

American River

1968

In unique conditions, combinations of temperature and humidity are known to create precipitation indoors. Aqueous vapor and cold pockets of air collude within interior domes and vaulted peaks where they freeze and crystalize. Snow has been recorded falling from the ceilings of cathedrals, ballrooms, and barns.

This nugget of knowledge glitters forth nearly word for word, fantastic enough to have survived a schoolboy's memory nearly forty years. As the driver maneuvers the heavy sedan through the weather, he can imagine it: moisture rising to high drafts, molecules coalescing to fuse into crystals that then fuse into flakes to drift past gaslight chandeliers to melt in ponds of champagne, to bead the eyelashes of waltzing couples. They would abandon their steps in half-turn to look up, unaware the snow is composed of their own exhalations of breath and sighs – their own sweat transformed and returned to them as pricks of white surprise on bare shoulders, on carefully pomaded cowlicks. In delight, they would marvel and dance amid snowflakes.

And now, here in the canyon of the Mississippi River valley, temperature and vapor collude again just as improbably. Mist over the river rises on thermal rafts strong enough to hoist the weight of eagles to form ice fine as sugar to sieve through the openwork grid of the old bridge.

It is snowing upside down, from the river to the sky.

As the car crosses the mid-way point, a sudden gust sweeps snow over the rear window to darken the Pontiacs interior as if something has reared up behind. The driver flinches into his collar and takes his foot from the gas. Coasting, he can hear the hiss of snow scouring the under-carriage and axles. The gust swoops forward and upward – a forceful djinn of wind. He brakes and cranes forward over the wheel as wind connects with the highest girder to launch the accumulated snow there, unfurling it in a crest of white like clean linen.

Snow. No lack of it here.

Unaware that he's been holding his breath until the moment the tires thump from the bridge to the solid ground, his nostrils release steam as if from valves and he exhales in relief, a little amused. It is a bridge he's crossed a thousand times, more – had jumped from it countless times as a youth, hollering and cannonballing with the joy of flight and anticipation of contact with the river.

With his coat-sleeve pulled over the heel of his hand, the driver clears a circle on the windshield. The river road is terraced into the limestone bluff, sharing the ridge with a line of oaks still clapping copper leaves in mid-December. On the river side, a guardrail defines the curve overlooking the old Stanton Pottery and its columnar chimneys. The silhouette of the

factory emerges slowly from behind the curtain of snow, like a photograph coming to life in its chemical bath – first ghostly white, then grey darkening to the scorch of brick kilns. The blockish pottery buildings slope down the riverbank like a set of great steps, banks of windows checkered black with missing panes. His children have been warned never to play here. He reminds himself to warn them again.

Past the pottery, a sign claiming *Mercy, it's Fine!* greets travelers. Beyond the sign an unoccupied patrol car sits idling at the overlook where snow has been disturbed by many footprints and tire tracks. A flare fizzles on the ground as a policeman climbs over a freshly plowed bank, brushing snow from the shoulders of his jacket. A second officer follows, carrying something brightly striped – a mitten, perhaps a ski hat.

The driver knows these men by name and would normally stop to ask what has happened, since asking is his job, but he only slows and watches in the rearview until the patrol backs onto the road toward the bridge, its cherry top unlit, benign.

He shrugs. Whatever the trouble, it's over.

The sedan planes silently into the neighborhood known as Pearl Hill, flanked by an auto salvage yard and grain elevators, with houses so close together their gutters nearly touch. Below the slope of houses is the button factory. Mountains of clamshells bulge behind a chain-link fence under the sign *Zenith Button and Fastener*. Along the fence a German Shepard gives chase alongside the Pontiac, barking at the exhaust for the length of the factory yard. The next block hosts an assortment of taverns and rooming houses. Near the end of the block are tracks and the rail yard that forges a wide division between this part of town and Mercy proper. Pearl Hill, despite its name, is the wrong side of Mercy.

Farther down the bluff the road splits and traffic is funneled either toward the central square or north continuing along the river road. The town square is a snow-covered expanse quartered by walks with benches, naked maples and a dwindling number of elms long ago planted in grids with German relish. Three of the elms have the telltale spray-painted rings indicating they are lost to disease, though even these are decorated with swags of colored bulbs for the holiday. In a fit of Christmas cheer, someone has tossed a spruce wreath around Henrik Stanton's neck. His bronze head is slightly canted so that the viewer naturally follows his gaze to the figure at his feet, Mercy Stanton. Little Mercy is cast in the act of forever petting a kitten. Ringleted and round-cheeked, it's easy to imagine she was once like other children, though over decades vandals have etched her with slander, suggesting with some drama that she was crazy, a whore, a witch or all three. Misspelled *lunatic* is gouged over the shirring of her bodice, and her bronze forehead is slightly flattened from grinding away timeworn affronts like *harlot* and *floozy*. Founding father and daughter anchor the center of the park since anyone alive can remember, their mute poses eliciting curiosity and disquiet for nearly a hundred years.

He drives on. In the middle of the north block, a barber pole revolves under a precise cone of snow, and two doors down a mannequin in a pencil skirt and velvet pumps stops just short of walking through the window of Crystal's Dress Shop. What was once the First Trust

Savings is now a pizzeria, its metal door girded by ionic pillars. Across the street, the plate glass panels of Stevedore's Credit Union are soaped white from the inside. On the Delphi Theatre marquee, blinking lights lasso the title *Oliuer!*, a *u* making do for the lost *v*. The few establishments still thriving include a municipal liquor store, the Greyhound Bus terminal, The VFW and Herkemieir's Pool Hall. At the western corner, Snapper Joe's neon sign flickers – a turtle clamping and unclamping its jaws around a lit burger. Inside the cafe, two men sit deep in their coats, warming hands on pale curves of coffee cups.

Where old buildings have been razed, vacant rectangles form repositories for excess snow piled high against the neighboring structures, their walls host ghostly outlines of trusses and staircases on the exposed brick like bared spines. Higher up, faded advertisements barely suggest *Castille Soap*, *Rosie's Fish Fry*, and *Dutch Boy Paint*.

The driver tries to remember the word for something written then erased. As he passes the appliance store with its sign bolted over the chiseled insignia of the old Masonic Temple it nearly comes to him – something beginning with a *p*. Leaving the square, he takes the shortcut that swings through a modest residential section of clapboard bungalows and Sear's kit houses planted atop foundations of local limestone. Further on, he rejoins the river where trees thicken and a park spreads darkly inland from the bluff. Beyond the park at the far edge of town lies a once elegant neighborhood, where lawns stretch wide and low stone walls separate properties set along the curve. Several of the big houses have been chopped up into apartments – few reflect the gleam they had a century ago when laid like gems across the shoulders of the bluff.

The driver's gaze drifts along these old houses, not noticing the section of curve ahead has been blown clean to reveal glare ice. Near the last of the large houses he pares the curve and the sedan meets ice, sending the car skimming over the center line toward the inner curb. He attempts to steer in the opposite direction. While the speedometer needle barely teases twenty, the car gains speed as it fishtails into a full spin, the vehicle whipping back to the wrong side of the road, rotating riverward.

Anyone could see the rusted guardrail will be no match for a ton and a half of car. As easily as he can imagine a flurry in a ballroom, he can imagine the moment of guardrail burst outward like a finish-line ribbon; flakes of rust trailing the airborne car like blood-colored lace amid lace-colored snow. The river below will take the car in with barely a ripple.

The Mississippi pauses for nothing.

The driver's fate seems suddenly so certain – so sealed and imminent, that his panic surprisingly abates, as if the combination of velocity and inevitability have produced a narcotic calm. As the car skims feather-light with speed, he is reconciled to an end, not for the first time in his life, but surely the last. His hands relax and the knuckles of the steering wheel spin and graze his wedding ring in a languid *tat tat tat* like a distant round of gunfire.

His eyes close.

...

Tat.

Unit photographer Second Lieutenant Philip Piers opens his eyes to another river, lids stinging in the tropical daylight that always seems several stops brighter than he expects. Smoke carries its yellow smells from downriver – kerosene from cook stoves and rotten fish littering river mud. He turns south toward better air laced with the haysmells of bamboo and palm. Though not on duty, out of habit that he raises his Leica and peers through the long lens to see if any boats are headed up the Yalu. There are two; a distant junk, and the sort of dugout canoe men net-fish from while standing. He pans across the water and along the steep bank. Not much is happening: his commanding officer, Captain Reichart, stands smoking on the cart path that leads to the road that leads to Seoul. A passel of half-naked youths race down another path, pushing an old rimless tire with one of them curled inside like a fetus. There are two local women on the road – one seems to be making a gesture of communication as she approaches Reichart.

The wind delivers a barely audible string of words he cannot translate – after two years, the language stubbornly remains a series of yips and yawns to his ear, delivered in pitches wholly beyond his range. He watches Reichart's arm slowly rise and assumes the captain is about to point out something of interest, perhaps give some direction. He follows this action with the lens to see the women have barely stopped before they are backing away.

He zooms the lens, too tight at first, so that most of the frame is filled with blurred khaki and the dark sweat stain under the captain's outstretched arm. Pulling back, Philip corrects focus until he can make out the faces of the two nurses, their unmistakable white and blue kerchiefs binding their inky hair into bundles, their hospital aprons the same deep blue as the *taegeukgi* of the Korean flag. As their expressions shift from concern to fear, he pans back to Reichart and nearly drops the Leica. He sees the weapon only as it is steadied and aimed.

Flailing his arm, he shouts. But the brown river rushes in front of him, the wind taking his voice along with smoke and chaff and the rustling of the reeds he stands among. After two unsteady strides further into the muck, he realizes he cannot cross, cannot reach the other side to confront Reichart and stop his nonsense – he shouldn't be going around frightening nurses who know nothing. He's not crazy, just a horse's ass. He cannot be thinking of harming them. For Piers, the worst aspect of this tour has been serving under a superior officer who is not only his intellectual inferior, but a bully.

It occurs to Philip that he only need fire a warning shot for Reichart to be distracted. But he's not armed – his pistol is not where it should be, it's hidden on the bank, lest he slip and get it wet, as he had the week before. His rifle is back in barracks, both are offenses he can only imagine the ramifications of. Instinct brings the camera back to his face, the casing hard to his brow as he tries to stay upright on the spongy bottom. Pressing the shutter by reflex, his hand does its own bidding, clicking, then thumbing the lever to advance the film. Just as he begins swearing under his breath for the captain to stop his ridiculous game, a blossom of orange appears in the viewfinder – a vapor that floats in air for an endless instant, his camera recording what Lieutenant Peirs cannot quite register.

The delayed *tat* sounds a beat later, no louder than a hammer strike, a pip.

...

As quickly as such scenes come, they shutter to black. Afterwards, all he is left is a sense of unease as if awakened from a dream beyond recall.

The driver looks down at his hands as the steering wheel moves of its own volition. He watches his arms and wrists come back to life to crank the wheel back into his control. There is a shift in gravity as the tires grab and the trajectory of the vehicle arcs away from the guardrail, though it is still spinning, it is now spinning inward toward the houses. Tires carve great curves, following another to emboss a Spiro-graph pattern in the snow. The car swales and connects with something unseen just out of his periphery, something structural – the base of broken stone pillar at the entrance to a driveway. When the car jerks to a hard stop, his skull connects to the side window with a bolt of pain.

The Pontiac plunks down on its chassis. His foot has been knocked from the clutch and the engine sputters before rattling to stillness. The grill is canted into a driveway, headlights drunkenly settled over the side of an old Tudor house of stone and shingled eaves and dormers. Few rooms of the house have lights on, but at the back corner of the house there is movement at a bright window. He blinks through the pain. A tall woman appears, her form sectioned behind the grid of glass. Touching her neck, she peers through the falling snow to him. The driver slumps forward, watching her arms drift to the sill. As she leans, backlight clips her into a silhouette. When a thin girl slips in alongside, the woman turns briefly, shifts aside minutely. Together, they look out, as if waiting for his next move.

The driver fumbles for the ignition, the already-forming knot on his temple coursing a route of pain to his jaw.

The girl edges forward and scrawls large letters with her thumb in the condensation on the glass, one letter for each pane. He squints to read them, but his attention pivots in the direction of a muffled *crack*. A shutter from an upper window is unmoored, thumping against a sill. His gaze tours the lines of the house, from the obelisk columns of the carriage-port to window screens hanging like torn pockets, to the shell of a grotto where a headless archer aims his iron bow. Back at the window, the woman is nudging the girl. The girl – the shape of the girl – wipes the letters away with her forearm before ducking out of view.

The key is cold. For a several terse seconds the starter grinds. Pumping the gas pedal, sweat pools at his collarbones. When the engine finally turns and roars he is grateful for the motions of shifting, steering, backing away, aligning the car with the river, aware of every flake of snow meeting the windshield and melting there, watching in the rearview as lights of the rambling house first shrink to amber squares then tick away to mere sparks in the darkness beyond the trees. The message on the window had been written backwards; had obviously had been meant for him. Written, then erased.

Syllables form alongside the throb at his temple – *palimpsest*. Odd, he thinks, that there be two occasions in evening for the same obscure word.

...

“You *sure* that wasn’t Daddy?” Audie asks her mother. There are no streetlights on the river road.

Vivienne shakes her head, “No. Maybe just someone lost.” She turns back to the glass, smoking the rest of her cigarette while snow smudges the tire tracks left by the Pontiac. Her focus contracts from the dark outdoors to her own reflection, and when her daughter catches her eye in the glass, she turns quickly into the overhead glare of the kitchen, all business. She scans the boys’ dinner plates, then Audrienne’s, admonishing over her shoulder, “You’re not eating.”

Dinner is fried cod and mashed potatoes, crescent rolls from a tube, and peas that have simmered on the stove since they arrived home from school. The meal has grown cold on blue willow plates. There is no china at Vivienne’s place, just a cut glass tumbler next to an untouched napkin and a heavy crystal ashtray. She sits to resume the conversation interrupted by the car, plucking at the embroidered initials on her cardigan. A thread has come loose from the *R* in *VMR*. *Vivienne Marie Robichaud*. Her name before she was their mother.

“So, anyway...” she pinches at the blue thread, speaking into her chest, “...he is in hospital.”

No doubt people in kitchens all over Mercy are talking about Bobby Sokol’s accident this very minute. Audie pushes a pea into the mashed potatoes and presses the hole closed, rubbing her finger onto the rim of her plate, trying to imagine...*buried alive*.

Her brothers sit across from her, tall to small. Andy, Bern, and the much littler Willie, the hitch of years between them like a missing riser where the twins would have been. Willie, the youngest, is their mother’s final attempt to cork her grief and fill the too-big house. The older boys are so much beefier than runty Willie they’ll probably mash *him* someday playing pile-on. He’s small for nine and the fact he’s nine is easy to forget once he opens his mouth, and since he is that smart Bern somehow wants to squash him more, and calls him Professor Midget.

All Audie can think about is being crushed, smothered, or, as Bern said earlier before the cold fish grew even colder, “*ass-fixyated*”.

Now, set on tucking the thread back into her sweater, their mother picks up a fish fork and works a tine into the monogram.

The boys all look like their mother, and their mother looks like Ava Gardner. Out together, they are pack of good-looking gypsies. At rest-stops, stores or the beach, it never fails someone will tisk a nod towards Audie, while surmising, sometimes even asking, *adopted?* They hitch their brows as if to say, *poor thing!*

As often as she's wished, Audie is not adopted, has only inherited her bland looks from the Piers' side; genes leap-frogged from her grandmother, bequeathing Audie her non-eyebrows and weak eyes the color of diluted Scope. Also, her eczema, "*Which you will probably outgrow...*" Her father often assures her, using the same unconvincing tone he does when insisting she has *good bone structure*. He, at least, is a darker pale, with hair that's a deeper dishwater. Her arm is probably the only one in existence that is actually Crayola Flesh.

Still, all of them ringing the yellow Formica make a bright party against the creamed-tiled walls. Jade colored serving bowls center the table, one congealed with grease, the other with potato drying to its side like spackle. There are coloured aluminum cups for milk – everyday drinking glasses are a thing of the past, gone along with most windowpanes on the ball-playing side of the house. There have been too many trips to Doc Baer for stitches, so the cups are now metal and broken windows get glazed with sheets of hard amber-coloured plastic.

When she squints, the red napkins tucked into the necks of her brothers' sky-blue oxford shirts look like nosebleeds – like murders. The girls at St. Cecelia's wear boxy jumpers or itchy pleated skirts in the school tartan of Black Watch. Wool, of course, so that Audie must armor up with cotton tights and her Orlon slip or the backs of her knees and thighs will flare. The only plaid in the boys' uniforms are the ties, which get ripped off in fights, stomped, used as belts or as replacement straps on book bags.

Behind the boys, the windows reflect the backs of their heads, blurred and multiplied to a crowd of six, a double-triple homicide that comes back to life as they turn their same-looking faces toward their mother and all ask questions with same-shaped mouths.

"Was he squashed?"

"Is he frozen?"

"Will he live?" Willie leans forward, needing to know, "Who *found* him?"

"Mr. Petroni." She sighs, "Walking his dog across the bridge. He saw the boy's scarf, and one boot, I think, sticking from the snow. The plow had pushed a lot down the cliff just at the overlook on the river road. He was buried on the path."

"For how long?"

"No one knows. No one can find the driver yet to ask what time he plowed the bridge." The thread, loose and long, is unraveling just above the slope of her bust. She gives up, mumbling, "*Merde.*"

"Well, was he squashed or not?" Andre sniffs.

“No, not so squashed, but frozen some.” Vivienne pauses. “He is critical in condition.” Under the arc of her accent the word *critical* sounds almost restful. “He didn’t have so much air, and so maybe his brain will be...be...” she puzzles at the ceiling as if the word she needs hangs there.

After a beat Bern plants his fork like a flag, “His brain’ll be *what?*”

“Damaged, I suppose.”

“You mean brain-damaged?”

“*Qui*. I suppose, like that.”

Bern sits back. “Like this town needs one more retard.”

Their mother reaches to yank his ear so fast there is only the flash of her bracelet and his yelp, then her hand is back around her glass.

“Ow!” He furiously rubs his ear, “I’m just repeating what you’ve said.”

“Never mind what I say.”

“I won’t.”

She elbows Audie, not spilling a drop. “Audrienne, I always tell *you* stay clear from that river. Now maybe you’ll listen, no?”

“I wish you wouldn’t elbow.”

“If you had not cut your braids off, I wouldn’t need to.”

“Jeezus.”

“Do not blaspheme, especially that. Did you hear me about the river?”

The response is a circular nod yes that includes a no until her mother goes back to fooling with her sweater, speaking into its fibers. “Eat.”

When her voice goes quiet they are more prone to obey. Willie juts his chin toward his plate and they all pick up their forks, maneuvering them in the upside-down manner that is just another item on the list of things that effectively separate them from other kids in Mercy. Chewing, Audie wonders what it might be like to be pummeled to the ground by a half-ton of snow. There might’ve been warning before the first cold clump went down Bobby’s neck. Maybe he went still, like deer do and just watched it come at him. Had everything gone black at once, like a mine cave-in, like a boot heel over a roach?

Bobby sits behind her in math and biology at St. Cecilia's. He shuffles the terrazzo halls with pants cuffs dragging and his school tie snarled. He is smart in ways she isn't and doesn't want to be but is supposed to. She recently copied from his biology quiz: *kingdom, phylum, class, order* and had gotten a *B*. But when she had to confess to someone to save her from having to in actual confession, she purposely chose her father on one of his half-on, half-off days, so that he only replied, "*Well, no one the wiser*" before turning back to his two-finger typing. Normally, he would sit her down for a lecture.

It would be a shame if Bobby ended up retarded. He might be smart, but common sense doesn't always follow brains, she thinks, because even an idiot wouldn't be on the icy lookout path in the dark. There's nothing even there but the dangerous slope down and the stone island at its bottom, where no one would go in winter, especially at night since everyone thinks it's haunted. It was never a true island, only a load of limestone blocks tipped from a barge, intended for a county courthouse a hundred years ago that never got built. The story was that the barge was too heavy and low in the water and silt clogged the bottom and dredging couldn't clear it, and the dock workers walked off the job and barge captain wouldn't wait another day and so dumped the blocks on a sandbar and there you are, an island.

Not that it mattered. By then it was obvious Mercy Township would never become the county seat or anyplace important. Her father knows all the history – all about the Stanton curse and what-all else happened after the town was named after little Mercy, and later, after the Mississippi washed crazy old Mercy from her clay caves and onto the stones to haunt their curve of the river. Audie isn't convinced the island is haunted, but because others do it means she gets the place to herself. In summer the limestone blocks are surrounded by green willow drapes. It's a place to go, sometimes just to sit on the chalky warmth and etch pictures into the stone with the penknife she's not supposed to have. If she has a whole day, she'll bring a bologna sandwich, her stash of stolen cigarettes and a can of Tahitian Treat.

Snow hits the windowpanes like hurled grit and their mother shudders back into herself to announce, "They are trying to thaw him now at hospital."

Thaw him? It's deathly quiet as they watch her light another Kent. Bit by bit, she burns the hanging blue thread with the glowing end.

After supper the boys clear the table, grousing, while Audie sweeps. They've dropped little bits of fish for Ribald, now sitting under the table cleaning his whiskers. Bones closest to the radiator have already dried to the floor. She jiggles the broom bristles over them, wondering how. *How* will the doctors and nurses thaw Bobby? In a pool of cold water? That's what their mother does with frozen poultry and roasts – tosses them into the sink to bob to room temperature. Maybe they would dunk Bobby like a stewing hen or rock-hard cod. *Bobby could be bobbing now.* She has to reach under the table and scrape the bones with her own fingers.

Her mother gets more ice cubes and drifts out of the kitchen, mumbling in the patois that their French teacher, Sister Martine, laments is only a sort-of French, telling Audie it is a

thing that cannot be taught, which makes sense since Willie is the only one who gets even close. He stands on a chair to fill the sink with suds and Bern scrapes and stacks and Andre huffs because it's his night to wash so he practically shoves Willie off his chair, saying, "I don't have all night, Squirt."

Once the boys finish and drag away to the living room, Audie can tidy the mess they've made cleaning up. She nests the silverware and wipes the counters, turns off the big overhead lights so that the morgue-like walls stop glaring and shadows soften the hard corners. After the cups are evenly spaced in cupboards and the knives are in the right slots, she rearranges the skillets hung out of order on the hooks above the stove. Once everything is right, she backs through the swinging door to the pantry where none of them willingly linger because it's where they get sent – just a wide passage of cupboards with two swinging doors, a cell with convenient porthole windows on either end for checking on prisoners. The old pantry sink is more green than copper, with taps so rusted there is no question of a drink. The one small window is painted shut, so there is no question of escape. In the cabinets behind the many panes of bubbled glass, stemware that belonged to their dead grandmother and great grandmother glints and warps. In the lower cupboards is the survival kit, hidden in an iron casserole big enough to cook a dog. The survival kits is a few Louis L'Amour paperbacks and a copy of *Valley of the Dolls*. There's a jar of lemon drops, a sketchbook, pencil nubs, a deck of cards for solitaire, string for finger games. Enough to fill an hour – two if the offense is very offensive, but only Bern ever gets two hours, and Andy is too old for the pantry now. For Willie (rarely sent to the pantry, but takes his punishments to heart) there is a grimy hankie and a broken rosary. A cookie tin blooms with boring old junk they've all pawed through a thousand times: faded postcards, hat pins, buttons, embroidery thread, coins, stamps, broken brooches, lint, and an iron ring loaded with keys for cabinets and doors that used to get locked fifty years ago when there was a maid and a cook.

As Audie presses the far door open, hinges practically squeal the word *oil*. There's no sneaking out of the pantry when the hinges start. The cramped back hall is a game show of doors – to the back porch, the basement, two closets, the WC, and the back staircase that is a complete fire hazard with piled hockey equipment. The last door leads to the dining room, which looks like a door on the hall side, but on the other side is disguised to look like the paneled wall. Just beyond this trick door, the hall makes a jog and widens, ending just past the front staircase at the foyer with its sets of inner and outer doors. Halfway along the hall at the base of the stairs is the wall-phone, its black cord stretched and twisted. When pulled nearly to the living room and then let go, it will snap back and the receiver will jump, making the phone ring a half-ring.

When she walks in the living room, her mother's head swivels like an owl, "I tell you not to do that, *cheri*." The couch exhales dust when plunked on. Andy is wheezing into a Mad Magazine, and Bern is on his back on the carpet, playing his game of tossing a super ball as close as he can get to the ceiling without it touching, knowing it makes their mother insane, knowing the second it hits she will crack. Willie is on his tiptoes on the window seat, tugging at the rolled-up towels laid on the ledges to stop drafts. They are frozen to the sills, making tearing sounds as he pulls them away.

“Look,” he marvels, “the towels leave towel hair in the ice.” It never takes much to entertain Willie. At the hearth – big enough Willie can still stand in it – Their mother shoves paper and kindling under a teepee of logs and then lights a match by dragging it over the tiles. Setting it to the crumpled paper she stares at the flames in a way that would make anybody wonder if she should have matches. Once the fire gets going, the flames reach nearly to the big iron hooks where who-knows-what got cooked or hung there – big pots, *pigs*, supposedly. They could always thaw Bobby in a giant whatsit...*cauldron*. He’d float, face-up, steam coming off his cheeks as he changed from dead blue to pink. An enormously huge thermometer would lean like a paddle in the water...

“Ma, what color do crawfish start out? Are they gray like shrimp before you cook them?”

“Don’t call me *Ma*.”

Willie turns from the window, “A crowfish is just like a catfish, only black.”
“Wrong.”

Vivienne rattles her charm bracelet. “A *crawfish* is no fish at all, he’s crustacean, like a crab. It will say in the encyclopedia.”

And like a crab, Audie crab-walks over the rug and crosses the moat of parquet and past the arch to push open the library doors with her crab-claw. Before even turning on the light she senses something is off. On the big table across from the desk, a volume has been left open, face down – an offense even the boys know enough not to commit. It is an Audubon book, its linen jacket embossed with a crane. Rare. Inside is a razored stub where a color engraving has been removed. The text opposite reads:

Pavo Cristatus – commonly known as peafowl, or peacock. The showy male sheds his plumage (see plate 2e) in late summer, and does not regain it fully until after December. Native to Ceylon and India, where the birds are common in a natural state. In North America only southern climes agree with this species, known for its frail dispositions and erratic habits.

Audie stumbles over half the words, lips moving around them, her finger tracing the sentences. Their father will have a bird of his own when he sees this – a silent bird like always, just loud enough for the whole house to hear.

Andy’s face comes from nowhere through a missing pane in the French door. “How long to find a lousy book, *Oddie*?”

“Up yours, Andy...excuse me, *Ahhndray*.” Which is his name only when their mother says it, and lately, for some reason, girls at school, simpering, “Your brother, *Ahhndray*?”

When she responds at all it is to mutter, “Never heard of him.” She snaps the book shut and slips it into its cloth sleeve.

“Well?”

“Keep your jock strap on, I was just looking for it. Wait. Which volume was I supposed to get?”

“*M*, for moron.” Andy swings through the door and snatches up *C* before Audie has a chance “See? *C* for crustacean,” he singsongs, “also for cre-cre-cretin.” His eyes cross, not entirely unkindly, then he’s gone.

The Audubon volume is kept in one of the locked glass cabinets with other books like it, all in special sleeves with deep embossing: *Cook’s Journey*, *Darwin and The Beagle*, *Machu Picchu: A Citadel of The Incas*, *The Maori*. *The Book of the Eskimos*. Volumes about places she will never visit outside this room. None of the special books are supposed to leave the library, the one room her father calls “unbreached” meaning left alone by their mother, meaning that what’s in it is not ruined or disturbed by her disturbing. Until now.

Nothing else seems out of place. The key has been carelessly left on the desk, so it needs a new hiding place that she’ll have to remember to tell her father about. She chooses the humidior, burying it in tobacco so old it is blond. A few bookshelves are in disarray, spines need pushing in, others need pulling out. The shelves are black with old varnish cracked like the leather on the reading chairs. So many books there’s a chance he won’t discover the ruined one. A swipe of her sleeve over the table erases where dust has outlined the shape of the Audubon book.

Back in the living room, they are clustered around the open volume of *C*, examining a picture of a crawfish. Vivienne looks to each of them, baiting, asking if they know how the crawfish came to be? When they shake heads, she launches into one of her stories.

She begins with the familiar plot of how the Acadians were burnt out of the Canadian Maritimes by the dastardly horrible British, but this time she includes the crawfish in an added twist, claiming that it actually started out as a lobster. The lobster, loyal to the French, followed them inland from the craggy Atlantic and down the great rivers of America. The lobster was starving and suffering along with the rest of the bedraggled refugees, but pulled himself along anyway, plucky as he was, so that by the time Vivienne’s grubby lot of ancestors reached the bayous, the lobster had shrunk to the size of a pocket-mirror.

Their mother spreads her thumb and forefinger, “And so was only this small when they reached my parish. *Petit*, you see, and *viola*, the crawfish!”

Audie is still standing in front of them, trying to read upside down and make out the black and white picture. “Yeah, that’s great. But what color are they to *start* with?”

Her mother shrugs, “Blue?” She holds out her empty glass and rocks it like a slow paint shaker, “Or green. Would you, *cheri*?”

When Audie opens the freezer door cold fog rolls out. Before the metal ice cube tray has a chance to freeze to her fingers, she trots to the sink and runs warm tap water over it and yanks the handle, thinking, *Bobby's arm*. The lever gives and cubes fly, one bouncing over the rim of the sink to skid across the linoleum.

If Audie stacks the cubes in the glass like puzzle blocks they take up most of the space, leaving less room for bourbon. Near the pantry door she steps on the melting ice cube and wetness wicks through her sock. Would Bobby's blood be as cold? She automatically licks at a drop of liquor splatted onto her hand. Shocked by the dentist-office taste, she saws her tongue across her teeth.

In the hall she pulls the phone cord again and waits for her mother's trill. Once in the living room she hands over the drink and announces flatly, "I'm going out."

Willie jumps down from the couch. "Where to?"

"Just outside."

Willie sing-songs, "Me too, me toooo!"

Vivienne frowns, "It's cold. It's *dark*. What will you do?"

Audie looks at her mother and blinks, "Play!"

They pull on snow-pants and quilted jackets and she buckles Willie's boots. Outside the snow has stopped and the evening sky cleared, reminding Audie of her mother's black jet bead necklace. Each night since Halloween it's gotten darker, each night glassy as the one before and as blue-black as the next.

Audie marks off an area and digs, mindless of the cold, first with a plastic shovel, then with hands until her mittens ice-up into frozen paddles like sea-turtle flippers. She has seen sea turtles on Channel Two; ugly mother turtles racing to cover their slimy eggs in the sand before pelicans can swoop down for a meal. The eggs were soft-shelled and when empty dented like a stepped-on doll's head.

When completely dug, the hole is as long as she is tall. As she settles and begins covering herself, Willie is still digging his own grave. Snow shooshes over her nylon pants and she pulls armfuls in and pats it down over her legs. She sweeps piles in from the edge over her lap. Half buried, she begins covering her chest, mounding as much as she can over herself. Closing her eyes she pulls the rest in over her face, wincing at the cold. Finally, when there is enough weight to make it feel real, she wriggles her arms in and down.

Holding her body rigid with eyes shut tight against the sting, she waits, silently counting. *One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three...* Her freezing eyelids feel like tissue, and images of what she'd last seen slip across them like a film strip; the deep eaves of the porch,

the bare bulb over the side door, ice nuggets caught in the fibers of her red mittens. *Twenty Mississippi*; the fringe of Willie's lime-green crocheted scarf.

By *forty-five Mississippi* the dissolving images break into dots as if in a reverse printing process. It's freezing. *Fifty Mississippi*. The dots begin to slowly pirouette around her eye-sockets, changing from dots to squares. *Fifty-two Mississippi*...the squares become diamonds.

Audie waits for the peace – the peace and the tunnel they talk about with the inviting light at the end. But there is no quiet to float towards, only a burn raking through her chest, holding her down. What had Bobby seen when his world became airless - God leaning on his staff with angels thick around him like sheep? Would there have been questions about his sins?

The pain winds deeper like a wild root. She's lost count. *Something Mississippi*. I am numb, she thinks, I *could* die, but where is the light? What kinds of sins would a boy like Bobby commit besides the one all boys constantly do? What if it were *her* at heaven's gates? *Audrienne Marie Piers this is your judgment day*. She would have to confess the candy stolen from the drugstore, the times she'd wished Bern dead, the Easter chick, the seven dollars.

A muffled voice presses her for an answer. "Audrienne?"

Not God's voice, just her mother's. She ignores it.

Freeze.

"Audrieeeeeene?!"

Die.

"Audrienne Marie!"

Come to life!

She jolts up, breaking up from her mounded grave to gulp in a breath that is surprisingly more painful than no breath at all. Snow is everywhere, down her neck, in her ears. Light swirls, she is dizzy. Maybe she'll faint anyway, just to see what happens.

As she popped up, her mother inhaled a little scream. Vivienne is high above, swaying on the topmost porch step. Audie rubs ice from her lashes. Her mother plants her hands on her hips. Breath rises around her like mist. She has changed clothes and the bell-sleeves of her bathrobe form wings at rest. Her head is positioned directly in front of the porch bulb so that her hair is haloed with light. It is too perfect. Audie spits out snow to ask, "Are you an angel?"

...

Willie is towel-dried and sent to bed with a hot water bottle and Audie is sent to the pantry. She rereads two chapters of *Valley Of The Dolls*, sentences punctuated by house noises of wood dropped to the hearth; footsteps on the kitchen tiles, the vacuum suck of the freezer door opening. The dining room radio crackles through the news – then the station gets changed to something with horns. Herb Alpert, she supposes. From the back of the house the muffled racket of Bern and Andre pulses: dull shouts, balls hitting walls, soft thuds that could be kicks or punches.

The bookmark in *Valley Of The Dolls* is a postcard from her grandmother's junk tin – a sepia scene with small white print at the bottom, *Dedication of the Town of Mercy, 1888*. A crowd in stiff-looking clothes flank the statue in the town square, and in the foreground the real Henrik Stanton is holding the real child, Mercy. The girl's shoulders are blurred by movement, but her wild, tearful expression is clear. She is the only person looking into the camera. Behind Henrik and Mercy stand men in top hats – one is thier great-grandfather, Jan Piers, publisher of the Independent and founder of Midland-Piers Newsagents. It was likely one of his reporters took the photograph. Jan Piers is handsome, but his mutton-chops and spectacles make him look older than forty. Next to him, Henrik Stanton is short, fat and friendly-looking. Audie doesn't care about these dead men, only wishes for a magnifying glass to see Mercy Stanton better.

She used to visit the statue. When she was five and six and seven she would wedge herself against Mercy's bronze arms and legs, wondering when she might grow to the same size. She would compare their different colors with envy, deciding one July day to stay out in the sun long enough to change her own color from Band-Aid to brown, but had only managed such a sunburn she had to lay in bed smeared with Noxzema, unable to bear more than underpants and a sheet.

During the spring she turned eight, Audie sprouted and was suddenly bigger than Mercy, sad to discover that sometime over the winter she'd grown beyond the moment when she and Mercy would have been the same size.

She takes a crystal glass from a high cupboard and presses its bottom to the postcard, trying to magnify Mercy's image. In the smiling crowd, the girl's distress seems palpable. Yawning, Audie sinks sideways on the pantry floor. Her hour is up, but she makes no move to leave the pantry, only pulls her jacket over her shoulders and curls next to the radiator under the window. Still holding the postcard to the bottom of the glass, sleep nets over, dragging her downward, followed by Mercy's stare.

1888

Red, white, and blue swags lift and settle in the breeze, ruffling with each gust before drooping to stillness. Matching streamers are hung from the gaslights around the perimeter of the square, snapping themselves into braids. Mercy's eyes follow the dance of cloth, the patterns of movement and color. Bunting festoons the outdoor stage where she sits with her father and ten other mustached men. She likes the way the bunting moves, even though the

colors don't look nice together. The swags hang like a row of aprons, something Cook or Beetle might wear.

Mercy ignores the elocutions of the men at the podium, though occasionally her ears burn at the sound of her own name. The mayor's top hat glints as he speaks, reflections nodding along the smooth beaver-hide. She would like to touch the hat, feel the gleam under her fingers. The dedication ceremony seems endless. Mercy searches the rows of people seated on folding chairs on the grass. Beetle sits in the second row, her shining dark cheeks and red hat a beacon in a sea of wheat-colored faces. Mercy attempts to catch Beetle's eye and lifts her hand to wave, but her father traps her fingers in his, holding them to the pocket of his morning coat.

She whispers loudly, "How come Beetle can't sit with us, Papa?"

Henrik speaks evenly but not too sternly through his teeth, "I've already told you, Puddle." he leans and whispers, "And you shan't call her Beetle in public, it's disrespectful. You should address her as Mrs. Greenfield when we are out."

"She *likes* the name Beetle, and besides she's not green, Papa, she's *brown* – brown-brown-brown as a bee-bee-beetle."

"Mercy, that's enough now."

"It's not fair." Mercy points towards the sleepy-looking man to her right, the one with bright red webs across his oniony nose, "If a governor can sit up here, why can't a *governess*?"

Her father makes the frown she knows to be a smile and squeezes her hand to shush her. She pulls away to cross her arms. While the speakers drone on, Mercy looks out at the audience and amuses herself by counting hats by color. The men in the front rows wear black. She counts fifty-seven black top hats, and seventy-one less fancy bowlers in the third and fourth and fifth rows. The women's hats are altogether different, not one the same. Some are like enormous desserts, sugary-looking, foamy. Others are pastel and round, the size of drums. Row by row she considers their shapes and colors; a sea-green wedge, a straw platter proffering silk fruit, a beribboned felt brim wide enough to shade all of Beetle who is stout. Smooth, nubby, velvety, shimmery, coarse, fuzzy – the hats suggest more character than the faces beneath them. One hat is the disturbing hue and sheen of a new-born piglet. Her favorite hat of the day, she decides, is a dove-grey ladies top-hat with netting dotted with pale-yellow and delft blue flowers. There is only one red hat. Beetle will be happy to hear.

Beyond the last rows of chairs a large group of men stand more naturally, like livestock. Their hats are only caps. Of those, twenty-nine are brown and seventeen are grey, though most don't even wear their caps, but hold them over the fronts of their trousers as if to hide stains. Of all the people grouped in the square, Mercy most readily recognizes these far faces, the men that work at her father's pottery.

The echo of her own name interrupts Mercy and she is prodded from her reverie. As her father guides her to the podium, people begin to applaud. She looks down at her calf-skin boots with too many buttons and feels heat creep over her face. Her father tips her chin so the crowd can see her.

Her name is cheered and then given to the town on a bronze plaque. There is more applause and the blare of a marching band as the statues are unveiled. Drum strikes pound through Mercy's small chest. She hasn't yet learned the word *mortification*, but when she does, these moments will rush forth, the terrible attention of too many people and too much noise. Tubas blast like drunkards shouting.

She doesn't look at the statue. Won't. Just when she's hoping it will all be over soon, it's time to take their photograph next to it. The black towel goes over the photographer's head and the huge box camera is aimed like a weapon – this doesn't frighten Mercy, but the statue does. The bronze girl is a dead thing, a pretend copy of her own self sitting at her pretend father's feet. They have done something terrible to the eyes, where the pupils should have been are holes gored into the metal. People laugh when her hand jerks away from the cold forehead.

Her scream is a pitch drawn from her very center. As other sounds fall away there is nothing but the scream. She has startled every person in the park, heads swing to the urgency, many are awed that such a small figure can issue such sound, and with nearly operatic endurance. Those closest cover their ears. Henrik swoops her up in his arms but the siren continues. He tries shushing Mercy, pressing her face to his lapels to shield her from the gawking crowd. He whispers unheard comforts into her hair while marveling at the capacity of her lungs.

Of course Beetle has heard, and is navigating a river of knees from her row in the audience. She reaches the aisle with one hand on her red hat, the other on her jigjogging bosom. When she clambers up the platform steps, Mercy feels the heavy, familiar footfalls, and lifts her head toward Beetle, taking a deep breath to gather more air – finally, *here* is someone will listen.

The photographer races to take the picture before the whole event falls apart. He sees his chance in the stunning silence following the scream and hollers *one two three* just as Mercy's glare meets the lens.

The flash is blinding. All in Mercy's sight blurs away to searing yellow and she blindly looks at the two shapes that are her father and Beetle, as if they might explain this further insult. Mercy rubs smoke and sulfur from her wounded eyes, somehow knowing, without knowing that this awful day, which fat old men have claimed is a great new beginning also marks the end of something.