?" she asked.

"Fine. Mother's worried about how she'll fit everyone at the table for Christmas dinner."

"She'll sort it out, I'm sure." Mae realized she hadn't been invited to dinner at the Harper's; until this moment she hadn't noticed the missing invitation. She didn't know if it was a deliberate slight or not. His family had always been nice enough to her and they didn't flaunt their wealth, though Mae sometimes detected an air of self-satisfaction in the way they welcomed her into their home.

"And your family?" Paul asked, politely reciprocating.

"Everyone's fine at the moment," she said. "Lily is growing fast and keeping me busy. I'm exhausted when I fall into bed at night." Mae hoped the awkwardness between them would soon pass. Perhaps it was to be expected when one person went away to a new life and one stayed behind.

"This summer, I have a chance to work for a company in Ames, get some real business experience. It's a good chance for me," Paul said. "I haven't heard for sure about the job in Chicago yet, but a friend at school has an uncle with a small apartment we can rent. It's in a nice neighborhood." He turned his eyes from the road and looked at her. "Plenty of schools in Chicago. We'll have to find out if you can teach there."

His enthusiasm for this new life was seductive. The more Paul talked, describing what he already knew of Chicago and imagining what they would do there, the more she wanted it too.

But he was speaking only about the two of them. He hadn't said anything about Mae's letter, about Lily, about what their plans could mean for the little girl. Did he think she'd forgotten about what she'd written to him? Or that it somehow didn't count because it had been in a letter, not spoken between them?

"Paul, I need to talk to you about Lily." She paused and looked out the window where the rows of corn stubble rushed by the moving car. "I think there's more I can do for her – we can do for her."

"You really want to bring her to Chicago with us?"

"I do. I'm very attached to her- we belong together," Mae said. "And taking her with us would be a good opportunity for her. She could go to a better school. Have things she wouldn't have here."

"I know you feel responsible for her, that you want to do the best you can for Ivy's child." He paused a moment, concentrating on turning the car down a narrow road. "But honestly, I hadn't figured on a child as part of our plans. Sure, someday we'd have our own, but not now, not right away."

Mae didn't see the difference – a child now or a child later, but she wasn't going to say that to him. Bringing Lily with them was the perfect plan. She knew it, but she wasn't sure how to make him see it. Perhaps she should back off right now, give him time to think about it.

Outside the car, the panorama of winter fields rolled by, long patches of frozen dirt dotted with the stubble of dead cornstalks. Mae didn't usually succumb to the grayness of the Iowa winter until February, but she could already feel the weight of the horizon line where the flat gray of the sky met the flat gray of the landscape. Paul had

driven them in a roundabout route through the county and now brought the car down the county road from the north. From this direction, the Allinson's farm looked dormant, a place of quiet hibernation.

Paul stopped the car in the drive. He took off his gloves, then pulled her hands from her coat pocket. "Why do you never have gloves?" He smiled and began to rub her cold fingers between his palms. "I can see Lily needs you now. I'll give you time to figure out what you're going to do about her. We don't have to get engaged right away."

She tried to smile back at him, a brave face to mask her disappointment. "You're right. No need to rush things if we don't have to." It was all so reasonable, so thought out. That kind of rational approach was sometimes hard for her to take. She was, after all, a girl who couldn't remember to put a pair of gloves into the pocket of her winter coat.

Now when Mae thought about Paul, she wondered whether or not he still wanted to make their engagement official. They hadn't talked about it in the last six months; in fact, they'd hardly talked about anything at all. They exchanged letters and talked on the telephone several times, but kept things light, more an exchange of news than real conversation. He would be finished and come back from Ames by the end of the summer. She was trying to think of ways she might persuade Paul that taking Lily with them was a good idea when the little girl's small voice called out to her.

"Mae."

Not "Mama," not "Aunt Mae." When the time had come to teach Lily what to call her, Mae realized she had to choose a name for herself. She never dreamed of suggesting "Mama" or "Mother." "Mae" just seemed natural—easier to say than "Aunt Mae," a title

that would have made Mae feel too old. Mama insisted Lily call her “Grandmama.” It wasn’t as formal as “Grandmother,” but Mae thought something like “Gran” or “Gamma” would be easier for the little girl to say. Perhaps Mama would prefer it if Lily never learned to call her anything.

Mae turned to see Lily holding up something in her small fist. Mae held out her hand, palm open to accept whatever it was she offered. Often it was a rock, a shriveled root, or a leaf. This time Lily’s fingers uncurled to reveal a small, brown beetle. It dropped into Mae’s hand. “Thank you, Lily. I’m going to put him over here in the grass, where he belongs.” By the time she brushed the insect off, Lily had crawled under the tomato plants, the beetle forgotten.

More and more, Mae took Lily into the garden with her to keep the toddler out of Mama’s way. She tried to keep the two of them apart because her mother no longer bothered to conceal her animosity toward the child, and Mae was concerned that as Lily began to understand words and tone of voice, she would come to know how much Mama blamed her for Ivy’s death.

Papa walked up from the cornfield and stopped at the edge of the garden plot. “I came to admire your work,” he said.

He always spoke in terms of work, but Mae understood it was how he told her he approved of what she was doing. “I’ve had a lot of help,” she said, glancing at Lily, whose dirt-covered backside still stuck out from under a tomato plant. “How are things out there?” She nodded toward the field.

“I think we’re okay.” There were still black streaks of soil on his hands. “Let’s hope there’s more rain and no violent storms or, God forbid, hail.” Whenever her father

gave a status report about the farm, however tight things might be, he always made her feel as if things would be fine.

Of course, a serious hailstorm while the plants were still small could devastate the crop. It would destroy the tender garden fruits and vegetables, too. If Mama heard him just now, she would have scolded Papa for mentioning hail, believing that by saying it aloud he could cause just such a disaster to come to pass. Mae simply nodded in agreement and bent over to pull another scraggily weed.

That evening, as Mae was putting Lily to bed and Lucy and Violet cleared away the supper dishes, Lloyd Whitsett, turned up at the door. Papa ushered him into the front parlor, the only formal room in the house. Most of the family felt out of place in the parlor with its oriental carpet and lamps with the frosted globes; as Mae stood in the doorway looking at Lloyd, she thought he looked particularly awkward on the curved-back Victorian sofa, his lanky frame bent just to fit.

His face was ruddy and his dark blonde hair was too long over his ears. He appeared dirty – not from recent farm work, but as if he hadn't washed in some time, as if the dirt somehow merged permanently with his skin. He looked forty, not twenty-five.

She couldn't recall exactly how long it had been since they last saw him – six months, at least. After Ivy died, Lloyd fell apart – not sleeping or eating, only drinking and getting into fights. Mae remembered vaguely what his grief had looked like as she had been so consumed by her own. She recalled him once, in the weeks after, sitting alone on the parlor sofa, where he sat now. He'd cradled Lily awkwardly in his arms, his fingers fidgeting with the edge of her blanket, the shock of being a widower with an infant daughter apparent in the way he looked at the baby, as if she'd fallen from the sky.

He might have appeared lost then, and he might seem that way right now, but Mae knew Lloyd was capable of rising in anger. She'd seen it when he'd been shut out of Ivy's sick room, forced to wait outside the door until the doctor, Mama, or Mae gave him word about his wife's condition. Once, toward the end, he'd stood in front of the bedroom door as Mama tried to enter, insisting again he be allowed to see Ivy.

"You can't help her now," Mama said, her voice low and her lips tight.

"She's my wife. You can't keep me from her." Lloyd gripped Mama by the shoulder and leaned his face into hers. "I'll take her out of here myself," he said.

Mae could see the knuckles whiten as his fingers dug into her shoulder. Her mother didn't wince. Instead she brought her arm up with enough force to knock his hand away, at the same time turning and grabbing the doorknob. Before Lloyd could move, she was inside the bedroom, the sound of the key turning in the lock signaling the end of the discussion. Lloyd turned away from the door, pushed past Mae, and fled down the stairs. On his way out, he slammed the front door back against its hinges with enough force to crack the wood.

Now Mama sat in the straight-backed chair across the room from the sofa, watching Lloyd even more closely than Mae did. Papa stood, leaning a shoulder against the fireplace mantle, no doubt aware that by doing so he seemed to fill the small parlor. He spoke first.

"Have you got work?"

Right to the point, Mae thought. No pleasantries, no small talk.



Lloyd looked up from his lap. "I'm working on a farm over in Willmont. Farmer there lost a man in an accident, so I picked up his spot. The wages aren't much, but guess I'm lucky to have it."

"That's good," Papa said. He turned to look out the window. "What can we do for you?" Mae knew this was his polite way of asking 'What do you want?' It was the question on all of their minds.

"I want to know how Lily is," Lloyd said.

"She's fine," Papa said. "Healthy. Growing like a weed."

"Can I see her?"

Papa glanced at Mae. "She's in bed now."

Lloyd was silent a moment. Then he drew in his breath and sat up straight on the sofa. "I want to have my daughter with me."

The moment Mae always knew was coming was now here, and as often as she'd imagined it, trying to prepare herself, she wasn't ready. Her stomach turned over and jittery waves of panic rippled through her body like wind through a field of grass. Why did he want her now? Why did he want a child he hardly knew? She gripped the door jamb and waited for Papa to speak.

Papa looked down into the unlit fireplace. "No, Lily should stay here with us for right now," he said. "Mae is looking after her well enough. Besides, what do you know about taking care of a child?"

"Not much, I guess, but I could figure it out," Lloyd said. He shifted on the sofa, as if trying to unfold his awkward limbs to make himself look bigger. "She's my daughter. She belongs with me."

The note in Lloyd's voice was one of pleading, the sound of pure want. It didn't matter why he wanted Lily or that he couldn't care for her properly. It wasn't logical – it was simply a desire and Mae recognized it.

“Where you live is no place for a child,” Papa said.

“Then I'll find somewhere else.”

“Where? Your family isn't going to help you. Your mother is gone, your sister lives hundreds of miles away, and your father won't have anything to do with you since you started running for that bootlegger.”

Surprise flickered across Lloyd's face but he didn't look away. “I gave that up months ago,” he said.

“That may be,” Papa said, “but people around here have long memories.”

Mae had always felt sorry for Lloyd before – he'd been hurt enough already. But now she felt a growing urge to lash out at him, to hurt him herself. It all came in a rush of words. “Lily's happy here with me. She doesn't know you – you're a stranger to her.” Her legs shook as she stepped close to Lloyd. “Ivy would want me to have Lily.”

“Mae, stop it.” Mama finally spoke.

Mae turned and caught Mama's eye, but couldn't read her expression. She stepped back into the doorway and waited for Mama to say what she had to say. Papa's word was usually law, but it was possible Mama might take Lloyd's side as a way of getting Lily out of her house.

“Lloyd, it has been difficult caring for Lily,” Mama said.

Mae believed that what she really wanted to say was “That child took away my child and I don’t want to look at her. Take her.” Would she really pack a toddler off with a man who could barely take care of himself?

“But I can see you’re in no condition to take her off our hands. Perhaps after you remarry,” Mama went on. “Until then, she stays with us.”

Lloyd’s head jerked up. “Remarry?” He looked from Mama’s face to Papa’s, as if he hoped to find an explanation there.

Mae hadn’t thought about Lloyd remarrying, but she knew it was true that most widowers married again within a couple of years, especially if they had children. Now that Mama had brought up remarriage as a condition for having Lily, a condition Lloyd clearly could not meet, Mae could see exactly where her mother stood -- Mama’s desire to punish Lloyd for taking Ivy from her was somehow greater than her need to push Lily out of the house.

“Who would I marry?” Lloyd asked. His eyes darted around the room, his gaze flitting over Mae. His body seemed to rock a little back and forth as he spoke. “I could marry Mae, work here on the farm with you.” He looked directly at Papa. “Get my life straightened out and be around my daughter.”

Papa snorted and opened his mouth to reply, but Mae cut him off.

“If you think I’m going to assume my sister’s entire life, her husband as well as her child, as if it were some old hand-me-down dress, Lloyd Whitsett, you’re wrong.” Her legs shook and she stood rooted in the parlor doorway, refusing to get any closer to him. “How dare you even suggest such a thing. It’s disgusting.” She turned and fled up the stairs to her bedroom.

A few minutes later, Mae heard the sound of the front door closing as Lloyd was ushered out of the house. She sat on the edge of her bed waiting for the tears to come. She had tried to prepare herself for this day by picturing, over and over, Lily being taken away, like one might repeatedly prick a finger to toughen the skin. It brought her to tears every time and still she felt no tougher.

As she got ready for bed, Mae tried to measure the changes in Lloyd. He seemed to have lost everything. The bootlegging was news to her; that he had been involved in something illegal and dangerous made it all the more strange he would come and ask for Lily. And that he would suggest she marry him made him seem almost crazy. But she knew there was a cord of strength running through him. She'd seen it when his mother died of influenza in 1918 while visiting his older sister in Milwaukee. Lloyd helped his grieving, confused father through the two day trip to pick up her body, calmly telling Ivy that it was what he had to do for his family. Lloyd was the kind of man who plodded on, banged his head against the wall until he got what he wanted. He'd asked Ivy to school dances, box socials, and church fairs for nearly two years before she finally said yes to him. Maybe this kind of doggedness was something Ivy liked about him, but right now it was a problem. He could be shoved off for the time being, but she knew he would gather himself.

While she truly believed taking Lily to Chicago was in the best interest of the little girl, Mae knew that might cause some to say she was stealing the child. But that was not her intent. Certainly Lloyd would be able to find Lily – she would not be hidden away. But what Mae also understood was that he might not look too hard for his daughter, especially if his life remained in as much upheaval as it was now. As she lay

awake in bed, Mae wondered where Lloyd Whitsett was right now, out there in the dark, and when he'd be back.

The July 4th holiday, a few days later, brought Paul home for several days. Mae planned to meet him in town, by the band shelter in Emmons Park, before the Independence Day celebrations began. In the morning, the whole family set out for town early, eager to get there well before the ten o'clock start of the parade so they could get a good spot along the street to watch from. Mama and Papa rode in the truck; Lewis drove the wagon with the children in the back. Mae rode up front on the wagon bench with Lily on her lap.

The Iowa Bluffs Independence Day festivities were not what they had been in their heyday, back in 1915, when as many as fifteen thousand people walked, drove cars and wagons, or rode the special trains in from the surrounding small towns. They came to watch the parade of floats, cars, wagons, bikes, and ponies, all wrapped and draped in red, white, and blue banners. They came to hear area high school bands play "The Star-Spangled Banner" and "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." They came to be moved by the oration of Senator M.L. Fletcher and to applaud Lulu Boatwright's dramatic reading of The Declaration of Independence. Back in 1915, they had packed the grass around the baseball field to watch the Iowa Bluffs team whip the Hampton team, 21-2. The high point of that day had been the flight of an airship, brought in specially from Chicago, over the ball field. The day ended with a local talent contest that paid cash prizes, followed by open air dancing late into the warm summer night. Mae was too young then to stay out late, though her father let her and Ivy dance the first dance before they left for home.

But ever since the country made its alliance with England in 1917, at the height of the Great War, town fathers across the Midwest thought it best to tone down the celebration of the country's rebellion and break from Great Britain. And the post-war troubles that hit farmers meant there was less money for parade floats, band instruments, and grand orators. When folks worried about their crops and income, they didn't travel all that way on the train for a one-day celebration.

But the holiday was still enough to lure Paul home, though Mae wasn't sure about meeting him in the park, in such a public place, knowing what she had to say to him. Paul might be her only chance to keep Lily. She had agreed with him when he suggested they hold off on their engagement, but her feelings for Lily had not changed. Now the matter seemed more urgent than ever. She had no reason to believe Paul had changed his mind. She loved them both and her suggestion to bring Lily with them would let her have both. Why couldn't he see that? Why did he object so to Lily? She had to try again to make him see it her way. Her stomach churned and she gripped the side of the wagon bench.

The jarring of the wagon stopped as Lewis guided the wagon into a spot on River Street, two blocks from Emmons Park. Mae lifted Lily down from the wagon seat, her hands under the toddler's arms, squeezing her torso. The little girl, excited by the ride, laughed and kicked her legs as Mae tried to balance the child on her hip. Mae was glad she was so exuberant; maybe if Paul could see the joy in her, he would understand everything.

People were beginning to gather on River Street, making their way toward the park. Mae followed behind the rest of the family, stopping periodically to shift Lily to the other hip. She hoped she could split off from the others and find Paul on her own, but

Mama and Lucy seemed to be hanging back also, matching her measured stride. They walked through the park gate closest to the band shell.

“There’s Paul,” Lucy said, pointing toward the large elm tree that spread its shade over the audience benches in front of the band shell. Paul stood under the tree talking to a man Mae didn’t recognize.

As they approached, he turned toward them and Mae thought how different he looked. The contours of his face were still familiar, still handsome with the olive skin and deep set brown eyes she recognized. But he looked strange to her – not simply older, but different in some way. Perhaps it was the way his hair was smoothed back instead of flopping into his eyes, or the way he held his head now, lifted slightly so his chin jutted forward. Mae wondered if this was how people changed when they had been away from their home too long.

“Hello, Mae,” he said. “Mrs. Allinson.” He nodded toward Mae’s mother.

Mama turned to Mae and extended her arms toward Lily. “I’ll take her with me.”

Mae leaned into her mother, shifting Lily’s weight away from her body, but the child clung to her blouse with one hand. Her other hand gripped the top of Mae’s bare arm, the small fingers pinching until they turned red. Lily began to whimper.

“Let me try,” Lucy said. “Come with me, Lily,” she said in her most playful voice, her hands reaching toward the little girl.

Lily turned her face away and buried it in Mae’s shoulder. Fearing Lily’s good mood would evaporate, Mae jostled her gently up and down and patted her back. “It’s okay, she can stay with me.”

Mama frowned at her, but Mae refused to meet her eyes. Mama put a hand on each of Lucy's shoulders and led her off through the crowd.

Mae turned to Paul. There would be no hug, the fact of Lily's clinging body coming between them. The girl had stopped whimpering but the closeness of her, coupled with the humidity of the summer morning, made Mae sweat, little rivulets running down her neck and between her breasts. Soon she would have to set Lily down, if the child would let her.

"Is she afraid of strangers – or just me?" Paul asked with a quick smile.

"She's shy today. The crowds, the movement, and all the loud voices," Mae said. "It's not you."

At the sound of his voice, Lily turned her head to look at Paul. Her expression was blank, as if she was still assessing this man, trying to determine if she liked him or not.

Anxious to show Paul that the little girl need not come between them, Mae began to unclamp Lily's fingers, cooing in her ear to soothe the child. Once the little fingers were loose, Mae bent and set her feet on the ground. The red, white, and blue cotton bunting that hung from the back of the park bench soon caught her attention. She ducked under it, then peeked out, giggling when she caught Mae's eye.

They sat down on the bench. Mae felt the tension between them like the static in the air before a summer rainstorm. People streamed by them – girls and women in summer white, boys in short pants and straw hats. They were leaving the park to line the streets for the parade that would wind down Washington Avenue, turn north on River Street and end near the ball field.



Paul ignored the little girl and turned to look Mae in the eye. “Mae, I know somebody has to take care of Lily, but why does it have to be you?”

“Because I’m the only one who can do it right now. Not my mother, not my father, not my sisters.” She added, “It doesn’t *have* to be me. I want it to be me.”

“Doesn’t her father want her back?”

“He’s in no condition to take her. Besides, he doesn’t feel about her the way I do.”

“You say he’s in no condition – how do I know that?”

“You think I can’t tell when someone can or can’t care for a child?” Mae asked. “Or you think I’m lying to you about him.” She stared down at the pavement in front of the bench, tears prickling behind her eyes.

“No, I don’t think you’re lying. I’m just not sure how clearly you see things,” he said. “So you’re going to give up everything we planned for all of them?”

“I was hoping I wouldn’t have to give up everything. I was hoping you would change your mind, that we could take her with us.” She hesitated, glancing at him. “That we could set up housekeeping with Lily.”

She waited for him to ask her why she felt this way, but he didn’t. She drew a quick breath and went on. “You think – if you think about it at all – that I’m ridiculous for wanting my sister’s child.” She held her breath, but Paul didn’t say anything. He sat looking straight ahead, as if he were interested in the passing crowd. “Lily’s a part of Ivy. The least I can do for my sister is take care of her child.” She stopped short of adding that she often felt guilty that she was the one still alive, that caring for Lily felt like a kind of

penance. He didn't need to know that -- and the idea of sacrificing herself for Lily's sake would be foreign to him anyway.

"I'm going to Chicago once I graduate," Paul said. "I want you to come with me -- just you. I want to do all the things we talked about." He turned to look at her. "I'm just not ready for a child."

"I didn't realize until just now how little you cared about what I want," Mae said. The tears were about to come.

"I don't think it's fair to say I don't care just because I don't want what you want. I'm not even sure why you want it -- you know you're going to lose her someday."

Maybe it had always been like this, that the things they talked about both wanting were really only the things Paul wanted. Perhaps she'd been too enamored of him, of his good looks, of the way he'd paid attention to her to notice how much it was he who had determined so much of what happened between them.

As if to soften the blow of his words, Paul leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. Mae was only aware of Paul's face hovering somewhere near hers; she couldn't actually feel the sensation of his lips. So he would go to Chicago without her. As she watched him get up from the bench and walk away, she realized that the idea of his leaving didn't raise in her nearly the kind of gut-wrenching panic the thought of losing Lily did.

The parade had ended and people were streaming back into the park and filling the seats in anticipation of the band concert. Mae picked Lily up and fought her way through the crowd and out the park gate. She was halfway back to the spot on River Street where the wagon was tied up when she started to cry. She'd never been able to

bend the world, or the people in it, to her will before. Why did she think she could do it now?

She walked farther down River Street, her quick, rocking stride seeming to fill her body with frustration, rather than letting it out. She held Lily close to her body, jostling the child with each step. Partially blinded by tears and only half aware of where she was, Mae turned down the short, unnamed alley that ran dead-end into the river.

Several children came running toward them across the swing bridge that spanned the river at this point. Their footsteps clattered on the planks and the bridge swayed from the force of their moving bodies. The bridge was more or less safe, with sturdy railings and a cross-hatch of wooden rails that mostly kept children from falling in the river. Mae had heard the stories – the toddler who slipped between the slats, the teenage boy who climbed onto the rail and tumbled in. The small child sank like a stone, but there had been some hope of saving the youth if they could pull him out before he hit the rapids. Sadly, by the time they got to him, the rapids had already had their way with him, leaving him a bruised and battered corpse.

Lily pulled at Mae's hand, eager to venture out onto the bridge. Mae tightened her grip and let the child pull her out over the water. It was smooth and glassy, the heavy summer air keeping everything still. The wire rope holding the bridge up squeaked as the cable flexed under their weight. Small eddies swirled along the edges of the river, where the water met the limestone cliffs.

The distant sounds of people shouting and clapping pulled Mae's attention away from the water. Behind her, the open baseball field of Riverbend Park was filled with spectators watching the Iowa Falls boys play the team from Eldora. She picked up Lily

and walked to the far end of the crowd, down from the first base line, close enough to see what was going on but out of the way enough to let Lily play in the grass without bothering anyone. She set the little girl on the lawn and laid down on her back so she could stare up into the cloudless, blue sky. Her head ached from crying and, under the vastness of the sky, the world seemed to spin around her. She clutched the grass to steady herself. Lily seemed content yanking dandelion and white clover heads out of the grass. Maybe Mae could close her eyes for a moment.

“What are you doing her? I thought you were off to the big city.” The voice was familiar, though the teasing tone was new.

Mae opened her eyes. Joe Marshall’s upside-down face leaned over her. He was drunk. Though alcohol was banned, this was the kind of day where corn whiskey would find its way into cups of lemonade and where flasks would nip in and out of pants pockets all day long.

Mae sat up, but didn’t bother to smooth her hair or straighten her skirt. “I’m not a city girl. Never will be.” Mae looked around for Lily. The child was only a few yards away, torturing a cricket she’d caught.

Joe looked at the little girl. “I see.”

“You see what?” Mae asked, irritation in her voice.

Joe blushed and looked away. He sat down in the grass near her and pulled a small flask from his pants pocket. Behind them, the crowd clapped and called out to the players. He took a sip of whatever was in the flask.

“I thought you were the one who was going to get out of here,” Mae said. “Long time ago, when the Flynn’s left. But here you still are. Why is that?”

“That’s old news,” Joe said and leaned back on his elbows. He looked past her.  
“And maybe it’s none of your business.”

“It isn’t my business, but I’m asking anyway.”

He leaned forward suddenly and grabbed her arm.

“What are you doing?” She tried to pull away, but his grip was tight.

“You and me, we’re both stuck here.” His face was close to hers, his eyes narrowing, intense in a way she’d never seen before. “We’re both suckers who are going to spend the rest of our lives here.”

“Let go of me.” Mae yanked her arm back and got to her feet. She leaned over Joe. “You don’t know anything about me, about why I’m still here.”

He laughed drunkenly and settled back into the grass. “I think maybe I do.”

Mae scooped Lily up and stalked off. By the time she reached the bridge, her anger had subsided and exhaustion took over, leaving her bone-tired and almost weak. She set Lily down and took her by the hand so they could walk. Mae would have to drag them both back toward town. The sun was setting and she would be glad to get back to the truck, grateful her brother would take care of the ride home.

## October, 1925

The mid-autumn light cut in at an angle, soft and diffuse. This morning the cornfields glowed, but by late afternoon the light would cast deep shadows that distorted ordinary things. The shocks of wheat dotting the fields would look like stretching, grasping figures, the way Mae remembered them frightening her as a child. The drive back would be chilly, but it wouldn't matter much as she and Papa took the truck to the Marshall farm.

Joe Marshall had called this morning to say Maurice, the black Shire horse Papa sold him last year, wasn't acting right; it looked like he had colic. He asked if Papa could come and take a look. Although a seller wasn't responsible for an animal's illness after it was sold, Papa would help out. He knew Maurice well and could surely do something to avoid a call to Dr. Felson, the vet.

The burlap sack that held treatments for the sick horse sat on the truck seat between them. It was his version of the doctor's black bag. She came along to help him, as she had since she was a child when she first held chickens and goats steady while he tended their damaged wings and split hooves. As she grew bigger, she soothed Jesse, the irritable milk cow they had for years, while he examined her swollen teats. By the time she was fourteen, Mae could calm even the largest plow horse, including Maurice, enough so the creature didn't step on her father's foot or try to knock him over.

Mama hadn't commented when Mae said she was going with Papa, but when she said Lily was staying at home, Mama said, "Lily and I will do our best to get along."

If anyone asked, Mae would have said she was going along to help her father, but she admitted to herself she was also going because she wanted to see Joe Marshall. She'd

often thought about that day at the baseball field, what he been like, the things he said. She'd seen something in him she wasn't supposed to – and she wanted to tell him a thing or two.

“Is Joe Marshall really in charge of their farm, or is his father just running him like he was a hired man?” she asked her father.

He glanced at her, then back to the road. “I'm not sure how the Marshalls run things is any of your business. Besides, I didn't know you cared so much about that kind of thing.”

“He puts on like he's in charge, but I know sometimes farm men do that, especially the younger ones anxious to prove themselves.” She didn't usually talk to her father about the nature of farmers – or the nature of men, either. But lately those were the kinds of questions she asked herself.

Since he wasn't married, she wondered if there was something odd about Joe she hadn't been able to see yet. What did he do about women? Surely he had some drive to be with a woman. If he was willing to come to the baseball game more than a little tipsy, he no doubt went with his Uncle Rex to MacKenzie's, over in Welden. They served corn whiskey and home brewed beer and there were women there who went with men for a price. Joe's Uncle Rex had a reputation – not that he was wild or had ever been locked up in the town jail -- but that he was a man of certain habits. He could be found at MacKenzie's with some regularity and Mae wondered if he'd taught his nephew to do the same.

Perhaps if she saw Joe in his own element her curiosity about these matters would be satisfied. Maybe she shouldn't be so keen to take a close look at a family with a sick

father, a bachelor son, and an uncle who might be a drunk, as if they were some kind of freak show. Was she reveling in the misfortune of others?

As they came down the county road, Mae could see the Marshall's small cornfield was untouched. It was possible the corn wasn't yet ready, but Mae thought it unlikely as most folks in the county were well into harvesting by now. Some were finished, their fields bearing only the stubbled remains of corn stalks, ready for birds to pick over and the November frost to coat. Beyond the cornfield, the pasture was a fading green and the dairy herd was nowhere to be seen. The silver maple trees lining the short lane leading up to the house were bright yellow-gold and the pond just beyond the truck patch was smooth and calm in the morning light. The white clapboard house needed paint and several of the front steps sagged like they had given up.

As Papa turned the truck into the Marshall's lane, Mae tried to remember the last time she was there. She recalled coming some years ago, in December, with Mama and Ivy, to help Mrs. Marshall dress the slaughtered hogs and make sausage. It was not long after Joe's father fell ill. The kitchen was warm that day and the women worked with an unspoken sense of urgency. The only thing she remembered about Joe was that he had fled the kitchen shortly after they arrived.

Other than that long ago visit, Mae had only Papa's vague reports about what happened at the Marshall farm to go on. He often said they were "getting along" or "just keeping up" when he talked about them. She figured he was downplaying something, since she, like everyone else, knew Sam Marshall blew a great deal of money on that round barn and then what money they had left had been stolen. And the "good times" for farmers ended years ago when the war in Europe ended. Papa had carefully managed



their corn production and other crops, but still they'd dipped into their savings a few times over the years. Joe Marshall would've had a real hard time balancing the size of his herd, milk production, and the price of milk – all without the cushion of money in the bank.

Papa parked by the chicken coop, causing the ragged collection of hens to flutter away from the fence. They walked around the coop toward the round barn. Mae remembered seeing the barn years before, when it was still new, its clay tiles evenly dark, the color of the Iowa soil. Its shingled roof had been a solid black and the trim around the doors and windows neatly painted white. The double doors had hung straight and the iron weather vane turned smoothly in the strong wind. It had looked every bit the neat, tidy, picturesque Iowa barn – except that it was the wrong shape.

She knew what was said about Sam Marshall when he'd built the barn. He was called “crazy man” and “damn fool.” She'd heard it said he was going to lose his farm and send his family to the poor house. Papa, true to form as a man who was rarely uncharitable when talking about his fellow farmers, said the round barn wasn't something he would have built, but that he preferred to mind his own business and assume Sam Marshall knew what he was doing. Mama echoed popular sentiment about the poor farm by saying, “He's going to drag his whole family down with him, just because he has big ideas – thinks he's going to be king of central Iowa.”

“Maybe he's smarter than everyone else and that barn will change everything,” Mae had said at the time, more concerned with being contrary toward her mother than out of any understanding of agricultural progress.

Now, eleven years later, she was curious about this strange building, this place so many people passed judgment upon. She wondered if it was indeed any better than a regular barn, if perhaps it was the thing that allowed Joe to keep the farm going through the downturn, when many farmers gave up. Perhaps the barn possessed some kind of magical efficiency that made the Marshall's cows give more and better milk.

The round barn's bricks were weathered unevenly – some bleached lighter, some dark with a crust of soil – giving it a spotty, freckled look. Shingles were missing from the roof, victims of the harsh Iowa wind. The wooden barn doors hung open, the gaping mouth of the barn ready to take in wagonloads of hay and spit out loads of corn silage from the silo. Mae saw one of the doors was crooked and that the metal track on which the doors slid was rusty and bent, perhaps hit by a wagon or forced too hard against its will. The barn air was cool and grew cooler as they walked the semicircle from the door around to the horse stall on the side opposite.

“It really hasn't held up well,” Papa said. He shook his head, as if he felt sorry for the barn, the way one might feel sorry for an unhappy child.

“Was it worth the money he spent?” Mae asked.

Her father shrugged. “I think he probably got ripped off by the guy who built it. But Sam never really got the chance to find out if he could make it work.”

The railing leading up the steps to the hay loft was pulling apart at the joints as the wood warped, making it wobbly and loose, as if the barn was ripping itself to pieces. As she walked, Mae ran a hand over the ends of the metal stanchions that separated each cow stall; many were rusty and rough to her touch. But even as she felt the barn

decomposing under her hand, she could also imagine what it was like when it was new – that the barn could draw people to it with its novelty, its oddly welcoming air.

Somewhere there was a clanging sound, metal against metal, as if something flapped loosely in the wind. The concrete under her feet seemed uneven and she stumbled as the toe of her shoe caught in one of the divots that pitted the floor. But the barn was clean, as it should be; it smelled clean, like sweet hay with no odor of urine or feces.

They found Joe in front of the horse stall, leaning over the gate to get a closer look at Maurice. “He didn’t eat this morning,” he said. “Been dull and restless, too.” The look of concern on his face seemed incongruous with the boyish appearance he still possessed – freckles, ears just a bit too large and sticking out, wide-set, blue eyes.

As if on cue, Maurice began to paw the ground. He bowed his neck out so he could look back at the length of his body, as if he might see the thing causing the pain in his gut.

“Colic,” Papa said. “Question is, what kind – and how much worse it’ll get.” He opened the gate and went into the stall. Mae followed him, carrying the burlap bag. Maurice seemed to recognize them and let them move closer.

“I checked his food – no mold or spoilage. And I’ve been feeding him the same amount, same time everyday.” Mae heard the note of defensiveness in Joe’s voice.

“Did you walk him?”

“Yeah, it seemed to help him some, but I didn’t want to tire him out. I may not know much about horses, but I know not to walk them ‘til they collapse.”

Mae held Maurice’s lead and stroked his neck while her father searched for the horse’s pulse point. His firm hand rested there and she saw him concentrate, counting the

animal's heartbeats. "His pulse is over forty and he's sweating pretty good." Mae knew if Maurice's pulse stayed under sixty he would probably survive. Papa pried the horse's lips apart and pressed on his gums. "Teeth are still good. Gums are pale."

Papa was deft and sure in his movements, the way he touched Maurice – and the animal knew it. As Papa leaned in close and pressed an ear to the horse's belly, he stood still, only his head bobbing slightly against Mae's hand. "No gut sounds – nothing's moving through. He's not a bolter or a cribber, so I'm going to hope it's just a blockage, maybe not enough roughage," Papa said. Maurice didn't bolt his food down or chew wood from the stall rails that would fill his intestines with splinters and cause a blockage. Mae tried to be hopeful; she'd seen horses go down with colic before, but Maurice was special.

"I've been feeding him oats," Joe said. Mae knew Papa was just making a diagnosis, not an accusation, but Joe shrugged in apology as he spoke.

They all knew what it would look like if Maurice got worse. He would sit up on his back legs like a dog – an unnatural position for a horse that unnerved anyone who saw it. Then he would lie down on his side with his legs extended stiffly, trying desperately to get relief from the pressure and pain in his belly. He would roll wildly on his back, kicking and flailing enough to knock a man out, break his arm or leg, or crush his skull if he got too close.

"We had one die of colic when I was a kid," Joe said. He seemed to be speaking directly to Mae, though his eyes were locked on what her father was doing. "He was a big one, too. Pulled our wagons for years. Was a nice animal, though we couldn't ride him."

Mae nodded and combed her fingers through the coarse hairs of Maurice's mane.

“I was the first one to notice he was listless and his breathing was labored. When he wouldn’t eat Dad said it was probably gas. Or impacted food and he’d get over it.”

“What did you do?” Mae thought she sounded silly, like a kid listening to a fairytale, but she wanted him to keep talking.

“We walked him, but instead of getting better he got worse, fast. He would stretch, like he was going to urinate, but nothing came. Then he started kicking at his belly with his back legs, grunting and groaning. He was lathered with sweat, his eyes were bloodshot, and he kept retching, like he was going to vomit – but couldn’t.”

In some bizarre way, what he described sounded to Mae like Ivy trying to deliver Lily. Like Ivy, the horse thrashed about in search of relief from its agony. And like Ivy, it endured a kind of delirium, an unawareness of its surroundings because of the furious pain.

“Dad called the vet, but not in time. The horse started making this odd sighing noise.” Joe pointed to his chest. “He staggered from side to side, then pitched forward dead.”

“Oh,” Mae said, trying to put the picture of Ivy’s sweating, writhing body from her mind.

“We never did know what kind of colic it was. Dad wasn’t going to pay the vet to cut him open to find out. I know horses are working animals, but when his knees buckled like that--”

“You tellin’ her about old Bosco?” Uncle Rex had come into the barn and stood behind them. He smiled at Mae despite the seriousness of the conversation. “Worst thing

I ever saw happen to an animal. I think his stomach ruptured. Hope that doesn't happen here." He leaned over the stall gate. "What do you need me to do?"

Papa finished his examination and Mae handed him the burlap bag. He pulled out a long coil of rubber and a glass jar of clear liquid she knew was mineral oil. The tube would both get the mineral oil down where it could act as a laxative and would release gas and fluids from the horse's stomach.

Joe and his uncle came into the stall to help. They moved slowly, but Maurice was agitated and tried to dance away from them, until Mae's father leaned against his side and pinned him against the wall. Joe changed places with Papa, pressing against the horse's side, while Uncle Rex held his head still. Mae stood to one side of Maurice's head and murmured into his ear as Papa began inserting the rubber tube into the animal's nostril. He guided the tube with his thumb, aiming it downward toward the animal's pharynx. He turned the tube gently and moved it toward the animal's esophagus, stroking Maurice's throat with his other hand to get the horse to swallow. He then blew into the end of the tube to dilate the animal's esophagus and kept pushing the tube in toward Maurice's stomach.

"He's not coughing – that's good," Uncle Rex said. If the horse coughed, the tube would be pulled out in a hurry and Papa would have to start over.

Maurice tried to move his head away, but Uncle Rex gripped him around the neck. Papa knew he had reached the horse's stomach when Maurice jerked and stomach fluid and gas forced its way up through the tube and into the pail where Papa had dropped the end of the tube. The sour smell of stomach acid and half-digested oats filled the stall.

"Is there blood" Joe asked.

“No,” Papa replied. “And the food looks fairly fresh. It must be a blockage of some kind.” He began to pour the mineral oil into the tube end through a metal funnel. The horse bucked slightly as the liquid hit him, but they held him steady. They had to be careful he didn’t inhale some of the oil by accident -- that could kill him, too

“Now we wait,” Papa said. “If that takes care of it, we’ll know soon enough.” If the colic was caused by twisted intestines or a foreign body that wouldn’t budge, they would need the vet for emergency surgery – and Maurice would most likely die before the vet could do anything.

The waiting was the worst part, though Mae knew this wait couldn’t be nearly so excruciating as what she’d come to think of as the “deathbed vigil” they’d had for Ivy. She wanted to stay in the barn with the men, but thought she ought to go into the house and say hello to Joe’s mother.

Mae excused herself and though the men were intent on Maurice, Joe nodded to her. She walked back to the truck to get the jars of fruit, packed into a large wicker basket, she’d brought to give Joe’s mother. Mama wanted to give her more jars, as if she thought the Marshalls didn’t have enough to eat. It was a kind of concern Mama was capable of but rarely seemed to display.

As she walked between the corn crib and the old wooden plank barn, Mae thought the old barn needed to be taken down. It had been cannibalized for its iron hinges and handles, its doors, even the wooden planks that held it together, leaving gaps and holes that made it look like the wreck of some old ship. It had to be a fire hazard, just waiting to catch a spark from summer lightning that would surely burn it to the ground.

In contrast to the hulking ruin of the old barn, chicken pens behind it were well kept, no doubt because poultry added to the family income. The chicken coop stood straight and strong; it was recently painted and the yard was neat and securely fenced. The back of the farmhouse was not so lucky -- the paint peeled in spots, dirt splashed up along the bottom three feet of the wall, and patches of trim rotted away. It was not unusual for the farmhouse to take a backseat to the barn and livestock, but Mama made sure that at their place, if Papa couldn't work on the house, one of Mae's brothers did.

She thought flowers could be planted along the side and back of the house. She could see tall gladiolas and bushy tiger lilies blooming in the summer; maybe something closer to the ground, like sweet William or violets. The vegetable garden could be bigger and more productive. She would add a patch of strawberries and raspberries at one end, like she had at home. She was sure the Marshall family could rise just a bit above the constant grind of farm chores – not every activity had to be something that brought in money.

The water in the pond just south of the house was still high, clear, and smooth. In the spring there would no doubt be ducks and ducklings. Lily liked ducks and Mae could see them flocking her feet to take the crushed bread she offered, the baby ducklings hanging back until their mothers took to the water again and they could follow in their straight line fashion. But perhaps she shouldn't be replanting the garden here or counting ducklings that hadn't hatched. She had no reason to see any future here.

As she pulled open the screen to the back door and knocked, Mae tried to think of the last time she'd talked to Joe's mother. She'd seen her in town and said hello in passing, but the last time she'd really been around Mrs. Marshall was the day they'd



come over to help make sausage. She was nice enough to her and Ivy, though they'd both been shy about helping, quietly doing what they were told, mostly by Mrs. Greunig. She remembered Mrs. Marshall as a small woman with a smooth, pleasant face and very wide set eyes that gave her a look of constant wonderment.

A voice called out for her to come in. Joe's mother was in the kitchen, up to her elbows in a sink full of soapy water. She smiled at Mae, but didn't stop what she was doing. "Mae, nice to see you," she said.

Mae set the basket on the table. The kitchen was neat and bare – no stray shoes left behind, no knickknacks on the shelves, no papers on the table. A slight bitter smell lingered in the air, as if something had burned at breakfast. "Mama sent some plums and jars of applesauce."

"Thank you very much. And thank your father for coming to look after Maurice. How's he doing?"

"They've given him some mineral oil. They hope it will loosen the blockage causing the colic." She didn't bother to say anything about what would happen if it wasn't a simple blockage – Mrs. Marshall undoubtedly already knew.

They fell silent for a moment.

"How is your sister's little girl? Is she still with you?"

It was a sociable enough question, but if she had to ask, then perhaps Joe had not talked about her or Lily to his family, did not mention seeing them on the Fourth of July.

"She's fine – growing up fast, keeping me busy most days."

Mrs. Marshall smiled. She was still soft and round and welcoming – all the things Mae thought a mother should be. “My mother is not very fond of Lily,” Mae said. She was speaking out of turn but couldn’t help herself.

Mrs. Marshall turned away from the sink to look at her. “She probably hasn’t gotten over your sister’s death. Some people never do.” She paused. “What about Lily’s father – is he paying her any attention?”

“He’s in no shape to take care of her, but that hasn’t stopped him from coming around and asking for her.” Why was she telling her this? If Mae wasn’t careful, she might say more than she meant to.

“And Lily is very attached to you?” Her question seemed conversational enough, but Mae thought there was more behind it. Mrs. Marshall was indeed a pleasant looking woman with a broad smile, but there was a shrewdness in her deep set eyes that told Mae she had survived all that had happened to the Marshall family through her own strength of character.

“Yes. It’s hard to pry her off my leg sometimes.”

“She must be very unhappy right now, if you’re here and she’s not.” She raised her delicately curved eyebrows, making the statement into a question.

“So is my mother.” Mae gave a wry smile to let her know that she was both joking and serious.

Mrs. Marshall laid the last of the dishes on the drain board and pulled the sink plug. The water made a gurgling, sucking noise as it went down. She dried her hands on a towel and motioned for Mae to follow her out of the kitchen. “Have you said hello to Joe’s father?”

Mae was surprised. The way people talked about Sam Marshall and his condition, she assumed he didn't see visitors. She was never really sure what his illness was, other than it was in his lungs. Some people said it was a bad case of pneumonia that had permanently weakened his lungs; others, including Mama, thought it was tuberculosis, though he'd never been quarantined. How bad would he look? She learned long ago how to speak to the sick and the elderly, but she wondered what she would say to this man she'd never spoken to when he was healthy.

She followed Mrs. Marshall into the front parlor. A large piano stood in one corner, dwarfing the wing chair next to it, as well as the figure sitting in the chair. Mae remembered Joe's father as tall, broad-shouldered, almost barrel-chested. After all the years as a semi-invalid, he seemed to have collapsed in on himself, his chest sunken, arms shriveled, the skin around his face and neck loose and wrinkled. The sickness seemed to come off him in waves, making her feel weak and loose, as if she needed to sit down.

"Sam, this is Mae Allinson, William and Lorene's girl. William came over to tend to Maurice's colic and Mae came along to help." Her voice was unnaturally bright and cheerful, the voice people used to talk to the ill. Mae wondered if she always talked to him like that or if it was for her benefit.

Sam Marshall raised his head. There was still something bull-like about his head, with its strong nose, even though his eyes were sunken. He appraised her from head to toe, as if she were a not-so-prized cow about to go on the auction block. "How's the horse?" he asked.

“My father gave him mineral oil to move the obstruction that’s causing the colic.” Mae forced herself to stand still and not fidget under his gaze. “Now they are waiting to see if it worked.”

“Do you know anything about horses?”

The way he asked the question made him sound like he was drunk. She wasn’t sure what he was asking, but she answered honestly.

“No sir, I don’t know how to treat them myself – my father does. But I’ve helped him ever since I was a child, so I came along too.”

“So you’re soft on horses,” he said. He looked off to his left, into the distance. “Women are always soft on critters with big, round eyes.”

“We like their soft, wet noses, too,” Mae said, then thought perhaps she sounded too flippant.

Mae’s eyes met Mrs. Marshall’s. She seemed unsure what her husband would say next and, at the same time, amused by him. She was the healthy indulging the infirm. Or maybe laughter was her way of coping with the years of care she had provided – and still had to provide.

Mae knew about farmers who became infirm or incapacitated by accident or illness. Unable to work their land, their bodies either grew soft and weak or stiffened until they could barely move. The pride they took in their hard work and their land evaporated, so they grew bitter, making life for their wives and children difficult. It often seemed it would have been better if the accident or disease killed the man outright, like a horse going down suddenly, without suffering. Some men wasted away quietly on their

front porch, waiting for God to take them in his time. Some men couldn't wait for God and took matters into their own hands. Mae wondered which one Sam Marshall was.

"Surprised my son had the good sense to call your father," Mr. Marshall said. "Didn't have to tell him myself to do it. Won't be good for us if that horse keels over."

"Maurice won't die – they know what they are doing."

As if sensing the conversation had gone as far as it ought to go, Mrs. Marshall handed her husband a copy of *Wallace's Farm Journal* and said, "I'll bring you your lunch in a few minutes." She touched Mae's arm and ushered her out of the parlor. "He likes you," she said.

"I wasn't sure how sick he was," she said as they walked into the kitchen. "He seems better than I imagined."

"Today is a good day."

"I'm going to see how the men – and Maurice -- are faring," Mae said, as a way of excusing herself.

She walked back out to the barn to find Joe alone, leaning against Maurice's stall door. "Your father went out back to look at one of the goats," he said. He pushed away from the stall door and began to walk slowly around the semi-circle of the barn. Mae followed him, listening.

"Pigs are around here." He stopped in front of the hog pen, on the far side of the barn. "Damned things are the best paying livestock on this farm."

In the pen, several large sows rooted quietly through the hay. They were large and pinkish-white creatures with mild dispositions. Mae knew hogs could be quite profitable,

but she was surprised Joe brought up money, even indirectly, to her. Did he see everything, every relationship, as a transaction – profitable or unprofitable?

“We didn’t have them in here to start,” he said. “But they’ve done well enough for us that I thought they deserved to come into the barn, such as it is.”

“I’ve never been in here, though I’ve heard a great deal about your round barn.”

Joe laughed. “You mean you heard all about the crazy man who built it.”

“I don’t think I’m one to judge who is or isn’t crazy,” Mae said. “But I know how it is around here. People look in from the outside, think they know what’s going on.”

Joe leaned over the rail into the hog pen to scratch the back of one of the sows. “What have you heard about the crazy man’s son?”

Mae shrugged. “Only that he’s managed to keep his farm going and feed his family.”

Joe started talking about feeding the dairy herd and about milk production. As Mae listened, it occurred to her that he seemed to be trying to impress her, to let her know he was good at what he did. They certainly weren’t at odds with each other now, as they had been that day at the baseball game. Still, she felt compelled to bring that day up. “Do you remember what you said to me at the baseball game?”

Joe blushed slightly. “Yes, I do. But I hoped maybe you’d forgotten.” He fiddled with one of the lanterns that hung next to the stall. “I apologize for that. I was wrong.” He looked at Mae. “And I understand what you’re doing with Lily, raising your sister’s child.”

Mae smiled. “You may be one of the few who does then. My own mother doesn’t understand it.” She picked up her father’s burlap sack and moved toward the barn door. “No one is going to marry me if I already have a child.”

Joe followed her out, closing the door behind them. “What makes you so sure of that?” He took the sack from her hand and carried it to the truck.

A minute later, Papa and Uncle Rex appeared from behind the barn. Papa told Joe he would call him tomorrow to check on Maurice. The ride home seemed much shorter than the ride over, Papa chattering about Maurice, about the Marshall’s goats. Mae only half listened.

Several weeks later, Joe called to say Maurice was in distress again. Mae and her father rushed over, but by the time they arrived the horse had already collapsed and died. As Uncle Rex and Papa stood over Maurice’s body, discussing what to do next, Mae and Joe waited outside the barn, each lost in their own grief. Mae didn’t cry, unwilling to let her sentiment show, though she felt she’d lost a childhood friend.

Joe stood running Maurice’s leather lead through his hand, staring into the distance. Mae guessed he was grieving the loss of a farm asset, one that the family could ill afford. She was unprepared when he turned to her and asked if she would be willing to marry him, a man with a foundering farm, who had just taken another hit. She could tell he was serious and, as she took the leather strap from his hand, she simply said “yes.”

## August, 1927

August typically brought Iowa either a hot dryness that threatened to wither the crops or a humidity that pressed down on humans and animals alike, making them slow and dazed. The heat and humidity was sometimes punctuated by violent hail storms that bruised and bent the crops. August, 1926, had brought heavy rains, the first storm arriving mid-month and lasting several days. A second, then a third storm, poured rain into the Mississippi Valley until streams and rivers in ten states flooded their banks. The rain continued into the spring of 1927 and spread south until it caused what became known as The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927. The deluge churned up and flattened crops and spread the bloated bodies of cows, sheep, and human beings from Cairo, Illinois all the way down to New Orleans. By summer, everyone hoped for better.

Despite the heat and the fact she was eight months pregnant, Mae often walked during the day as it eased the discomfort in her body. Her loose cotton dress, with its low waistband, made it easier for her to move, especially after she tugged off her apron. Her mother-in-law, who she called “Margaret” rather than “Mom,” didn’t seem to mind if she left the kitchen or abandoned whatever chore she was doing to take a walk. The way Mae’s shoes pinched her toes punished her for sneaking away from her work, but she refused to take them off, not to walk through the yard or into the barn. Bare feet were only for the pastures and fields.

This morning, the doors of the round barn were open and the cool, dark interior beckoned her. She was often drawn to the barn, even though it was another reminder of work that needed to be done. Weeds grew up around the foundation and doorsills, weeds



she should pull. They were just scraggily grasses gone to seed, plants of no use to anyone – but still she didn't have the heart to yank them out.

The heat of mid-summer also brought the year's second litter of pigs. The sows were bred in early May so they would deliver their litters in August. Joe prepared their pen in the round barn exactly one week before the sows were due to farrow. He cleaned and disinfected the stalls, wormed and treated the four sows for lice and mange, then washed and moved them into the clean stalls. Their pen was now the cleanest, best kept part of the barn, which continued to grow shabbier with each passing season. Joe's attention to the pig stalls reminded Mae of the old saying about not trying to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, but she didn't think her husband would find it funny. Perhaps there was something about the pigs' delicate natures – the fact they thrived only in certain temperatures and were susceptible to drafts and disease – that brought out an extra measure of compassion in Joe. It was the kind of concern of which his father would surely disapprove.

Mae often came out to check on the sows. She recognized each one by her features – the shape of her nose, the roundness of her eyes, how high or low her ears were – and the way each creature moved its growing body. She checked them for signs they were about to give birth, looking for the telltale restlessness -- laying down, getting up, pawing the floor, and rooting and chewing the straw, as if they were trying to build a nest.

Today was not a good day for the sows; the humid air clung to them, thick and close and made them restless. A sow named Clarissa paced and shifted her body, trying to get comfortable. Mae moved the same way under the weight of the baby growing

inside her. In fact, the four-legged animals were better balanced and more graceful in their condition than she was. She couldn't resist the urge to keep walking, although most of the time she felt she'd tip over if she made the slightest misstep.

Mae had paced and shifted her body much the same way the day she married Joe, as if she was trying to get comfortable. There had been so many things to be uncomfortable about that day. The wedding took place on a gray day in late January of 1926. It had been hastily arranged with only family in attendance, as if the whole event was a secret, a moment no one was supposed to acknowledge. The minister from the family's church officiated, but the ceremony was held in the Allinson's living room.

"If you're going to marry so suddenly, the living room is good enough," Mama said when Mae and Joe told her parents. The two of them sat stiffly on the parlor sofa, more than a foot apart.

For the first time ever, Mae felt awkward in this room, as if she was an outsider. She supposed it was a nice enough place to be married in -- the floral wool rug was not worn, the dark wood furniture was well-polished, and the pair of lamps with the hand-painted globes that came from Mae's grandmother were almost works of art. "It will be lovely here, Mama," was all Mae said.

Papa offered no opinion about the details of the wedding plans, no doubt because he believed they were the province of women. But he approved of Joe, giving his consent for them to marry to Joe just a few minutes earlier when the two men had talked privately. "You can provide for my daughter and granddaughter?" was all he'd asked, according to Joe. Mae was sure of his approval -- though he stood stiffly through the brief wedding ceremony, -- he had kissed her gently on the cheek after it was over.

Mae's wedding was in stark contrast to Ivy's June wedding, which had been in the church and witnessed by many friends and family. There had been a reception at the farm with garlands of fresh flowers festooning the porch rails and a lavish spread of food laid out on trestle tables in the front yard. Even though Mama hadn't really liked Lloyd, she was determined to give Ivy the wedding she believed her daughter deserved. Ivy looked beautiful in her ivory satin gown with a flowing, floral veil ordered from a store in Ames. The dress had required three fittings with the seamstress in town before it fit her just right.

Mama hadn't offered to let Mae try on Ivy's dress, which was carefully wrapped in muslin and stored in a trunk full of Ivy's things in the attic. Mama never suggested the dress come out of this shrine to her oldest daughter, though she ought to know Mae wouldn't have worn it anyway. Mae felt every bit the second-hand bride, married in the rose-pink bridesmaid dress she wore for Ivy's wedding. The dress had been lovely in June, but the short cap sleeves and lacy neckline were not right for January. Mae let herself chill through rather than put a sweater or coat on over the dress.

Not quite two years old yet, Lily was unaware of the tension and strangeness of the wedding. As far as the little girl knew, it was merely a chance to wear a pretty, new dress – dark green wool with ruffles on the skirt and at the wrists. It had been purchased a month earlier so she could also wear it at Christmas. For Lily, the wedding was also a day to have grownups pay attention to her. She was on her best behavior, smiling and twirling in her dress, lighting up the room, an awkward brightness in the midst of everything.

And Lily was indeed indulged by the adults. Reverend Townsend's wife bent her face close to the little girl's and asked, "Are you a fairy princess, dancing and twirling about like that?" Lily shook her head no and pranced away to follow after Joe's fourteen-year-old brother, Alex.

At fifteen-years-old, Alex had no real use for a toddler, but he was willing to pick Lily up, flip her over, and swing her by her arms until she giggled. The day of the wedding, he entertained her by pulling silly faces and giving her countless piggyback rides. Even Joe's mother heaped attention on Lily, pulling her up onto her lap, letting the little girl wear her hat, and reading to her from a book of Bible stories she'd pulled from the parlor bookshelf. Mae wondered about the bond she thought they were forming, guessing that perhaps Margaret wished for more grandchildren besides Matthew, Joe sister's little boy. Even now, as Mae wandered about the farm, Lily was in the kitchen with her mother-in-law, baking pies for the upcoming church picnic.

As she leaned over the rail into the pig stall to watch the sows, Mae searched for a connection to the animals, as she had when she was a child. But now she seemed to find only the differences that separated her from these creatures. She envied the sows that they were unaware of the risk they faced giving birth. They never asked themselves "Who will love this child if I don't survive its birth?" Instead, they ran on an instinct that spared them the worry and fear that came with birth.

Mae often pictured herself lying in the bed, pale and sweating as Ivy had, trying to push the baby from her body. Her head told her she was not Ivy and childbirth for her might go just fine. But some part of her heart, the part that fluttered irregularly with her fears, could feel her straining, bleeding, body sinking into darkness.

Now more than ever, Mae wished she had her sister to talk to, to confide in. She felt at ease with Joe's mother; but, even though she asked her mother-in-law a few questions about pregnancy, she wasn't ready to reveal her deepest fears.

She tried to talk to Joe, but he often wanted to comfort her quickly and simplistically by saying, "Don't worry, it will be fine" or "You get your fears from your mother and her superstitions. Don't let her wind you up." He wanted to quiet her down, as if he could not bear to hear about the things that could go wrong with the birth of their child.

So Mae found herself confiding in Uncle Rex, something she never expected. Perhaps it was because he didn't judge others or because he was unattached -- almost as if he floated free, above all the cares of the farm -- that she was able to talk to him more freely. She usually found him in the round barn in the late afternoon, starting on the milking while Joe finished in the field. With Uncle Rex, Mae didn't have to warm up with small talk, though she could as he seemed to be able to talk about any subject. She could lean against one of the posts or stanchions and start talking while he milked, as if it were something they had always done. Sometimes he asked questions, sometimes he just let her talk.

Today he was perched on a milking stool with his head pressed against the cow's flank. He looked up at her. "How are you feeling?"

"Tired, mostly. I knew it would be exhausting, but I ---." She hesitated, then plunged ahead. "I didn't expect the nightmares. The falling, swirling feeling -- even though I've got this weight holding me down." She put both hands on her swollen abdomen. "I see Ivy in my nightmares. Blood everywhere. Like she was splitting in two."

“Mae, you’re stronger than your sister. I know that.”

How he knew this exactly, Mae wasn’t sure. As far as she was aware, he’d never met Ivy.

“Your child is special. I can feel it.” He smiled and added, “Special. But not crazy like their paternal grandfather. Maybe they’ll be smart enough to get out of here.”

Whether or not her child ever left Iowa Rapids, Mae couldn’t begin to think about. Perhaps Uncle Rex was right – or maybe he just liked to sound wise and knowing. She smiled back and left him to his work.

The next day, Mae returned to the barn to check on the sows. She lingered by each pen, staring at the animals, waiting for one of them to look back. She envied them their instincts, that inner drive that would show them what to do when the time came. Running on instinct meant the sows didn’t have to prepare themselves for what would happen to them – it would just happen.

Mae tried to prepare herself for everything that came with her new life as part of the Marshall family. She prepared herself for the hard work and, as the daughter of a farmer, she was ready to match her husband in effort and in energy. She saw herself working along side him, picking corn or driving the truck, if need be. He knew she was good with the livestock. But so far, he did not need her.

She was prepared to work at getting along with Joe’s mother, sharing the kitchen easily with her as they cooked meals, baked bread, and canned vegetables. She was even prepared for Sam Marshall’s illness – the day to day, coughing reality of the old man’s stooped figure. She pictured herself giving him his medicine, helping him into his chair on the front porch, reading to him from something besides *Wallace’s Farm Gazette*.

What she hadn't been prepared for was the way Lily attached herself to everyone from Joe's mother to his brother, Alex. Lily was always in the kitchen with Margaret, baking bread, a chore still novel enough to interest the little girl. Joe's mother was ready to offer love and to care for the child in a way Mae's own mother didn't. But why shouldn't Lily draw others to her – she was a likable child. Still, the piggyback rides Alex gave her and the way he sat patiently in the parlor armchair reading her a story surprised Mae.

Perhaps this attachment was the payoff she hoped for when she agreed to marry Joe; it was the life she wanted for Lily. Now it was up to her to settle into the life she had made. Much of her marriage to Joe was what Mae thought of as companionable. They agreed on many things concerning the farm, though Mae never really expected to be consulted on the running of an established farm simply because she married into it. But Joe did talk to her about business, reporting on the crops, the herd, the yield, prices – all the things she needed to know. She asked questions, the kinds of questions that would elicit more detailed information about these matters – and he was happy to reply.

But Mae hadn't been prepared for the silences that came when they were alone together, before bed or early in the morning or in the odd moment when she and Joe were the only two in the kitchen. Often when they talked, Joe offered her one word answers or didn't pick up the conversation or didn't offer any comment, even when she probed him about things she thought would interest him – what other farmers were doing or the latest news about people at church. She was used to the silence of her father who, as a farmer, lived long days of exhausting labor performed in silence, alone with himself. But somehow, without thinking about it, Mae believed her husband would be different –

open, talkative, full of ideas and opinions -- despite the fact he was the very same kind of man as her father.

Joe's touch did not send the tingling through her body the way Paul's had. Her physical response to Joe had been slower, a kind of earnestness that was something more than duty, but not quite passion. While she didn't find it unpleasant, Mae wondered if there was more to relations than laying still under Joe's weight on those nights. She wondered if all farm people, who spent so much time around breeding animals, could only see the act of human love as breeding, a transaction designed only to create new life. She hadn't gotten pregnant until sometime after Christmas 1926, almost a year after they were married.

The sows had settled down to nap. Not wanting to interrupt Uncle Rex's milking two days in a row, Mae returned to the kitchen to help her mother-in-law prepare dinner. "I can't tell most of the time if Joe is proud of this farm and that barn or if he'd rather set fire to it," Mae said as she stood opposite Margaret, in front of the sink.

"I think he's proud of how hard he's worked since his father got sick. Getting us through the hard times," Margaret said. She stirred beef stew in a large pot. "Barn didn't make it easier. It never really worked the way his father thought it would." Her laugh sounded slightly bitter. "Sins of the father visited upon the son, I guess."

"But he seems to apologize for its condition. Who is he apologizing to?"

"Certainly not his father. He thought his father was as big a fool as everyone said. Joe just wouldn't say it out loud."

"There are a lot of things he won't say out loud," Mae said. She reached into the cupboard and pulled out a stack of dishes.



“After his father got sick, Joe didn’t criticize the way he’d done things anymore – none of us did. You know how the ill are beyond reproach.” She shrugged. “Joe stopped fighting with him. Just shut up and got to work.”

“Well, he should be proud. Things have been so awful – farmers giving up, selling off, leaving,” Mae said. “Sam should be proud the farm’s still whole.” She set the dinner plates, silverware, and glasses on the table.

“That’s not entirely true.” Margaret glanced at her, then looked away. “That plot of thirty-five or so acres, down past the south field, had to go in nineteen twenty-two.”

“I didn’t know you ever owned that section. How did Sam take it, having to sell?”

“He doesn’t know it’s gone.”

Mae wrinkled her brow. “I thought he knew everything that went on here, even though he’s been so sick.”

“Things got desperate – the tractor broke, we had to pay the doctor,” she explained. “Rex suggested selling the acreage to Joe and me, but not to Sam. Said he knew a buyer, so they had papers drawn up.”

“How’d they get him to sign?”

Margaret turned away. “You’ve seen how confused he gets sometimes, those spells he has where he can’t really understand what you’re saying to him.”

Mae nodded. She fiddled with the homespun napkins, refolding them and putting one at each place.

“He’s been having those for years. Rex and Joe just put the papers in front of him. I’m not sure what they told him they were. Something to do with livestock, probably. He was in no shape to read them. He just signed.”

Mae was shocked and a little proud at the same time. She could see Uncle Rex working out such a plan, but not Joe. Or maybe it was possible, maybe he was capable of doing what needed to be done.

“I’m not going to apologize for selling that bit off,” Joe’s mother said. “Maybe we shouldn’t have deceived him like that, but if he weren’t so darn stubborn--.”

“I don’t mind so much what they did, either,” Mae said. “I do wish Joe had told me about it.”

“Everyone has secrets. And it’s hard to get men to tell you much of anything.”

“I’ve told Joe all my secrets.” Mae shook her head. “Not sure if he was listening, but I told him everything.”

“That’s all you can really do.” Her mother-in-law took the large bowl from Mae’s hands and turned back to the stove.

As they sat down to dinner, Mae watched the family closely, looking at Joe and his uncle almost with new eyes. The conversation started with the usual small talk, but took a turn when Sam said abruptly, “Greunig’s gonna be foreclosed on.” His voice was too loud and he didn’t look up from his plate. “Bud Thompson told me. Damn fool should never have borrowed.”

Uncle Rex jumped in. “Sam, it wasn’t the borrowing. He made bad decisions. You said so yourself.”

Joe nodded. “Greunig’s a nice guy, but he’s not always smart about his planting. Maybe he’s had some bad luck with livestock getting sick, but he should be smarter.”

“Cabot screwed him, too. I’m sure of it,” Sam said. He banged a hand on the table and looked around, as if he expected immediate agreement from the others.

“What did he do that was so stupid?” Alex asked.

“I don’t think the Gruenig’s misfortune is good dinnertime talk,” Joe’s mother interrupted. She passed around dishes of food. “We’ve done too much of that over the years.”

Later that night, as Mae and Joe got ready for bed in the same bedroom Joe had occupied as a child, Mae sat heavily on the edge of the bed. The bedroom was small and made even smaller by the growing bulk of her body – but it was the only place for them. Even though it was torturous labor each evening for his father to climb the stairs, Sam refused to give up the large bedroom he and Margaret shared since the farmhouse was built. So, Joe and Mae slept in the double bed brought in to replace his childhood bed. Gone were his childish things – toys, books -- except for a crystal set radio that sat atop his dresser. The room was cramped with the bed, two dressers, a small bedside table, and a chair.

“Why did everyone get so tense when Sam brought up the Gruenigs?” Mae asked. Her tone made him close the door and lean against it.

“When my father starts talking everyone gets tense. You’ve seen it often enough by now.”

“Yes, but usually everyone caters to him or rolls their eyes or waits until he finishes. Tonight was different. As soon as he mentioned the Gruenigs, you and Rex started talking over him, trying to change the subject.”

“Mother was right – it’s not good to talk about the misfortune of others.” He sat on his side of the bed, his back to her, and took off his boots. “Not very Christian.”

Mae shook her head. “This family is no different from any other. We talk about every other farm family just as they talk about us. We think we can tell who’s smart, who’s a good farmer, who’s an idiot. Always judging. So don’t talk to me about being a good Christian.” She waited for him to respond.

When he didn’t reply, Mae went on. “What’s the problem with the Gruenigs?” If she pressed hard enough he would have to tell her something.

“Dad doesn’t know what he’s talking about when he goes on about the sins of borrowing money. Just because he didn’t do it. He’s living in the past – what’s left of his mind is, anyway.”

Mae chose to overlook his comment about his father’s mental state for the moment. “So it’s about borrowing? What about it?”

Joe got up from the bed and began to strip off his overalls, then stopped. “We did it. We borrowed in nineteen twenty-three. Farm credit had been available for years and we needed the money. We put up the property.” His tone was flat. “There’s a mortgage and he doesn’t know.”

Mae waited a moment. “I suppose you just slid the papers in front of him when he was out of it, got him to sign something he didn’t understand. After all, it worked once before.”

Joe turned toward her. “You know about that?”

“Yes, I do.”

“It was before you came to live here.”

“But, you should have told me.” She looked up at him. “Is there anything else you haven’t told me?”

“Like what,” he asked.

“Like the things a husband should tell his wife. In a marriage, nothing should be off limits.”

Joe climbed into his side of the bed. “I don’t think we have that kind of marriage.”

“What kind of marriage do we have then?” She was surprised to hear him even talk about the nature of marriage and she wasn’t going to let him get away so easily.

He turned on his side to face her. “Mae, we have a good life here. We aren’t starving. Lily is happy. There will be a new baby.” He rolled onto his back and looked at the ceiling. “This is what there is for us.”

Mae looked down at her hands. “I thought it was going to be good enough. I really did. But sometimes I’m not so sure.”

Joe turned away. Just about the time Mae thought he’d fallen asleep, he said, “Wait until the baby comes. You’ll feel differently after that. Women always do.”

She didn’t know how he knew anything about what women feel, especially after they’ve had a baby, but she let it go. Exhaustion was overtaking her.

Two weeks later, Mae went into labor and their son, Raymond David, was born. The birth was an easy one, or so Mae was told by other women. Her labor progressed normally and the baby was perfectly positioned for delivery. Though she’d been anxious at first, Mae was calmed by the doctor’s reassurances that everything was okay. After the baby arrived, she had no infection or fever or other complications.

The first month after Ray’s birth, Mae was too tired to do much of anything except nurse him. While Ray’s birth had been far easier than Lily’s, he was not nearly as easy as she had been. Colicky from the start, he fussed constantly. Mae held him and

walked up and down the farmhouse stairs, jiggling him in her arms. She shifted and twirled him until she found a position that soothed him.

By the time she was fully recovered and Ray was old enough to be taken outside, the weather had cooled and the pigs had farrowed. Mae resumed her midday walks, sometimes by herself, but usually with the baby in her arms. She cradled him close to her body, welcoming his small weight against her, but aware too that he would soon wriggle and kick against her, as if to get away.

Today was the first chance she'd had to see the piglets and their mothers. The sows still seemed large and swollen to Mae, though they were no longer pregnant – just heavy, bullet-shaped pink bodies with black spots. Their piglets squirmed and ran about until the sow flopped over and they lined up to suckle. Mae tried not to think of her own nursing infant as she looked at the suckling pigs, but it was impossible. She wondered if the sows were as sore as she was.

She found Clarissa, the pig she recognized and knew by name, at one end of the pen with her litter. She lay on one side, her teats exposed to a bunch of wriggling piglets who stepped on one another to get to a nipple.

Mae watched them for a while, looking away every so often to gaze at Ray, who slept quietly, for the moment, in her arms. As the piglets finished nursing, they gradually fell away from the teats and rolled into the straw to sleep. When the last one let go of her, Clarissa shifted, as if to get up. As she rolled herself onto her feet, Mae caught a glimpse of something in the straw underneath her – the pinkish-white form of a piglet. It was dead, flattened accidentally by the weight of its mother. Mae silently mourned its loss, then walked quietly out of the barn and back to her work.

## November, 1928

Though the true hardness of winter had not yet set in, the round barn stood cold and stark in the November chill. The wood of the barn doors had weathered a pale gray and was lined with dark stains of mildew, like an old man's streaky beard. The bottoms of the doors were splintered where the planks were kicked and banged by men's boots and beasts' hooves, year after year. The wind moved through gaps in the unpatched roof and cracked windows, forming competing drafts that chilled a body.

Still, the inside of the barn provided a kind of refuge, especially during the later afternoon milking. As the days shortened, Mae took to bringing Lily and Ray out to the barn in the afternoon, a routine they all needed and enjoyed. Bundled against any chill in sweaters and caps, they stopped to visit Dodge, the aging Clydesdale horse that replaced Maurice.

In need of a horse to pull the large wagon, Joe traded several sows for Dodge. The horse was too large and heavy-footed for plowing. Fortunately, Uncle Rex brought the tractor back to life, so Dodge's main job was hauling loads of manure.

He was still a beautiful horse, with long, silky white hair that hung over his feet and a soft, brown forelock that drifted into his eyes. He had a plodding temperament, though he was known to nip at any fingers that poked at him when he was out of sorts. Now he rubbed his muzzle along the stall door, inviting the children to stop.

"Give him the apple, Lily," Mae said. "Hold your hand flat so he can take it."

Lily reached through the stall rails, her small hand with the apple raised and waiting. Dodge nosed around the fruit, sniffing and chuffing her hand with his warm, moist breath.

“He tickles,” she said, giggling. The horse rolled his lips back and took the apple in his teeth. Lily dropped her hand and watched him crunch the fruit until it was gone.

The children were the focus of Mae’s days now. Ray outgrew the colic that plagued him as an infant. He was less agitated, though Mae could still sense unrest lurking just beneath his mild expression. Playing with the horse’s mane was the thing keeping him from erupting into whiny tears right now.

Mae loved her son from the moment he was born, but her feelings were somehow different than her feelings for Lily – perhaps because she’d had no choice in it. Ray wasn’t as pretty as Lily, though Mae said so only to herself. He had thick, dark hair that didn’t fall out shortly after he was born, like it did with most babies. He had a heavy brow and often furrowed his eyebrows, as if he disapproved of everything. His eyes followed every movement and, as he grew, he became known as “the little man,” willful and independent. Long and stretched out when he was born, Ray grew by filling out almost to the point of being pudgy, then growing an inch it seemed almost overnight. It was as if his body was always struggling to push and pull itself into shape.

Mae wondered if perhaps her feelings for Lily were stronger because the child was sweet and compliant. Ray didn’t bring out the same kind of immediate affection and it would take a bit more work to feel the same way. But she was not her mother and she would not hold the failure of her own feelings against her child.

Joe was tenuous with his son at first, afraid to hold him, like most new fathers. “Typical farmer,” Mae said. “He can pull baby pigs out of a laboring sow and deliver spindly-legged foals, but can’t figure out what to do with a squirming baby boy.” But



with time, he did learn how to cradle Ray's floppy infant head in the crook of his elbow, making a point to hold him for a few minutes each night when he came in from the fields.

Mae recognized her husband as a man who no longer ran on instinct -- if he ever did. He was now the kind of person who needed to warm up to an idea -- or to a person. His initial strangeness with Lily faded as he learned he could best get along with her when she was around animals. Joe was the first one to swing the little girl onto Dodge's back, where he held her tight as the horse took a few steps. Mae gasped nervously at first, but relaxed when she saw Lily's eyes widen in excitement.

Once the apple was gone Dodge lost interest in the children and turned his back to them to sniff around in the hay. Mae hitched Ray up on her hip, grabbed Lily's hand and led them around the barn toward the cow stalls. The cows were lined up in their slots, tails swishing as they waited to be milked.

Lily ran ahead of her and, by the time Mae caught up, the little girl had already found Uncle Rex squatting on his milking stool where he worked the udder of one of the brown Swiss cows. Lily inserted herself between Uncle Rex and the animal and he was patiently showing her how his fingers wrapped around the cow's teat.

Mae knew she loved Lily partly in defiance of her mother and partly because the little girl was her beloved sister's child. But she believed Lily belonged to her by virtue of the fight she waged to keep her, a fight she'd never had to make for Ray. He was simply hers.

Mae heard the barn door slide open, its wheels creaking, begging for a lubricant no one made time to give it. As the door slid closed, she waited for Joe to appear. She wasn't ready for the voice behind her.

"You can't steal my child," Lloyd Whitsett stood at the end of the stall, his gaze fixed on Lily. Uncle Rex stopped milking and stood up.

Mae felt a pulse of blood shoot through her, like she'd touched a live wire. She moved toward Lily, who was still entranced by the pail of foaming milk under the cow's belly.

Lloyd was no longer quite so thin, his hair had been cut recently, and Mae thought he looked like he was bathing regularly. He no longer looked confused. "You thought you could hide by marrying Joe Marshall and moving out here," he said to Mae.

"I wasn't hiding from you," she said, at first averting her eyes, then raising her gaze to meet his. "And my marriage is none of your business." She didn't have the courage to ask him why he had come here.

"You think these people are going to help you keep Lily? You think they can protect you?" He looked around the barn and waved his hand. "They can't even help themselves."

"What do you want?" Uncle Rex asked, standing up and moving the stool out of the way with his foot. Mae heard something in his voice she'd never heard before – aggression, menace – she wasn't sure.

"I want my daughter."

“You haven’t shown much interest in her in the last couple of years,” Uncle Rex said, “Seems to me you don’t really want her so much as you want to make trouble for us.”

“I’ve had my share of trouble -- I don’t need to make it. I’m here because my daughter belongs with me.” He was jittery and his hands moved rapidly as he spoke.

Mae thought back to the night he came to her parents’ house, how he expressed his desire for his daughter then. The want was still the same – plain, raw, simple. But then he’d been lost, unable to put the force of his desire behind his words. Now, although the words “I want my daughter” were the same, his desire seemed wilder, edgier, as if resentment simmered within him for the last three years and was about to boil over.

“What makes you think you’re fit to have her?” Uncle Rex asked.

Mae wondered what Uncle Rex heard about Lloyd, if he was talked about at the tavern – or if this was a bluff. She didn’t mind alcohol so much and didn’t begrudge Uncle Rex his time at McKenzie’s tavern. But if Lloyd’s working for a moonshiner hurt his case for taking Lily, she was more than willing to condemn him for it. She was happy to believe in the dangers and immorality of “demon liquor,” if it could be used against Lloyd.

“I haven’t done that for the last year,” Lloyd said. He turned to look directly at Mae. “I took your mother’s suggestion and got married.”

“Married?” She’d forgotten about that terrible moment when he’d suggested he marry her. It had turned her stomach then. “To who?” she asked, suddenly curious about the kind of woman who would marry him.

Lloyd didn’t answer and, instead, took a step closer to her.

Uncle Rex stepped in front of Lloyd and straightened to his full height. Lloyd moved in closer until they looked like two barnyard cocks, each waiting for the other to back down. Behind them, the barn door slid open again and Joe's trilling whistle echoed off the brick walls and concrete floor. As her husband came around the cow stanchions, Mae took Lily's hand to lead the little girl outside.

Suddenly Uncle Rex moved forward, pushing against Lloyd's chest with his hands. Lloyd pushed back, sending Uncle Rex staggering backwards. His face contorted in anger and he grunted as he straightened up. He came toward Lloyd swinging. The punch caught Lloyd's nose with a crunching sound. Lloyd sank to his knees and Uncle Rex moved as if to kick him, but Joe grabbed him by the shoulders.

As Mae hustled the children around to the barn door, she heard Joe tell Lloyd to get off their property. Uncle Rex shouted something about making him sorer than he already was. She looked back to see the two of them drag Lloyd out of the barn and pull him to his feet in the yard.

Joe came into the house alone twenty minutes later. He caught Mae on the stairs. "Are you okay? How are the kids?" he asked.

"We're fine. Lily doesn't know who he is and didn't see much. Is he gone?"

"Last I saw him he was headed down the county road."

"What are you going to do about him?"

"What more should I do? I told him to leave and he left."

"What about when he comes back?" Mae asked.

"What can I do? Lily is his daughter. He's not in the wrong here."

His sudden concern with what was right irritated her. "He's not fit to have her."

“He looked alright to me,” Joe said.

You know exactly how fit a parent he is just by looking?” She pushed him up the stairs and into their bedroom. “He came here to pick a fight. What does that say about him?” Mae sat on the edge of their bed, staring at the pattern on the quilt, the questions swirling in her mind. “And who has he married? Where is he living? We need to find out.” She needed to keep talking, to try and figure out what was going on -- and what they should do about it. “He hasn’t seen her in three years. She doesn’t know him – she’ll be upset.”

“She’ll get used to him,” Joe said. He stood awkwardly in the small space between the bed and dresser, as if he was afraid to sit down or even lean against the wall.

“Don’t you care enough about her, love her enough, to want to keep her here?” Mae’s voice was loud, but Joe made no move to shut the bedroom door.

“Of course I do. But he’s her father.”

“So you keep saying.” She looked him squarely in the face. “You think blood is more important, that it counts more than the love and care I’ve given her. More than you’ve given her – or that your mother has given her.”

“Blood may not count more – but you can’t ignore it.”

“What does blood prove anyway?” Mae pointed a finger at him. “Blood relatives can be some of the most useless, stupid people. You should know that.”

“He wasn’t blood,” Joe corrected, knowing she meant Allen Flynn. “Though I don’t think it would have made any difference if he was.” He lowered his voice, trying to get her to lower hers. “But this isn’t about my family.”

Mae's mind jumped from one idea to the next. "Can he go to a judge, force us to give her up?"

"I don't know if he's thought of that. But he clearly means to make trouble for us somehow. We already have enough to worry about."

He was concerned about milk prices and what they should be planting in the spring. Always with him it came back to the farm, the acreage, the herd. He left the bedroom and she heard the sound of his footsteps going down the stairs and out the front door. He was, no doubt going back to the barn until dinner time.

Mae stood at the bedroom window, watching her husband disappear into the barn. She already knew she'd made this marriage in order to protect Lily. What if the man she married, the man she thought at least understood her love for the child just a little, was unwilling to protect her? Panic started to overtake her and she shook her head violently, as if to shake it off. If her husband wouldn't do what need to be done, she'd find someone who would. After dinner she followed Uncle Rex outside to the woodpile. She made no pretext for being there, though she absently picked up several pieces of wood.

"Rex, if Lloyd comes back, will you help me? Will you help Lily?"

He didn't look surprised by her request. "Yes," he said. "He's not going to take her."

She stacked the pieces of wood she held on top of the pile in Uncle Rex's arms and held the door open for him.

For the next several weeks, everyone acted as if Lloyd might materialize again at any moment. Mae no longer took Lily outside to walk with her, as if simply keeping the child indoors would keep her father away from her. Joe worked harder, frenetically; he

was always moving, coming to bed later and later, after Mae was asleep. Uncle Rex seethed quietly; his eyes shifted and his body tensed, as if he was a crouching animal about to pounce. Mae told her mother-in-law what happened with Lloyd in the round barn. She asked no questions, but a look of concern moved across her face. These days she seemed to hold Lily closer than ever, too.

It was as if they were all waiting for something to fall from the sky onto them.

The week before Thanksgiving Joe decided he could no longer stand the toothache that had been plaguing him off and on for several months. He was going into Iowa Rapids to see Dr. Paige, the dentist. Anyone who wanted or needed to go along was welcome. Uncle Rex had to pick up more parts for the tractor and Mae needed some groceries for Thanksgiving dinner.

Lily would be content to stay home and help Margaret in the kitchen. Mae had planned to take the baby with her, but he was already well into his morning nap when it came time for them to leave. When he woke, he might not even notice Mae was gone – and if he did fuss, it might have nothing at all to do with his mother leaving him behind. And Mae wouldn't mind being without the children for a day. It would be nice to have a little time to herself.

So it came about that Mae, Joe, and Uncle Rex were alone together in the wagon, without children or parents. Joe handled the reins, Mae sat on the seat beside him, and Uncle Rex stretched out in the back, his shoulders leaning against the side board, his legs splayed out. As the wagon rolled along the county road, Uncle Rex commented on the passing farms and the folks who lived inside. Mae assumed he knew all this from his time spent at MacKenzie's tavern. Occasionally the conversation lulled as each of them drifted

into their private thoughts. No one mentioned Lloyd Whitsett, as if they believed that speaking of him might bring him back, conjure him out of thin air.

The dentist's office was two blocks off Main Street, down an alley, which made Dr. Paige seem a little less respectable than some of the other professionals in town. Still, the Marshalls had been going to him for years, at least the years when they could afford dental care. They agreed to meet back at the wagon when they finished their business and Joe headed off down the alley. Mae and Uncle Rex split, going in opposite directions down Main Street.

Mae had only made it half a block in the direction of McPherson's Dry Goods Store when she ran into Connie Hawkins. Mrs. Hawkins, who Mae's mother knew from the ladies group at church, was the kind of woman Mae knew to be cordial to – but also to refrain from telling too much. She was the typical busybody who appeared solicitous and concerned, but who was really most eager to pass along any sort of personal details to anyone who would listen. Mae thought her stout body seemed to twitch and quiver with “news” she couldn't wait to share. She stopped Mae by laying a hand on her arm.

“How is your husband's father-in-law?” she asked

Unsure of how rosy a picture she could get away with painting, Mae said simply, “He's holding his own.” She wasn't going to tell this woman he was becoming more stooped every day, that he rarely moved out of the worn armchair in the parlor or slept in that armchair now, sitting upright so he could breathe.

“We've been praying for his health to improve, but I was concerned if he was coughing up blood again.”



Aware she only sought the gruesome details of Sam's illness, Mae simply said, "No, he's getting along fine."

"We were surprised Sam decided to sell that small parcel off the county road." She made it sound like this was a choice, some sort of strategic move, when they both knew it was done out of desperation.

"We weren't making use of it," Mae said, "so we thought we'd let it go." Anxious to break away from the conversation, Mae looked over Mrs. Hawkin's shoulder. Uncle Rex stood in the middle of the street arguing with a man Mae recognized instantly as Lloyd. She mumbled some excuse to the woman and started toward the two men. She had only taken three steps when Lloyd turned and ran down Hickory Street, toward the river. Uncle Rex ran after him, shouting something Mae couldn't hear.

Goddamn it, Mae thought, surprised at herself for the swear word. She'd been kidding herself when she thought Lloyd had gone, if she believed he wouldn't be back to bother them again. She trotted after them, her skirt swishing around her, reminding Mae she didn't run much anymore. If he wouldn't go, even after the fight in the barn, perhaps he needed some greater persuasion. What would Uncle Rex do to him if he caught up with him? Perhaps without Joe around, he would feel free to follow his instincts, the urge to violence Mae was sure ran through him. If threatening didn't make Lloyd go, she wasn't opposed to Uncle Rex providing greater pressure, if it would solve the problem.

Mae followed them into the park, past the band shell and around the gate on the far side. Lloyd picked up his pace, staying ten steps ahead of Uncle Rex. Twenty-five yards or so behind them, her breathing was rapid and her calf muscles ached – but she was determined to keep up.

Once through the park gate, they tore down the worn, dirt path that ran parallel to the river's edge. Several times, Uncle Rex almost closed the gap, but Lloyd put on a burst of speed that kept him just out of reach. Gradually, they got away from Mae, stretching out the distance between them and her until she couldn't see them and had to rely on instinct to know which way they had gone.

The wooden swing bridge rocked back and forth, telling Mae that the two men had crossed it. Without much concern for the swaying, she stepped onto the bridge and kept running. The hard heels of her shoes pounded a staccato beat on the wooden planks and the lurching of the bridge threatened to throw her off balance. She picked up her pace until, reaching the end of the bridge, she burst through the trees and into the clearing at the Iowa Rapids Electric Plant.

Built just three years back, the power plant dammed the river in order to harvest electric power for the growing town. A low concrete wall was all that separated people from the churning water feeding the power plant's dam. The water rushed and tumbled over and over, its crashing sound almost deafening.

Mae caught sight of Lloyd and Uncle Rex by the river wall. Still yards away from them, she could only watch, as if she was in a theatre watching a play. Uncle Rex held Lloyd by the throat, pushing him backward over the wall, as if he meant to break his spine. He throttled the man, shaking him and squeezing his neck. Lloyd clawed at him with both hands.

Then, in one motion, Uncle Rex lifted Lloyd and flipped him, legs flailing, into the teeming water. He bobbed to the surface for a moment, his face contorted, mouth open as if to scream. Then the current pulled him under and he was gone.

Mae searched the swirling water to see if he surfaced. She held her breath, balanced on the edge between praying Lloyd came back and praying he did not. Only moments earlier she had fantasized about his death – but not like this. An accident – a tractor rolling over or a sudden fall. Painful and unfortunate, yes – but no one’s fault.

Uncle Rex watched the water, too. His back to Mae, he seemed unaware she was there. Suddenly he bent over double and vomited into the grass. He straightened, ran a hand through his hair, and turned toward Mae. Their eyes locked for a moment but, as he walked toward her, Mae looked away. She would wait for him to speak first. Perhaps he knew what to say.

“That’s not what I wanted,” he said. His voice broke and he cleared his throat. “I don’t know what happened. I was so angry.”

“I’m not sure you had a choice,” Mae said, though they both knew otherwise.

Uncle Rex laughed bitterly. “I’d say he won’t be bothering us anymore, but his disappearance is going to be worse.”

“Maybe he’ll be able to swim, pull himself out somewhere,” Mae offered, though they both knew that wasn’t possible. His body would turn up below the rapids sooner or later, caught on a log or a rock.

They retraced their steps back through the trees and across the sway bridge. They crossed the bridge quickly, aware that neither one of them could bear to look down into the water.

“What are we going to tell Joe” Mae asked.

“Nothing. We need to keep him out of this,” Uncle Rex said. “But I don’t think either of us can keep this to ourselves.”

“He’ll know something when he sees us,” Mae said, realizing that her hair and clothes were a mess and that he had bloody, scraped knuckles and red marks on his face.

They met Joe at the wagon, as planned, but waited until they were out of town to tell him. Mae sat in the back of the wagon so Uncle Rex could talk to Joe while they drove home.

He had sensed something was wrong as soon as saw them, but he wasn’t prepared for the story Uncle Rex told him. When his uncle got to the part where Lloyd disappeared under the water, Joe winced, holding his eyes closed for a few seconds.

“People saw you together, didn’t they?” Joe asked.

“Yeh, we must have attracted attention, running through the park like that,” Uncle Rex said.

They rode the rest of the way home in silence, each one trying to imagine a possible outcome, picturing scenarios that would play out. As Mae watched the scenery roll past, a reverse version of the morning’s drive, she wished she could reverse the day’s events. She had felt a brief moment of relief that Lloyd was gone for good. That relief was replaced by guilt, guilt that, although she hadn’t thrown Lloyd into the water, she was somehow still responsible for his death, that her desire to have Lily fueled what happened.

When they reached home, Mae swung herself out of the wagon and trotted across the yard, disappearing behind the chicken coop. She sat down on the stump of an old maple tree that was there for chopping wood. She began to cry, bending over double, sobbing as she had sobbed when Ivy died. She did this terrible thing and now she had ruined everything with Lily. She have to lie to the child for the rest of her life about

where her father was. Or she would have to live with the consequences if Lily ever found out the truth. She hadn't wanted either of these consequences, but now she was stuck with them.

As her tears subsided into the gasping spasms that came from hard crying, Mae knew also that once again they were waiting on Lloyd Whitsett. But instead of waiting for him to return for Lily, they were waiting for the sheriff to come and make an accusation on Lloyd's behalf. It would only take a rumor or an insinuation – made by a neighbor or made in town or made in church – saying that Lloyd's sudden disappearance had something to do with the Marshalls and her life here would unravel.

## February, 1929

Three months later the cold and gray of winter had firmly taken hold. While most farmers were busy managing their stores of hay and silage, and slaughtering hogs, the members of the Marshall family were still waiting, wondering if and when what was left of Lloyd Whitsett would be released by the Iowa River. So far, the rushing water revealed nothing, though it was possible he would turn up farther down river, where no one recognized him. Mae carefully scanned the newspaper for any mention of a body in the water -- but there had been none.

In the brief period between Lloyd's visit to the barn, when he revealed he was married, and that day at the power plant, Mae had not been able to learn the name of his wife. She was not sure what she would do if she found out. Now she was too afraid to make any inquiries, not wanting to raise suspicions. It wouldn't take much to start people talking in Iowa Rapids.

Whether it was because of local gossip or something more substantial was unclear, but in mid-month the sheriff paid a visit to the Marshall farm. Joe and Alex were in the side yard sawing timber with the long, two-man crosscut saw. Uncle Rex was dragging broken branches and storm-felled tree trunks from the back of the wagon, putting them in the pile to cut or split with the axe. Their breath was visible in the chilly air and, though they were warm and sweating under heavy clothes, the men stomped their feet and flexed their fingers to keep away the cold. Mae had come outside to gather a few logs for the stove when the sheriff arrived.

“Some people never get to see the sheriff pull up in their driveway. I’ve now had the privilege twice in my life,” Joe said to Mae. He wiped the perspiration from his face with his handkerchief.

Mae pulled her sweater closer around her and waited as Sheriff Stephens made his way toward the house. Unlike most people, who grew more stout with age, the sheriff started out heavy and grown thinner as the years passed. His hair was graying too, but he moved with the same air of authority he’d always possessed.

“Went to the Allinson’s place and they said Lily Whitsett lived here now with her aunt,” he said, extending his hand to Joe. He nodded to Mae.

Joe shook his hand quickly. “Come in.”

Mae’s parents had not been told about what happened, but they heard something and peppered her with questions. Did she know where Lloyd was? Had Joe and his uncle really beaten him when he came to the farm? She answered quickly, saying yes, he’d come to the Marshall’s farm, and yes, there had been a fight, but there hadn’t been a beating. No, they hadn’t seen him since that day. That was all she said and that was all the Allinson’s knew.

They ushered Sheriff Stephens through the front door and into the parlor. Mae was relieved to see Sam was not in his usual place in the worn armchair by the fireplace. He was, no doubt, in the kitchen. Margaret would have to keep him there – if he saw Stephens he would start on about the old days, blaming the sheriff for not getting him his money back.

They settled themselves around the room, like actors on a stage set Mae thought. Joe and the sheriff sat in the two straight-backed chairs that flanked the window. Uncle

Rex took the piano stool and she perched on the edge of the horsehair settee. Alex lurked in the doorway, not sure if he should come in, but not wanting to miss anything.

“Lloyd Whitsett has been reported missing by his wife,” the sheriff said. “When was the last time you saw him?”

Whether it was on instinct or because it suited their natures, Joe and Mae let Uncle Rex speak up first. They hadn’t agreed on any particular story, perhaps because they hoped this moment would never come.

“Yeh, he was here back in November,” Uncle Rex said. He swiveled slowly back and forth on the piano stool.

He looked too relaxed, as if nothing bothered him. She tried to take a cue from him, but found she was more nervous, more like her husband who was unconsciously twisting his handkerchief in both hands. She wondered if the sheriff felt the awkward air in the room, or if he was so used to creating tension wherever he went that he’d become oblivious to it.

“Was he looking for his daughter?” Stephens asked.

“He said he was going to grab Lily and take her, without any regard for what’s best for her. We asked him to leave. He wouldn’t, so we kicked him off our place,” Uncle Rex said.

“You mean you hit him.”

“Yeh, I did.” Uncle Rex shrugged. “He came onto our property making threats and insulting us. But he left and that was the last we saw him.”

Mae shifted, crossed and uncrossed her legs, waiting for the sheriff to turn his attention to her, but he remained focused on Uncle Rex.



“Several people thought they saw you and Whitsett having some kind of argument in town before he disappeared,” the sheriff said.

Uncle Rex hesitated, as if he didn’t want to admit anything, but would if he was pressed. “That was something that spilled over from the tavern. I don’t want to get anyone, including myself, in trouble, but we’d both been drinking. We had words. It was nothing.”

Sheriff Stephens nodded, as if he understood. Mae knew he turned a blind eye to the tavern the MacKenzies ran out of the basement of their farmhouse. As far as the sheriff was concerned, if they kept things quiet and under control, it was no concern of his. But he’d gone after moonshiners before, including Hal Anderson, who made rotten stuff that made people sick and who ran it all over the county.

“I think his work for Anderson may have caught up with him,” the sheriff said. “Delivering moonshine is dangerous, especially for someone who likes to taste the product too much. Causes trouble with the boss.”

“He said he was done with that,” Joe asked. “What are you saying?”

Mae didn’t know if her husband was really unsure about the sheriff’s statement or was trying to act so in order to encourage Stephens to believe his own story.

“Several men who worked for Anderson over in Franklin County have gone missing. Can’t be sure what happened to them.” The sheriff shrugged and waved a hand.

“Could be they just left town. But there’s a pattern.”

“So you think he’s dead?” Joe asked.

“Don’t know. Not sure how hard I’m going to pursue it.” He stood up and walked toward the door. “This wife of his seems odd. Like she’s hiding something. Or at least has no idea what her husband was up to.”

“So he really was married, then?” Mae asked.

“Only about six months or so. Her name is Eileen. Don’t know much about her or where she comes from.” He seemed to understand exactly what Mae wanted to know, what women always wanted to know – the details. “They lived in a ramshackle little place two or three miles out past the depot.”

Margaret appeared in the doorway behind Alex, as if to signal that Sam might be about to make an appearance. Uncle Rex stood and moved toward the door, encouraging the sheriff to do the same. “Let us know if there is anything else,” he said. “Lily is doing fine here with us.”

Suddenly Mae wondered where Lily was. She hadn’t thought about her or seen her since she’d left the kitchen to get the wood for the stove. Margaret was no doubt keeping an eye on her. Ray must still be asleep. She stood and excused herself saying, “My son will be waking up soon.”

Upstairs, the baby was fussing in his cradle. She picked him up and carried him to the bedroom window where she waited until she saw Uncle Rex and Joe escort the sheriff to his car. When he had driven out of sight, she sank to the edge of the bed, her legs giving way as the tension drained from her body.

Dinner that evening was mercifully quick, with Joe and Uncle Rex excusing themselves from the table as soon as they could to go back to work in the barn. Sam, aware that someone had come to visit, spent most of the meal asking questions about

what was going on. Margaret did her best with him, answering his questions with other questions meant to distract him.

Since coming to live here, Mae had gone out to the barn a hundred times for a multitude of reasons. Tonight, however, as she slipped out the back door to catch up with her husband and his uncle, she felt like she was sneaking out, like she was a conspirator.

The cold deepened the darkness, a blackness that was barely cut by the yellow light of the lanterns that hung from hooks in the barn. Instead of illuminating the place, the weak light cast sinister shadows across the faces of the cows. The pale, white bodies of the sows seemed to glow eerily and Dodge, the horse, shuffled and rattled in his stall like some kind of restless soul. She found Joe and Uncle Rex at the bottom of the steps that led up to the hayloft.

“He’s a shrewd man,” Uncle Rex was saying. “He could be leading us on with that stuff about the moonshine to get us to tell him something we don’t mean to.” He was leaning against the stair railing, his arms crossed over his chest.

“I don’t know,” Joe said. “I can’t read him.”

“No,” Mae said. “I think he really thinks Lloyd is gone because of what he was doing.”

“Maybe -- or maybe you’re just hoping for the best,” Joe said. “Fact is, we really don’t know what he’s going to do.”

“I should have left here a long time ago,” Uncle Rex said. He talked about leaving the day after it happened, but they talked him out of it. It would look odd. Besides, they needed him here. If he left, Joe would have to hire someone to do the milking.

“Will be more suspicious now, if you left,” Joe said. “Now that the sheriff’s been here.”

“I’m sorry, Rex,” Mae said. “You’re stuck now and I can’t help but think it’s my fault. I brought Lily here. And I brought Lloyd here.” Ever since that day, she’d noticed changes in Uncle Rex. He still acted jovial and easygoing and he hadn’t treated Lily any differently. But she had seen flashes of anger she’d not seen before – stomping and kicking things in the barn, shoving cows hard to get them out of his way.

“You didn’t ask me to do what I did,” Uncle Rex said. He shook his head. “I did it myself, did this to myself.”

A week later, Uncle Rex was gone. Joe was the first to know. When his uncle didn’t appear in the kitchen in the early morning, Joe climbed the stairs to his room on the third floor. When he came back down he reported that Uncle Rex’s bed hadn’t been slept in and his clothes and suitcase were gone from the closet under the eaves.

“He didn’t leave a note,” Joe said quietly to Mae, who was helping his mother prepare breakfast. The children were still asleep upstairs.

Sam shuffled into the kitchen, stooped but still moving at a steady pace. “Where’s Rex?” he asked. His voice could still be strong and authoritative, if he was feeling good. “He should be down here by now. Lazy son of a bitch.” He sat heavily in his chair and waited for his wife to place his plate in front of him. He glanced at Joe. “What time is it? Why haven’t you started the milking?”

“Rex is gone, Dad,” Joe said.

“Gone where? Town?” Sam looked from his son to his wife, his brow furrowed. He groped for a spoon to stir his coffee.

“He’s left the farm. He didn’t say where he was going and he didn’t leave a note.”

“Why would he leave and abandon his family?” He was puzzled, but quickly growing angry. “He’s been selfish before. When he was younger he took off to wander around the country. He’s done with all that now.”

“I guess he isn’t,” was all Joe said.

It was a shame they had to let Sam think Uncle Rex abandoned them for no apparent reason. But they could never tell him the truth of what his brother had done. He would have to be left to wonder.

After Uncle Rex left, Mae volunteered to take over the morning milking. After two weeks she had improved her technique significantly. She was no longer tentative when pulling on the cows’ teats and was able to send a strong, pulsing stream of milk into the bucket. She found milking time hypnotic, putting her into an almost trance-like state. It was while she was lost in the rhythm of the milking that she often saw Lloyd’s face, a grotesque mask, as it surfaced above the churning water. Though she’d never seen any of the bodies pulled from the river, she’d read enough of the descriptions to imagine Lloyd’s pale, bloated body, his face battered and bruised. She’d expected to have nightmares about him, but instead her recurring nightmare found her in the round barn, circling and circling behind the empty cow stalls, looking for the herd that had somehow escaped.

When she wasn’t thinking about Lloyd, Mae wondered about Uncle Rex. Had he left Iowa altogether? She pictured him riding west on a train, sleeping in a boxcar with other men who rode the rails. She tried to picture him back in California, though she

didn't know what kind of work they would have at this time of year. Perhaps he was working in a cannery or doing some other kind of factory work. She didn't expect they would hear from him – a letter or card – any time soon.

Sam said nothing more about his brother's disappearance, and, as if he thought to take Rex's place, he began to come out to the barn. He couldn't milk as he couldn't bend his body to the low stool, but that didn't prevent him from supervising Mae in her work, standing stiffly behind the cow, giving her instructions on how to do a job she could already do.

Early on the last Sunday in February, well before they had to leave for church, Mae trudged out to the barn dressed in boots and a pair of Alex's overalls. The barn door was stiffer and crankier than ever with the cold weather; she yanked hard on it until it finally gave way. Walking into the interior of the barn, she was struck by a cold hollowness she didn't usually feel, most likely because of the warmth and energy generated by the herd. A rhythmic creaking – not the usual sounds of drafts or of the barn supports popping and squeaking – came from somewhere above her. Sensing someone else was there, she called out Joe's name, then Alex's. Even Rex's name. For a horrible moment that sent a shiver through her, Mae imagined Lloyd was alive and had returned to the round barn, a living ghost come to haunt them.

She climbed the steps to the hayloft. The first thing she saw was an overturned, wooden crate. Then, three feet off the ground, the bottoms of boots and the legs of worn overalls dangled in front of her. After a moment, she realized she was looking at the figure of Sam Marshall, hanging from a rafter. Mae knew what she was looking at but it

didn't make any sense at first. She simply stared, her hand over her mouth. She felt no urge to scream or cry out.

She moved slowly around the swinging body. Sam's face was purple and engorged with blood. His eyes were open and seemed to protrude, as if he was surprised by what was happening to his body. How did Sam even manage to accomplish this? He must have mustered every bit of strength he had left to come out here in the cold and dark, to fashion the noose and throw it over the beam. And to kick the crate out from under himself must have taken tremendous will.

Even though he'd been broken and debilitated the last few years, Mae hadn't seen this coming. Older farmers were known to become melancholy, especially if they were ill or crippled. During the long, winter days they would sometimes take their own lives, often committing the act in their own barns. Mae almost had to laugh at how typical Sam was in his manner of death. And on a Sunday morning, no less – as if to shake his fist at God.

Mae closed her eyes and said a quick prayer for him. Suddenly her thoughts turned to what people would say. She was ashamed to be thinking at this moment about that sort of thing, but the hard reality was that this would be the subject of great speculation and talk in Iowa Rapids and the surrounding county. It always was.

Sam Marshall left no note. That was no surprise as he didn't communicate deeply personal feelings in life – why would he in death. "If he had left one, it would be a list of instructions, reminders telling us what we're doing wrong, or another of his lunatic rants," Joe said bitterly.

The next day, after Sam's body was taken away to the undertaker's, Mae and Joe sat in the kitchen, both of them vague, lost, unsure what to do next.

"What does his will say?" Mae asked. "Does the farm come to you now or did he leave it to your mother?"

"I don't know," Joe said. "I never asked him. Guess I assumed it would come to me to keep working and there would be something for Alex – cash or a parcel to go to him when he's old enough."

"But you don't know for sure?" She ran a hand across the table, as if clearing an empty space for his answer. "You've never seen a copy of his will?"

"No, I haven't."

"How could you not know?" Mae thought he was still in some ways a child afraid to confront his father, even when it came to something this important. "Don't you care about your future, which is now my future – and the future of the children?" She had no standing to be angry with him, not after what she had done.

"Of course I care," He turned away from her. "It's just that you don't ask your father – a man who acted like he would live forever – what is going to happen once he's dead."

Several days later, Margaret found a letter in the roll-top desk. It was dated the week after Rex left and, although it was not an official will, it was written in such way that it amended Sam's will. It was witnessed by two men the family knew well. Margaret remembered them visiting, sitting with her husband for some time in the parlor, but she hadn't seen them writing anything down.



This new will left the Marshall farm in its entirety to Joe. But by its very existence, the will made evident that the farm went to him only when it was clear to Sam that Rex was gone and would not be returning.

“Joe, he must have thought the farm was in safe hands,” his mother said. She folded the will and put it in the desk drawer. “That’s why he was able to let go of it.”

Joe smiled at her obvious attempt to be kind to him, as though she thought she could change the meaning of Sam’s actions with her words. “Mother, the truth is that once he was forced to leave everything to me and not to Rex, he couldn’t bear to stick around to watch this place go downhill.”

The farm was still in the Marshall family – it had not been split up. Sam had seen to that. But it was now subject to a mortgage they might not be able to pay. There was no ready cash to hire help. Mae and Joe stood at the back of the house, surveying what was now theirs.

“You might have been right about me. I was too stubborn, wanting Lily so badly,” she said. “I did this to us.”

Joe reached passed her to knock some of the peeling paint off the doorframe. “I’m not going to hold it against you, remind you every day of it,” he said. “That was my father’s way. We need to find a way to get along here. Decide if we can save this place or let it go.” He gave her a resigned smile and walked off to the barn. She watched him yank hard on the door handle, trying to persuade it to open. He disappeared inside.

As Mae looked at the round barn; she knew it was a failed experiment. And even worse than the fact of its failure, was that it would be forgotten. It would become a repository of old junk: corroded tractor parts and tools, rotting leather trunks and saddles,

broken chairs and tables, cracked window panes, discarded enamel pots and crockery, boxes of mildewed books and clothes no one wanted anymore but didn't want to throw out either. These were the things that would form the testament to their lives, the evidence that they had been here, long after they were gone.

The round barn would stand long after the Marshall family was gone. Mae didn't know where they would be, but intuition told her the family would be moving on to another kind of life soon. But the barn would outlast them all, a hulk of a beast that would not give in easily to time or to the elements. The bricks that came from the Iowa soil would not easily return to it. The inside of the barn would be warped and twisted apart, gutted like an animal, for anything that was useable, but the shell would stand. The outside would be surrounded by tall grasses and tangled weeds and the yard would be littered with rusted and toppled farm equipment, but the round barn would continue to stand.

### CHAPTER THREE: WRITING LIFE ESSAY

In searching for a metaphor to sum up the process of writing a novel, I bypassed the “novel writing as journey” option because it seemed too obvious. I considered the “novel writing as running the gantlet” metaphor, but, while it was painful at times, I don’t think novel writing is quite as bad as being beaten with switches by a column of hostile soldiers. I finally came to the conclusion that the process of writing a novel is like building a Rube Goldberg device. Webster’s describes a Rube Goldberg device as “a comically involved, complicated invention, laboriously contrived to perform a simple operation.” Although most people assume the “simple operation” is something like catching a mouse (think of the kids’ game, Mousetrap), if we assume instead that the simple task is “to tell a story” and we accept the notion that novel writing involves deliberate complications for our characters, Webster’s definition sure sounds like novel writing to me.

My “comically involved, complicated invention” – the novel entitled *The Round Barn* – came out of several inter-connected short stories written for the graduate fiction workshop. This seems a natural progression (story to inter-connected story to novel) and I have come to understand that, for me, the graduate workshop was a way to find out that I am not a short story writer, but a novel writer. However, I don’t believe I would start a novel this way again as the inter-connected stories left me feeling, at times, like I was trying to stitch together unrelated parts and that this structure forced me to throw away parts of many stories as they just couldn’t be made to fit. And the structure of inter-connected stories did not help me create a plot that seemed to naturally feature cause and effect, to feel organic.

*The Round Barn* grew out of place, time and activity – my interest in the world my grandparents grew up in -- rural Iowa in the 1920's. I think this project has been about me trying to write a place my grandparents knew in reality while also trying to imagine something that never existed in that place and time, something that made for an interesting story. I wanted to create a fictional place that was more interesting and engaging perhaps than the real place, but I feel I have failed; the “real” Iowa Rapids (Iowa Falls) still seems to me to be more interesting, engaging, more odd and dark than the world of my novel – judging, anyway, from the pictures, the newspaper accounts, and by the personal visit I made to the “real” place.

I've often asked myself what I was trying to say about my grandparents or to them by writing this novel. I think perhaps I wanted to write my way into answers to some of the questions I never asked them: Why did you leave Iowa? What did you think and feel about your childhood? What was there besides duty and work and God and family? What was going on “underneath”? What would you have done differently? I don't know if, by writing *The Round Barn*, I got answers to any of these questions or simply raised more questions.

In some ways, writing in a historical timeframe seemed easier to me than writing in the contemporary moment, perhaps because of the illusion that history is a fixed, permanent thing that could provide the writer with a significant and interesting backdrop for the characters and plot. I chose the rich (too rich, perhaps) period of American history that included The Great War, the influenza pandemic of 1918, an agricultural boom and an agricultural bust. All of this required research, which was endlessly interesting to me,

but also required a great deal of work to make the information an integral part of the work itself, not just a series of “info dumps.”

I also faced an unexpected consequence from both the influence of the research trip and of my grandparents’ legacy as very nice people. For the first year or so of writing this novel, I had a difficult time creating characters that weren’t “nice.” Iowa is, indeed, a “nice” place full of friendly people. Many of them, especially farmers, could be seen as honest, wholesome, Christian, salt-of-the-earth people. These folks would make great neighbors; they don’t make for great characters in fiction, especially when the goal is conflict. Of course, we all know that even in a place as “nice” as Iowa, the bad stuff is happening. It just took me a while to get to the fighting and the drinking and the selfishness. I still haven’t been able to take the novel as far as it needs to go in some of these areas, including sex. Try as I might to convince her, Ivonne refuses to believe it when I say there is no sex in Iowa, especially in 1915. In writing this novel, I had to work to put the “niceness” aside.

In writing the first draft, I found that I write from activity, meaning it was important for me to know *what* my farmers were doing in order to write the chapter and to get to their desires and motivations. It was also through activities in this novel that the values of the community and the time period are revealed. I have to know what my characters are doing before I can begin to understand why they are doing it.

What has been most valuable to me in writing this novel is what it has taught me about my writing process, the act of “laboriously contriving” this two-hundred plus page story. Before I undertook the novel, I didn’t really have a process – now I do. I have learned that I draft slowly, but revise more quickly once I know the whole arc of the

story. I have learned the importance of making writing a habit and staying with your story every day.

And I have learned that I write best in public, not at home. Home, for me, is a place of supreme distraction (husband, cats, laundry, yard, bills, etc.). Why is it we, as writers, often feel we write because we can't do anything else and yet, some days, when I am at home, I would rather rearrange my sock drawer or scoop the litter boxes than sit down with a pencil in my hand and face the blank pages of my notebook? However, if I take my notebook out and spend three hours in a public space (read: coffee shop, bar, park), I will write.

Consequently, I have also learned what it means to “make a spectacle of myself” as a writer, to be looked at by others who are wondering what I'm doing while they are enjoying coffee or a beer with friends. And of course, this means having to answer questions -- usually from well-meaning people who are genuinely curious about what I'm doing. But we all know how it goes: What are you doing? Writing my master thesis. What's it for? Creative writing. What is it? It's a novel. What's it about? Iowa farmers, circa 1915. And that's when “the look” flashes across their face, the look that says “Why on earth would you want to write about Iowa farmers?” I think perhaps, now that I have answered that question a thousand times and now that the thesis is done, I will miss that look.

I have also learned that I write in pencil on paper, then go through a series of computer drafts that I then scribble on again with pencil. It must be pencil and I cannot sit down to a blank computer screen and just compose. Some people seem surprised by this,

but it is the only way I know how to do it – and I think each of us has to make friends with our process, whatever it is.

For me, the sequence of drafting, revising, and editing is a process of refinement that feels like a triangle. It is fat on the bottom as there is much work to do in drafting and generating material and the first draft acts as the base that is built upon in levels until the last level (the peak) is revision at the sentence level (tweaking the language).

I believe that my strengths as a writer are organization (I can give you a first draft that is quite readable) and description. As a “visual person,” I think perhaps I am a more effective writer when I am seeing an imagined place and describing it in terms of color, texture, shape, light. I think that my greatest weakness is dialogue. While I feel that I can recognize good dialogue when I hear it, I have a hard time writing fluid, natural dialogue. It is a struggle for me to hear my characters speak.

I was advised by my very wise director to warm-up before writing by reading. It is a way to put oneself in the writing mode – and I have found this is true. But, at the same time, it made me wonder why the words of another writer should be the thing that draws me out. Why isn't my own experience, my own thoughts (my own internal monologue) on life, love, and my characters enough? Why must I rely on the voice of another to trigger my own? Why isn't what I know to be true enough? Is fiction more than that?

So who are these other voices that have influenced me? Certainly Jane Smiley and *A Thousand Acres*, no doubt the best known contemporary novel set in Iowa. Had it occurred to me that I could borrow a plot from Shakespeare, I might have done just that; however, what I found most useful about Smiley's work is that her prose, while effective, is not mysterious. She makes writing and storytelling seem possible. Similarly, Richard

Russo and *Empire Falls* speaks to me about place, about how a small town world can be created on the page and filled with colorful, yet realistic, characters. I hope someday to write characters as odd and vivid as Russo's. For me Annie Proulx is all about concrete specificity, a world filled with "stuff" - objects that give it texture and landscape. She is a master at making verbs do the work in the sentence and has such a variety of verbs working for her that I call her prose "crunchy." Alice Munro may not directly influence style, though I appreciate her subtlety (of moment, of dialogue); I enjoy reading her but I don't believe I can grasp her well enough to mimic her in any way. Finally, I should say that Joyce Carol Oates' *We Were the Mulvaney's* was both an enjoyable and useful book for me as far as getting deeply involved with characters and their emotions. The trouble I had with it was how she gets away with the multiple points of view and the shifting – though I have to say it didn't stop me from reading the book.

I think to write a good novel, an effective and meaningful novel, the writer has to be obsessed with their characters, be thinking about them all the time, be talking to them, listening for them. It requires a kind of immersion that I'm not sure I'm equipped to handle. I'm not sure I'm ever going to create characters or a world that interests me more than the one I actually inhabit. I am easily distracted by the many intriguing things going on around me and I also seek to have a balance in my life. While I don't want to suggest that good writers have to be "unbalanced," I think writing novels requires a kind of intense focus that the world does not foster or understand and that the rigors of everyday life (making a living, maintaining relationships, keeping cats alive and healthy) work to destroy.



Writing a novel can take so long that the writer changes in that time – and the novel changes the writer, going through different periods with different “obsessions” (both within the novel and in life). Early work can seem old, stale, or irrelevant as time passes and the writer moves on from it. Older material may also become “darlings” that cannot be killed –until a reader points out that it doesn’t belong.

Writing novels may never pay me, may takes more of my life/time/mind/soul than a non-writer can imagine. It could make me miss out on other things. It could run me through a maze like a mouse in a science experiment. And I am not sure that I have the stamina (emotional and intellectual) to write more novels, to construct more complicated worlds filled with human souls – and yet, let me tell you about my next novel and how it will differ from this last one...

**APPENDIX: DIRECTED READING LIST**

FICTION:

Chinua Achebe	Things Fall Apart
Dorothy Allison	Bastard Out of Carolina
Martin Amis	Money: A Love Story
Pat Barker	Regeneration
Susan Burmeister- Brown, Ed.	Mother Knows: 24 Tales of Motherhood
Raymond Carver	Where I'm Calling From
Kate Chopin	The Awakening
Agatha Christie	The Murder of Roger Ackroyd
J.M. Coetzee	Disgrace
Don DeLillo	White Noise
Andre Dubus III	The House of Sand and Fog
Katherine Dunn	Geek Love
William Faulkner	As I Lay Dying Sanctuary
F. Scott Fitzgerald	The Great Gatsby
Gustave Flaubert	Madam Bovary
Ford Maddox Ford	The Good Soldier
Graham Greene	The End of the Affair
Jennifer Haigh	Mrs. Kimble Baker Towers
Thomas Hardy	Jude the Obscure Tess of the D'Urbervilles
Jim Heynen, Ed.	Fishing for Chickens: Short Stories About Rural Youth
Susan Hubbard	Blue Money/Walking on Ice

John Irving	The Cider House Rules
Henry James	Daisy Miller
Ivonne Lamazares	The Sugar Island
Harper Lee	To Kill a Mockingbird
Norman MacLean	A River Runs Through It
Gabriel Garcia Marquez	One Hundred Years of Solitude
Lorrie Moore	Like Life
Alice Munro	The Beggar Maid Runaway The View from Castle Rock
Toni Morrison	Jazz Paradise Sula
Tim O'Brien	The Things They Carried
Flannery O'Connor	Wise Blood Short Stories
Joyce Carol Oates	We Were the Mulvaney's
Michael Ondaatje	The English Patient
Dan Pope	In the Cherry Tree
E. Annie Proulx	Accordion Crimes The Shipping News
Mark Richard	The Ice at the Bottom of the World
Richard Russo	Empire Falls
Arundhati Roy	The God of Small Things
Sam Shepard	Buried Child

Allan Sillitoe	The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner
Jane Smiley	A Thousand Acres
Susan Starr-Richards	A Hanging in the Foaling Barn
John Steinbeck	East of Eden
Hunter S. Thompson	Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas (Fiction? Nonfiction?)
Evelyn Waugh	Brideshead Revisited
Edith Wharton	The House of Mirth
Jeanette Winterson	Written on the Body
Virginia Woolf	A Room of One's Own (essay) Mrs. Dalloway To the Lighthouse
Emile Zola	Germinal

#### NONFICTION & CRAFT

##### **Nonfiction:**

Wendell Berry	The Art of the Commonplace: Agrarian Essays
Jimmy Carter	An Hour Before Daylight: Memories of a Rural Boyhood
Dorothy Wordsworth	The Grasmere Journal (nonfiction journal)

##### **Craft:**

E.M. Forster	Aspects of the Novel
John Gardner	On Moral Fiction On Becoming a Novelist
Jane Smiley	Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Novel
Stone/Nyren	Deepening Fiction
Edith Wharton	The Writing of Fiction